

Tracing the Past: Revisiting Greek Myths in John Keats' Poetry

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Abstract:

The study of myths, generally known as mythology has become an interesting field in the arena of literary studies. Mythology has of course branched out as an independent wing and focus of study but writers over the years have used and reused various myths in their writings from time to time. Thus, the concept of myth has achieved a widespread status and position in recent times as well. Not only the classical Greek and Latin myths but also various oriental myths provide the framework of writing in literature of the recent times. When it comes to the Romantic poetry and Romanticism in general, there is a tendency amongst writers to look back at the past and bring out the aesthetic quality of the long gone past and present them in their works. John Keats is considered to be an important member of the Romantic group of poets who has used mythology as the basic framework of writing down his poems. Many of his shorter and longer poems along with odes have the tinge of classical myth as the basic structure. This paper analyzes the use of myths by John Keats in his poems, with special reference to 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode to Nightingale'.

Keywords: Literature, Myth, Ode, Poetry, Romanticism.

Introduction:

In March 1819, just when he was entering his most productive period, a then little known poet wrote to his brother-

The fire is at its last click- I am sitting with my back to it with one foot askew upon the rug and the other with the heel a little elevated from the carpet... these are trifles-but...could I see the same thing done of any great Man long since dead it would be great delight: as to know in what position Shakespeare sat when he began 'To be or not to be'-such things become interesting from the distance of time and place.

(John Keats, *Letters*, 2:73)

The statement is interesting in itself for its characteristic eye for the apparent 'trifles' of life, its sense of, and concern with, the literary past, and, not least, its faulty grammar. The writer was of course, none other than John Keats. He too, is now 'long since dead'; and many of his most famous lines, from his poems and letters, have achieved a near proverbial familiarity on a par with Hamlet's remark.

From our own 'distance of time and place' it is simply tempting to label him as another dead poet, a 'great Man'. Despite his own doubt, which itself formed the subject matter of much of his poetry that he is. Yet, it is important to remember that this greatness must not, and cannot, be separated from the apparent 'trifles' of a life. Indeed, the 'delight', if any, we take in the poems should derive as much from a sense of Keats 'with one foot askew upon the rug',

grounded in what he elsewhere calls ‘circumstances’ not that dissimilar to our own, as it does from any view of him as ‘great Man.’

Keats was born on 31st October 1795 in London and he was the eldest child of his parents Thomas and Frances Keats. At the age of fifteen, he left Clarke School in Enfield to be apprenticed to an apothecary-surgeon and study medicine in a London Hospital. Though he became a licensed apothecary in 1816, he never practiced his profession, instead decided to write poetry. Keats’ love of poetry was ingrained in him by his former schoolmaster’s son Charles Cowden-Clarke who first introduced him to the poetry of Spenser. Clarke also introduced him to the radical poet and influential editor of the *Examiner*, Leigh Hunt, who encouraged and published his sonnets ‘*On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*’ and ‘*O Solitude*.’

Discussion:

Keats published his first volume of poems, *Poems by John Keats* in 1817 following it up with *Endymion* in 1818 and the final volume of poetry, i.e., *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* in the year 1820. In the summer of 1818, Keats nursed his brother Tom, who suffered from Tuberculosis. That year he met and fell in love with Fanny Brawne whom he could not marry. In 1820 he himself fell ill with tuberculosis. On February 23, 1821, at the age of Twenty-five, he died in Rome and was buried in the Protestant cemetery. And these words were inscribed in his tomb-

“Here lies the one whose name was writ in water.”

This paper takes into account Keats’ ‘Ode to Psyche’ and ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. In H.W. Garrod’s book *Keats* there is one sentence about Keats’ Odes that is a good deal more pointed and significant than its author presumably intended.

“...the close connections of thoughts which exist between all of the Odes with the exception of that ‘To Autumn’...a sequence...not of time but of mood.”

The above statement makes it clear enough that the Odes really are in a unified sequence and the best way to understand them is to treat them as such and make them interpret each other.

Like any writers of the Romantic Age, Keats too loved nature and admired the beauty of nature. Keats wrote it right when he says-

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.”

