A Study of 'Ode to Psyche'—From Pindaric Ode to Ronde

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Introduction

'Ode to Psyche', one of Keats's spring odes from his annus mirabilis, was written in a kind of experimental mood. He was looking for a suitable form for English and devised a new style mixing the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan sonnet. He mentions his efforts at composing in a letter to his brother just after writing 'Ode to Psyche':

I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes—the other kind appears too elegaic—and the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect...1

His experiment in this period is discussed by such critics as Garrod, Ridley, and Bate. They point out that Keats tried out forms until he achieved his supreme ode formula, and each of his experimental styles has its effect. However, Yoshiga's comment on Keats's relationship to Pindaric ode is of particular interest. Keats originally composed 'Ode to Psyche' in three stanzas. The present third and fourth stanzas constituted one long stanza in Keats's letter to his brother, in which this ode first appeared. Yoshiga points out that Keats's ode was originally composed in a Pindaric style, and he explains Pindaric form's three stanzas in the light of Hegel's rhetoric of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.3 In Pindaric ode, the third part shows the writers' indefatigable conflict between thesis and antithesis, and it shows a new notion of higher perspective. If Keats wrote this ode in an experimental mood, especially as concerns style, then he had a clear intention in using this form. Thus, we can find Keats's thought in his new stage by reading the original third stanza as part of a Pindaric ode.

I. Thesis

Just before he wrote this ode, Keats abandoned Hyperion, in which he had struggled to attain a mature poetic expression after Endymion was harshly criticised. However, the mythic world spread out as a background in the first stanza of 'Ode to Psyche' is much different from that in Hyperion. Here he describes a bower in the woods after the invocation:

I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair creatures, couch'd side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:

Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,
And ready still past kisses to outnumber
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love: (ll.7-20)\(^4\)

The rich forest here has more affinity with the
mighty forest on Latmos in Endymion, which is filled
with flowers and movement (i,63-121), than with the
deep and motionless forest in Hyperion (i,1-14).
Nature in this ode is described with verbs like
'whisp'ring', 'trembled', and 'ran', making this forest a
lively and pleasant one with a free atmosphere, it
then lends to the whole work.

The divinities that Keats describes in such a free
atmosphere also have more affinity with Endymion
than with Hyperion. His description of gods in
Endymion contains some eroticism, in contrast to the
stern gods in palaces or ruins in Hyperion; his gods in
Endymion are much livelier than Hyperion's statue-
like images. After publishing Endymion, Keats got
severe reactions for his wanton mood. To avoid more
criticism, Keats sought for a solution in Milton.
Imitating Milton, he omitted his eroticism as a
weakness and tried to describe a more 'grand' divinity
in Hyperion. However, in 'Ode to Psyche, he regained
the eroticism of his former works. This does not
mean that in this ode, Keats simply returned to his
former style. He depicts Psyche and Cupid in his
earliest works as follows:

So felt he, who first told, how Psyche went
On the smooth wind to realms of wonderment;
What Psyche felt, and Love, when their full lips
First touch'd; what amorous, and fondling nips

They gave each other's cheeks; with all their sighs,
And how they kist each other's tremulous eyes:
The silver lamp.—the ravishment,—the wonder—The
darkness,—loneliness,—the fearful thunder;
Their woes gone by, and both to heaven upflown,
To bow for gratitude before Jove's throne.

'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' ll.141-50.

In these two works we see similar images around
Psyche: the allusion to the wind with which Psyche
is carried to Cupid's palace in Apuleius's in The
Golden Ass ('whisp'ring roof! Of leaves and trembled
blossoms'—'smooth wind', 'upflown'), the description
of lips ('Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade
adieu'—'full lips/ Fist touch'd') and the connection of
kissing and eyes ('past kisses to outnumber/ At tender
eye-dawn of aurorean love'—'they kist each other's
tremulous eyes').

However, the ode's allusions to wind are much
softened in comparison to the keen intensity in the
earlier poems. The direct expression of wind changes
into the description of an object the wind touches,
which can be called a shadow of wind. Additionally,
the verbs ('whisper', 'tremble') associated with the
wind in the ode are very tender.

Furthermore, the descriptions of the two beauties'
sexuality are also softened. The passion of the kiss,
the touch of their 'full lips', bears a quiet tension by
Keats's addition of a statue-like stasis, which
brilliantly exposes the moment of bliss ('Their lips
touch'd not, but had not bade adieu'), though it is
more successful in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. The kiss-
eye connection is also obscured. Though Keats
defines the eye as the direct target of their kisses in
the earlier work, he uses 'eye' as a metaphor of dawn
and limits the meaning the word within a hint at their
physical eyes.

