



KEATS'S SHAKESPEARE: SHAKESPEAREAN KEATS

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Abstract

Among the different influences which shaped and formed John Keats's poetry and theories on the poetic character, the influence of Shakespeare is very significant. In Keats's poems Shakespeare's style is replicated and plenty of his imagery is found. Keats also never failed to mention the Bard of Avon, his greatest role model in personal letters to friends. The paper also discusses Shakespeare's influence on Keats's theories of Negative Capability, Chameleon Poet, and the vale of soul making- theories which are heavily used in Keats's greatest poetry. It also throws light on how the attitude of Keats towards Shakespeare changes with time. It can be hoped that the paper will help the readers to have a better understanding of the poetry of Keats.

Key Words: Negative Capability, Chameleon Poet, the Vale of Soul Making, Imagery.

“Here lies one whose name is writ on water.”

The above line is inscribed as an epitaph in Keats's grave as his request to be placed under a tombstone bearing no name or date only the words. Keats thought that his life was a failure but hoped that the posterity will nevertheless count his name among the major English poets. Although his poems were not generally well received by critics during his lifetime, his reputation grew after his death and today he had become one of the most beloved of all English poets. Keats abandoned his apprenticeship at Guy's Hospital in 1815 to study literature. At that time he was also working on his early poems. In 1816, he was licensed to work as an apothecary but left the profession to pursue his literary career. It is, however, common for poets to look other great writers for inspiration and guidance. In the development of Keats's poetic career the influence of Spenser, Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth, Milton, Dante and others on the style and theme of his works can easily be traced. Of all of Keats's literary role models, however, Shakespeare was supreme. It is to be noted, however, that Shakespeare never had such an attentive, perceptive and creative reader like Keats whose letters are filled with enthusiastic praise of Shakespeare's achievements and bristle with quotations from his plays and sonnets and comment upon his words. Keats's poems are often called Shakespearean, the result of a 'saturation' in Shakespearean texts, and as R.S. White argues, "he had absorbed the influence so deeply that the word 'sources' is inadequate to describe (in Keats's writing) the omnipresent but transformed ghost of Shakespeare's poetry and language." [01] Matthew Arnold, the famous Victorian poet and critic places him with Shakespeare, the central sun in the sky of the English as well as World literature. Arnold in *The English Poets* says, "He is; he is with Shakespeare." [02]

Early in his career, Keats expressed a belief that Shakespeare was his 'good Genius' or 'Presider' [03] encouraging and aiding his poetic efforts. There are many critics who find certain affinity between Keats and Shakespeare. Walter Savage Landor who believes that Keats "had something of Shakespeare in him" wrote of Keats that "in none of our poets, with the soul exception of Shakespeare, do we find so many phrases so happy in their boldness." [04] A. C. Bradley writes that "Keats was of Shakespeare's tribe." [05] John Middleton Murry wrote an entire book based on the promise that Keats "was essentially like Shakespeare" and that "a right understanding of Keats is the easiest and perhaps the only possible way to a right understanding of Shakespeare." [06] Caroline Spurgeon similarly claims that "Keats and Shakespeare had a very unusual, a very close and subtle relationship. They were alike in certain qualities of mind and art, a fact of which Keats himself was fully aware, and in some of these qualities they are unique among English poets." [07]

Some of Keats earliest surviving poems contain references to Shakespeare. "An Imitation of Spenser" written in 1814 is an exercise in descriptive gorgeousness that opens with a Spenserian sunrise. "Reminiscences of Milton's *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus* and *Paradise Lost* and of Gray's poems are also noticeable in Keats's Imitation. His method is impressionistic and not expository like Spenser's. Keats presents without explanatory transitions a series of flashing images suggested by the description of the Bower of Bliss in the Faerie Queene. It is Keats's reminiscences of Spenser and Milton that are revealed in them, and not his own personal experience." [08] Yet in the description of a wondrous isle we find something that could rob from aged Lear his bitter teen. Titania, the queen of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is mentioned in the poem "To A Friend who sent Me Some Roses" written in June, 1816 and "To Charles Cowden Clarke". Shakespeare is also mentioned in the 1815 poems. In "Ode to Apollo", written in February of 1815, which pays tribute to a whole pantheon full of great poets, Shakespeare appears along with Homer, Virgil, Milton, Spenser and Tasso:



“Thou biddest Shapspeare wave his hand,
And quickly forward spring
The Passions - a terrific band -
And each vibrates the string
That with its tyrant temper best accords,

While from their Master's lips pour forth the inspiring words.”[09]

“Epistle to George Felton Mathew”, written in November of the same year, where worm-hearted Shakespeare greets Chatterton in the afterlife:

“Yet this is vain — O Mathew lend thy aid
To find a place where I may greet the maid—
Where we may soft humanity put on,
And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton;
And that warm-hearted Shakspeare sent to meet him
Four laurell'd spirits, heaven-ward to intreat him.”[10]

It is to be believed that Keats's serious study of Shakespeare did not commenced until 1817, after he become acquainted with a new set of friends who had a deep impression in his poetic career. Leigh Hunt, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, and John Hamilton Reynolds- all of whom he met on October of 1816. Keats significant comments on Shakespeare occur in correspondence with John Hamilton Reynolds. The first letter in which conspicuous quotations from Shakespeare's *1Henry IV* appear is addressed to Reynolds: “Reynolds was certainly one of the cluster of people who encouraged Keats to adopt Shakespeare as his primary literary model and presiding deity.” [11]The writings and lectures of Hazlitt also had a great influence on Keats thinking about literature in general and Shakespeare in particular.

When Keats wrote the sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear once Again” in January 1818, he makes the opposite choice, preferring the ‘fierce dispute’ of Shakespeare's tragedy to the ‘fair plumed syren of Romance’ [12] chiefly associated with Spenser's *Faerie Queen*. Once again “Must I burn through, once more humbly assay/ The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.” [13]By vicariously experiencing the agony of Lear, “bound upon a wheel of fire,” Keats comes to that deeper understanding of human life he adumbrated in “Sleep and Poetry.” He also anticipates emerging from the fire, reborn as a poet of self-knowledge and tragic affirmation: “Let me not wander in a barren dream,/ But, when I am consuméd in the fire,/ Give me new phoenix wings to fly at my desire.” [14]The *Lear* sonnet's advance from barren dream to tragic reality and self-knowledge extends to form and meter. Though the octave was Petrarchan, its sestet is Shakespearean, and that final line hyper-metrically enacts the poet's liberation and its Alexandrine breaking the cage of the pentameter. Without doubt 1817 was the year in while Shakespeare ‘assumed the throne in Keats's mind’.[15] When Keats left Hampstead where he was then living with his brothers for the Isle of Wight in order to commence his first long poem *Endymion*. Keats first letter to his brothers after leaving London says: “I felt ratherlonely this Morning at Breakfast so I went and unbox'd a Shakspeare — ' There's my Comfort.”[16]. He was quoting from *The Tempest*(Act-II Sc.-ii). Two days later in his letter to Reynolds, Keats reports that- “the passage in Lear— ' Do you not hear the sea?' —has haunted me intensely”[17], after which Keats copies out his own sonnet “On the Sea.”It is probably his first poem to be inspired by one of Shakespeare's plays.“When I have Fears” – a famous sonnet by Keats, written between 22 and 31 January 1818,is typical Shakespearean in theme and style. In the opinion of Janathan Bate, with this sonnet of Keats, “The Shakespearean sonnet is actively revived, both formally and tonally, by a major English poet for the first time in two hundred years.”[18]

John Middleton Murry in his book *Keats and Shakespeare* traces the shift of interest in Keats's poetic career. He argues that Keats did not interest in Shakespeare at the end of 1819 which he was composing the first version of *Hyperion* because “Keats had fallen under the spell of Milton” [19]. Certainly Keats was reading and responding to Milton at this time as excitedly as he had to Shakespeare in 1817. Though it is found that the first *Hyperion* is a consciously Miltonic work, it contains enough Shakespearean allusions. But from Keats's full employment of the Shakespearean resources in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and in the great *Odes*, it can be argued that actually he had never retracted from Shakespeare. *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, the second poem on Hyperion is profoundly influenced by the Shakespearean vision of tragedy in its attitude and expression.