(*Endymion*: Book 1)

He does not give any theory or ideology about nature. The principle theme pervading most of his poetry is the tension between the transitoriness of human life where neither youth and beauty nor love endures, and the enduring beauty of the world of art and imagination. This is well reflected in his poem ‘*Ode on a Grecian Urn*’ where the ‘unravish’d bride of quietness’

transcends life and death. He merely reveals the beauties of the world with youthful effusiveness. Keats could-

“Stand on tip toe on a little hill or
Linger awhile upon some bending planks
That lean against a streamlet’s rushy banks,
And watch intently Nature’s gentle doings.”

(From *I Stood Tip-Toe* by John Keats)

Like all Romantics, Keats was essentially Hellenistic. He was influenced and inspired by Hellenism which was the soul of his poetry. The word “Hellenism” is derived from the word ‘Hellene’ which means Greek. Therefore, “Hellenism” means Greek quality, culture, manner, Greek idioms and Greek spirits. Keats’ “Hellenism” on his love for Greek arts, sculpture, culture and mythology has made him distinct in the gallery of Romantics. Keats began his life-long interest in classical mythology under the guidance of Clarkes, reading, most notably Lempriere’s *Classical Dictionary*. Classical Greek art and mythology as well as medieval architecture and scenes from nature drawn from his various walking tours inspired some of his best known poems. Though, Keats was not a Greek man or a Greek poet, his passion of Greek ideals and idols was very great which vividly expressed in his poems. And this made P.B. Shelley remark-

“John Keats is a Greek.”

During his childhood, Keats’ mind fed with the magical stories of Greece and Rome. This interest in classical literature and mythology later became a dominant influence in Keats’ life and the creative achievement in his career. Keats also found inspiration and knowledge about classical antiquity through Virgil’s Aeneid which he read in Latin during his school days. In fact, Keats was so inspired by Aeneid that he tried to translate the entire volume when he was still a student.

Indeed, though Keats was much influenced by medieval themes and by what he considered to be the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, it was ancient Greece that haunted his imagination most. He knew it mainly through Lempriere’s *Classical Dictionary*, the Elgin Marbles, and Chapman’s Homer, yet his instinctive understanding enabled him to use these inadequate approaches more effectively than many a better educated poet had used his sounder knowledge.

(*A Critical History of English Literature, Volume II*, David Daiches)

It is said that one day, one of his friends lent him a copy of Chapman’s translation of Homer. He was captivated by the new word of wonder and pleasure, which Homer revealed to him. He felt as if he had discovered a new world when he says:

“Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
When a new plant swims into his ken.”

(*On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* by John Keats)

But the most important factor in Keats' Hellenism was his own Greek temperament of his mind.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty-that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

(*Ode on a Grecian Urn* by John Keats)

When these lines are read from John Keats' '*Ode on a Grecian Urn*', the reader can feel the passion for beauty; 'beauty is truth.' For Keats, beauty became a very subtle and embracing concept. Like the Greeks, Keats too adored beauty. He believed in a close relationship between truth and beauty. However, he did not attempt to escape from the harshness of human existence to an ideal world of beauty. Keats said that beauty can be represented or expressed in many ways. The expression of beauty is the aim of all art, and beauty for Keats and Greeks are not exclusively physical or spiritual but represents the fullest development of all that makes for human perfection.

There are countless references to classical mythology in Keats poetry. The poet's use of vivid pictures and phrases shows us that he was well acquainted with the use of classical mythology. '*Ode to Psyche*' deals with the myth of Psyche and Cupid. In Greek myth,

Psyche was so beautiful that Venus became jealous of her and sent Cupid to make her fall in love with some unsightly creature; however, Cupid himself became her lover. He placed her in a palace but only visited her in the dark, and forbade her to attempt to see him. Her sisters, out of jealousy, told her he was a monster who would devour her. One night she took a lamp and looked at cupid while he slept, but a drop of hot oil woke him. Thereupon the God left her, angry at her disobedience. Psyche, solitary and remorseful, sought her lover all over the earth, and various superhuman tasks were required of her by Venus. The first was to sort out before nightfall an enormous heap of various kinds of grain. But the ants took pity on Psyche and arriving in hordes did the task for her. By one means or another all the tasks were completed except the last, which was to descend to the Underworld and fetch a casket of beauty from Persephone. Curiosity overcame Psyche and she opened the casket, which contained not beauty but a deadly sleep, to which she succumbed. Jupiter, at Cupid's entreaty, at last consented to their marriage, and Psyche was brought to heaven. This fairytale has often been interpreted as an allegory of the soul's journey through life and its final union with the divine after suffering and death.