His carefully softened expressions supply his work

with a moderate eroticism. Such moderation is based on the character of Psyche herself. In 1816, Keats depicted Psyche without wings, while his Psyche in the first stanza of his ode has them. For Keats, wings are deeply connected with knowledge. He wrote in a letter as follows:

The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this—in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare shoulder[e]d Creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledge<d>, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear.\(^5\)

Psyche without wings shows her lack of knowledge. She is 'upfown' like 'high Sensations' without knowledge. There is no independence or identity in such movements; they are just blown by the breath of almighty gods. In this expression, Rollins reads reminiscences of Satan's falling in *Paradise Lost* ii, 933, a passage Keats underlines in his own copy of the book.\(^4\) Driven by jealous and impatience, Satan flies high up without any perspective and is stricken down many fathoms deep into mud. Although Psyche looks to be in bliss with her true love in 'I stood tip-toe', Keats sees the sensation of a Psyche(soul) without wings as comparable to Satan's despair. To save Psyche from such despair, Keats gives her wings. We see here a moderate Psyche with wings of knowledge in a moderate, erotic mythic world: a poetic truth for Keats.

In the opening of this ode, Keats indicates the poet has encounters with immortals in his half-woken condition, in the 6 and 7 lines, ('Surely I dreamt today, or did I see/ The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?\(^6\) This half-dreaming expression is used in Keats's works; in his early period in particular, he shows a poetic truth that can be taken under the influence of imagination. He explains the imagination with reference Adam's dream in Milton's *Paradise Lost* viii, 452-90, as 'The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.'\(^7\) That is to say, the scenery the first-person narrator sees while half-dreaming is the poetic truth, and that is Keats's crucial thesis. The poetic truth he shows in the first stanza is a fusion of his original eroticism with the silence of *Hyperion*. It is the beginning of his new expression after a struggle with Milton in *Hyperion*.

2. Antithesis

Keats was always anxious about his belatedness. He felt as if all supreme themes had been already written by his predecessors and there were only remnants for him. He expresses his theme as follows in *The Fall of Hyperion*:

Before its wreathed doorway, on a mound
Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits,
Which, nearer seen, seem'd refuse of a meal
By angel tasted, or our mother Eve;

That full draught is parent of my theme.

(Canto I, ll.28-31, 46)

Keats's anxiety was about being refused permission to follow in his predecessor's lineage because he lacked a suitable theme for a supreme poem. In the second stanza of 'Ode to Psyche', he shows his irritation at his refusal as an antithesis, by duplicating his situation in the neglect of Psyche. Here, Keats counts Psyche's inadequacies one by one. He counts them as a contrary concept that his thesis, a moderately erotic

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\(^{1}\) *Letters*, i, 277.


\(^{3}\) *Letters*, i, 185.
mythic world, has to contradict. In this enumeration, he shows his irritation for the cold society that would not accept the supreme beauty of his 'latest born'. He expresses his frustration by using vocabulary from Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' ('Nativity Ode'). Miriam Allott points out Keats's allusion in lines 30-35 to Milton's ode:

Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming
No shrine, no grove, no oracle no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

('Ode to Psyche', II.30-35)

The oracles are dumb,
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the arch'd roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,

With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance or breath'd spell
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

('Nativity Ode', II.173-80.)

We can see Milton's influence on Keats in the repetition of negatives, in words common to both poems ('shrine' and 'oracle') and in similar phrases ('delicious moan/ Upon the midnight hours'—'nightly trance' or 'pale-mouth'd prophet'—'pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell'). However, Walter Jackson Bate interprets these similarities as unconscious ones:

Perhaps unconsciously he remembers and echoes the phrases about the pagan deities in Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity".3

It was soon after Keats abandoned Hyperion that he composed this ode, and it is not impossible to consider that these similarities are unconscious echoes as Bate points out; however, the allusion here must be more intentional, because during the period he was writing spring odes, he was in a highly experimental mood and carefully chose his words and style. Besides, Milton was more than just one predecessor among many for Keats; he was a great mentor who led Keats to a higher poetic eminence.