There is some evidence, however, that Keats attitude to Shakespeare did change and that it changed in line with his surveillance of the moral content of poetry itself. In the opinion of R.S. White, there is a gradual change and transformation to be discerned in Keats's use of Shakespeare: “In his formative period we may identify with a degree of precision what attached Keats in Shakespeare's plays, but at the time of his own mature poetry we can speak only of a general spirit and



mode of expression which, although intimately related to what he found in Shakespeare, emerges in his own unique voice.” [20] The development in his thinking can be traced as a kind of internal dialectic between March 1819 when he sends a long quotation from Hazlitt’s defense of his critique on *Coriolanus* to his brother George’s family in America, and July- August of the year when he composed *Lamia*. It seems certain that before this period Keats reveled in poetry as an expression of beauty. Although he was concerned about “the lore of good and ill” his general assumption was that the beautiful must be true in a moral sense. One could call this a Spenserian assumption. We should remind ourselves, however, of Keats’s almost equal fondness in his youth for Spenser’s poetry. But the reason explaining why the expression of this idea at the end of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is so commented upon, may be that Keats by this time did not entirely believe the sentiment. May be he was in the middle of a personal debate about it. In the ode he can only put the phrase “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” in inverted commas rather than in his own voice, as an indication of the Urn’s limitations of perspective when its words are applied to the world of human passion.

Shakespeare is usually mentioned or quoted by Keats in the well-known passages of his letters where he is concerned with such ideas as “negative capability”, “egotistical sublime” or “The vale of soul making”. Negative capability is the most argumentative theory of the young romantic poet John Keats. Keats first coined the term "Negative Capability" in his discussion of the qualities of "Man of Achievement" in one of his letters to his brothers George and Thomas Keats dated in 22nd December, 1817. In that very letter Keats speaks of “...several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability.” [21] Apparently the term “negative capability” seems to be an odd paradox. The word “negative” has many connotations. It may refer to rejection, refusal, nothingness, or disagreement. However, Keats used the word to signify nothingness or free of something mainly troubles and worries. The word capability is related to “capacity” as well as “ability”. Thus in bringing together the two words, “Negative Capability” refers to the space in one’s mind which is free from life’s troubles, and can be used and developed for certain purposes. As a literary concept, Negative Capability, Keats explained, is the state when man is “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.” [22] This state, according to Keats, must be the main trait of poets to make good poetry. Hence, the negative space of the poet’s mind, which is free from the troubles, conflicts and uncertainties of real life, acts as a container to the emotions and imagination which are symbolized by an object.

As a poetic theory, negative capability had its seeds in theater. Noteworthy, Shakespeare played an immediate impact on Keats’s poetic tendencies. Besides possessing negative capability, Keats considered Shakespeare as the “miserable and mighty Poet of human Heart.” [23] Fred Inglis emphasizes how Keats “saw in Shakespeare the ‘negative capability’ he wished to cultivate in himself”. He also adds that Keats “recognized that this upright spontaneity was mark of the highest genius and could not be arrived at without very arduous training.” Inglis also refers to the “inclusiveness described in the long letters to Woodhouse, which is so compelling in Shakespeare, and which Keats wished to imitate” and he further argues that Keats’s delight in Shakespeare “is at once heightened and overwhelmed by his sense of awesome obligation.” [24] Although the critic does not consider Keats as great as Shakespeare, he recognizes that the Romantic poet had, to a notable degree, “that same power of self-absorption, that wonderful sympathy and identification with all things, that Negative Capability which he saw as essential to the creation of great poetry and which Shakespeare exemplified so abundantly.” [25] Wolf Z. Hirst has, like Inglis, similarly stressed Keats’s fascination with Shakespeare as exponent of his theory of Negative Capability: “Keats openly recognizes Shakespeare as master of the Negative Capability that he seeks to emulate.” [26] In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats attempts to enter into the uncertainties of the nightingale’s world and held a comparison between the transience nature of human life and the immortality of the nightingale. This experience is supported by a metaphorical description of losing of the self to be imaginatively united with the bird. When the poet-speaker first heard the singing of the bird, he admits that:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:” [27]