(*The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*)

Keats remarks that his '*Ode to Psyche*'

“...is a poem- that I have written is the first and the only one which I have taken even moderate pains. I have for the most parts dashed off my lines in a hurry. This I have done leisurely- I think it reads the more richly for it and will I hope encourage me to write other things in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit.”

In his 'Ode to Psyche', Keats intended the irregular stanzas with inserted shorter lines, to produce loosely the effect of a 'Pindaric Ode'. In 'Ode to Psyche', the speaker opens the poem with an address to Psyche as:

"O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung"

He urges her to hear his words, and asks her to forgive him as he was singing to her, her own secrets. He also says that while he was wandering through the forest that very day:

"Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
 In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
 Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
 A brooklet, scarce espied:"

The speaker saw them embracing one another with both their arms and wings. Then he says that he knew the winged boy who was 'Cupid', the God of Love, but asks who the girl was.

"The winged boy I knew;
 But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
 His Psyche true!"

Later on he answers his own question as "His Psyche true!" Psyche also means soul so here Psyche can be referred to a beautiful princess beloved of Cupid and Cupid's soul, i.e., Psyche.

Then the speaker addresses Psyche again, describing her as:

"O latest-born and loveliest vision far
 Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!"

He says that unlike other divinities, Psyche has none of the ornamentations of worship: She has no temples, no altars, no choir to sing for her, no lute, no pipe, no shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat and so on. So, the speaker attributes this lack to Psyche's youth saying that she has come into the world too late for "antique vows" and the "fond believing lyre." And till his fallen days, he would pay homage to Psyche and become her choir, her music and her oracle. He also states that he will become Psyche's priest and build a temple for her. He promises Psyche about all the soft delights and says that the window of her new abode will be left open at night, so that her winged boy Cupid can come in-

"And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night
 To let the warm Love in!"

Psyche is in possession of the 'rosy sanctuary' and the torch is to direct her lover Cupid or Eros to her. The reference is, of course, to Cupid's visits by night-as the original legend speaks. Now that Psyche is defied and knows her lover for a god there is no further need for

them to meet in darkness. The capital letter Love would seal this interpretation if there were any real doubt, and the human warmth of the quatrain may remind us that Keats was living next door to Fanny Brawne in April 1819 and probably kept an eye on her window when it was lit at night. Keats is vicariously gratifying a natural wish. Dr. Garrod reads the quatrain very differently-

There shall be a 'bright torch' burning for her, and the casement shall be open to let her in at night. I do not find that any commentator has seized the significance of this symbolism. The open window and the lighted torch- they are to admit and attract the timorous moth-goddess, who symbolizes melancholic love...Keats has in fact identified the Psyche who is the soul (love's soul) with the Psyche which means moth. It is a strange goddess whom he has brought from her native unrealities into the reality of the imagination. But her identity is certain-we encounter her again, brought into darker shadow, in the *Ode on Melancholy*.

On the other hand Keats' '*Ode to a Nightingale*' is a romantic ode which is dignified but highly lyrical poem in which the author speaks to a person or thing absent or present. In this famous ode, the speaker addresses to a nightingale while developing his theme 'death'. This ode has its roots in the ancient Greek ode, written in a serious tone to celebrate an event or to praise an individual.

In Greek and Roman mythology, the nightingale alludes to Philomela, whose tongue was cut out to prevent her from telling about her rape and who was later turned into a nightingale by the Gods to help her escape from death at the hands of the rapist.

"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though hemlock I had drunk,"

The opening lines of the poem suggest that the speaker's heart hurts as if he has just drunken poison. 'Hemlock' is the poison that the Greek philosopher Socrates took when he was put to death. The speaker here does not die but feels as though he has drank some powerful drug that causes him to sink into a kind of oblivion.

"One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:"

In Greek mythology, Lethe was a river of Hades that made people forget all their memories as they drank from it. The speaker then addresses the nightingale of the title and wants to clarify that the pain he feels is not because he is jealous of the bird's happiness but its song makes him happy. The poet compares the nightingale to the 'Dryad'. In Greek mythology, a dryad is a female spirit attached to a tree.

"That thou, light winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singing of summer in full-throated ease."

In the second stanza, Keats wants a draught of something which is different both in itself and in its effects from the hemlock of the first stanza. So exquisite the song of the Nightingale in the shadowy forest that it makes the speaker's heart ache with joy and numbs his senses like a drug. The singing kindles in him a desire for a drink made of flowers and greenery and spiced with dance, the music of Southern France and days spent in sunshine. The speaker says he would also enjoy a drink from the fountain of Hippocrene, which is sacred to the Muses.

“Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,”

In Greek myth, Hippocrene is the name of a spring that the winged horse Pegasus created by stamping its hoof into the ground. Drinking from it was supposed to give poetic inspiration. The speaker thus wants to taste the water from the spring and then he would disappear in the forest with the nightingale on a journey towards death.

In his flight, among the shadows he would forget the afflictions of the world-weariness, fever, worry and old age. In this life, to think is to be sad and despairing. And love and beauty are all too brief. The speaker bids the nightingale to fly so that he may accompany it-not in the leopard drawn chariot of Bacchus- the God of wine, but on the wings of poetry. The poet says “tender is the night” as the Queen Moon sits on her throne, surrounded by her starry spirits. Light blows down from heaven through the gloomy shadows.

Entering the regions of death, the speaker says he cannot see the flowers around him and cannot smell the fragrance from the boughs.

“I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,”

But he knows that Nature has endowed his dark environment with grass, thickets, wild fruit, trees, white hawthorne and eglantine. There are dying violets covered with leaves as well as musk roses and the murmurs of various insects.

Long has the speaker been a friend of Death, whom he calls “soft names” in his poetry. Now as the nightingale sings its song, it would seem a comfort to him for Death to take him. He would “cease upon the midnight with no pain”.

Unlike the speaker, the nightingale is immortal. Down through the centuries, the speaker says, emperors and clowns alike have heard its song, as did Ruth. (The Book of Ruth in the Old Testament tells of his native of Moab-in the southwest of the present day Jordan who left home to live, work and marries in a foreign land).

Alas, the song of the nightingale fades away, travelling past meadows, over a stream, up a hillside and into the next valley. The speaker is all alone. Now that the bird is left, the speaker's not sure if he ever entered its world or not.

“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?”

The speaker thinks that may be the entire experience was a 'waking dream' and not really true. But the speaker returned to the real world. Maybe the nightingale's world was a reality and his world was just a dream. Everything is topsy-turvy, and he does not know what is true and what is fancy. He wonders if he is still awake or sleeping.

Thus, along the centuries, Greek culture has left a mark on everyone who came in touch with it, presenting itself either through mythology, language, music, literature, history or architecture, painting or sculpture. The greatest poets, best painters have always dealt with the use of mythology, giving it a texture of their own. And as analyzed above, Keats was a worshipper of Greek mythology. His poems echo the very songs of old myths.

Conclusion:

David Ricks wrote an article on Keats titled "*A Greek Poet's Tribute to Keats*" where he said that Lord Byron was given more attention than that of Keats in Greece. But "*Giannes Keats*" a poem by Angelos Sikelianos published in 1915, made Keats an honorary Greek. Furthermore, after reading Keats' poems and his life in relation to Greek Hellenism, it is well understood that Keats loved and adored Greek Hellenism. In truth he found beauty and in beauty he found truth. Keats can eminently be referred as a pure poet who has a passion for beauty and truth. His poetry is for the sake of poetry and nothing else. His use of Greek Hellenistic ideas in his poems is praiseworthy. Moreover, the remark that Shelley made on his part is true and correct that "John Keats is a Greek". Certainly, it will not be a mistake to say that "Keats is an English Greek".

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