Echoing Hamlet’s desire, in this same opening soliloquy, “that this too, too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,” [28] Keats wants to “fade far away, dissolve and quite forget” the world of mutability. Though the “dull brain perplexes and retards,” [29] he will join the nightingale on those “viewless wings of Poesy”. [30] It is through the power of negative capability that the poet gets the ability to dissolve in the bird’s world rather than taking refuge to it. He is completely submerged in the world of the nightingale:

“And haply the queen moon is on her throne
Clustered around by all her starry fays” [31]



At last, the word “forlorn” acts like a bell which summons the poet from the dreamy world of nightingale to the sordid reality:

“Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!”(32)

This marks the point of transition from the nightingale world to the poet's real world of worries and troubles. Besides, it is the turning point in the process of negative capability, where the poet gets back his active senses after the imaginative out of body experience he enjoyed when he heard the voice of the nightingale. Then, the ode turns from the happy tone to a plaintive one at the moment of the awaking of the poet's mind when the bird flies off and thus the identification ends. The poet now is wondering “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? /Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep?”(33).

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the imaginative journey powered by the negative capability doctrine ended with the poet's realization of what he thinks the most important fact in the world:

“When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”(34)

In developing his ideas about the formation of identity, Keats often works with anti-thesis to describe them. It is, however, important to realize that Keats is not setting up mutually exclusive opposites, but attempting to explain a process, laying between the poles of negative capability and the assertion of the self as the egotistical sublime. While the one submits to external impressions, the other speculates more actively upon experience, and the result is a unique, continuously and continually evolving identity. To Keats, men of genius do not have any determined individuality; a condition that embodies his theory of “chameleon poet.” In a letter to Richard Woodhouse in October 27, 1818, Keats writes:“As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself -it has no self - it is everything and nothing-it has no character-it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated...What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the Camelion poet. It does no harm from relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one because they both end in speculation. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity. He is continually informing and filling other Body.”[35]

Keats described the world as “The vale of Soul-making” in his letter to his brother and sister George and Georgiana Keats in Feb-May 1819. By the term he meant that the hardships and difficulties a person encounters in life are necessary for the development of individual character. “There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions-but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.”[36] Essentially, Keats seems to be saying that we achieve our full potential, our full humanity, by dealing with the challenges and learning experiences that we encounter in “a World of Pains and troubles.”[37] Keats forged his concept of life as a ‘vale of Soul-making’ partly through reading Shakespeare's famous tragedy *King Lear* and through examining his response to the experience. Lear was burnt and ‘bound upon a wheel of fire’ through unmitigated mental suffering and unavoidable submission to emotional pain. The reader first submerges himself in the painful feelings and at last finds his own identity again as a cleansed and new person. “There is a personal value to the reader in burning through Lear's pain and suffering, as he emerges knowing his own separateness from the king, with an enhanced perception of the limitations of being human which also brings an awareness of its potential. More integrated, more self-aware by being imaginatively aware of the suffering of another, he may finally detach himself from vicarious experience and return to the limitations of personal existence, strengthened by the process.”[38]

Just as in *King Lear* after the ‘violent harm’ comes the kiss of Cordelia as medicine to repair the frame of the moral world with love, so Keats's knowledge of the worst gives him a firm point of sanity and rest. Keats- the artist is untouchable and inviolable from such a point of visionary refuge and inner peace which is clearly reflected in *The Fall of Hyperion*. It is generally agreed that in *To Autumn*, the last of the great Odes, he speaks from such a perspective where the certainties of death and pain, moved just out of focus, gather on the horizon. “Gone self-storm”[39] is perhaps an equivalent for Aristotelian Catharsis, Miltonic ‘all passion spent’[40], or the Shakespearean ‘full close’[41] after the final words of a tragedy have been spoken. In a mood of quiet compassion, the poet guides us away from glimpses of soft-dying day and the mourning of the swarming gnats, back into a full appreciation of ripe forces available in the experience of living. This in itself is a great gift to discover in the poetry of Keats and the drama of Shakespeare alike. It is the sanctifying of common



experience, and paradoxically the concrete embodiment of sacred mysteries which we find demonstrated in the mature poetry of Shakespeare and Keats.

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