Keats began Hyperion spurred by a harsh criticism of Endymion, and he put aside his weakness, which had been violently attacked by Lockhart. However, Herbert Read understands Keats's weakness in a different way:

The weakness of Endymion had been his own weakness—'mawkishness' he called it; but we can now call it verbal excess, induced by the rhyming structure and by imprecision of diction. In Hyperion Keats avoided these weakness, but only by sacrificing his own sincerity, his valid sensation.10

Though Keats once chose to sacrifice some of his charm to attain grave Miltonic expression, when he quit Hyperion and returned his original sensation, he would have been aware of the merits and demerits of Miltonic expression for his own compositions. Released from Milton's spell, he was resuscitated from poetic death. Later, Keats wrote, 'Life to him[Milton] would be death to me'.11 In the period of the spring odes, Keats began to feel the gap between Milton and himself and he resurrected some of the expressions that he had once given up. He writes as

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4 Letters, ii, 212.
follows in the letter this ode first appeared in.

The following Poem—the last I have written is the first and the only one with which I have taken even moderate pains—I have for the most part dash’d 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 thing[s] in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit.12

Here we can see Keats's rebirth. He regained his own sensation and began to breathe with his own words. He felt a kind of emancipation from the too-strong influence of Milton. In such a condition, Keats used words from Nativity Ode to express Psyche's inadequacy. Nativity Ode is a paean to the birth of Christ, and at the same time, it is an elegy for pagan gods. Keats must have had a clear ironic intention in this usage.

The offerings that Milton shows here are lost after Christ usurps Apollo's divinity. Keats duplicates Psyche's unpossessed divinity with Apollo's lost one. Milton writes of the usurpation of Olympian divinity as a worthy thing in light of Christ's birth, and he applauds it as the accomplishment of Christianity. The point is the second part of Keats's poem presents the antithesis in Pindaric ode form. It conflicts with Keats's thesis, the mythic world in nature with calm eroticism. Of course, his antithesis would be Psyche's inadequacy, but behind it, he carefully places the exclusive religious sense of Milton. What he wants to oppose is the spirit of Miltonic Christianity, which locks out beauty. Such an exclusion of beauty distressed Keats.

3. Synthesis

The third part, lines 36-67, shows Psyche's new divinity and her fane. Here we can see Keats show his intention to duplicate the resurrection of ancient, free, mythic divinity in Psyche's newly gotten divinity. His intention is clear in his wording, in which he shows his reverence for ancient pure worship:

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire; (ll.36-39.)

Here we can see Keats's craft that draws readers' attention to antique pieties and makes readers strongly aware of the loss of pure devotion. Opening the stanza with the single capital letter 'O', soon followed by an exclamation mark, gives readers a surprise like wakening, working with the strong gap between the drowsy rhythm of [ou] in the leading stanza ('No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet,...' No shrine, no grove, no oracle no heat...') (l. 32, 34) and the last word, 'dreaming' (l.35). With this awakened ear, readers hear the repetition of the simple phrase 'too late', and this simplicity strikes readers' hearts directly.

To this struck heart, Keats shows what we have lost. Here, our lost 'antique vows' rhyme with 'forest boughs' and this rhyme with bursting sound illustrates how strong the vows were and how in making them the people raised their hands to heaven like boughs. We can see the scene vividly: myriad raised arms making a forest of limbs as the fervent vows are sworn. Furthermore, 'the fond believing lyre' rhymes with 'fire'. It suggests to us that the sound of the lyre intensifies until it roars like fire. Here, Keats appeals to the preciousness of the things we have lost, using the dramatic effect of rhyme and the arrangement of his words.

In these lines, Miriam Allott points out an allusion

12 Letters, ii, 105-06.
From haunted spring and dale
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flow'r-inwoven tresses torn
The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

In consecrated earth,
And on the holy hearth,
The Lars and Lemures moan with midnight plaint; (ll. 184-91)

When we read Milton's shadow in Keats's descriptions, the meaning of his longing is specified. His antique pieties are not vague ones; they have clear, strong images. They are specific deities that Keats loved in myths he was familiar with.

His use of 'holy' shows an ironic meaning. 'Holy' names for Keats all things that were worshipped in ancient times. Milton's work calls the same things 'holy' and he depicts scenery in which 'holy' things fill the air. However, with the birth of Christ this 'holiness' is deprived. That is to say, Milton calls the unholy things holy to contrast the deprivation of the false holiness with the true holiness. Keats recovers the holiness that was branded false by Milton and he values its purity. From lines 44 to 49, he indicates his determination to be Psyche's worshipper, reversing his own expressions in the previous stanza. He compensates for Psyche's inadequacy that he counts in the second stanza, the re-granting the divinity Milton had once usurped from Olympian divinities. Keats takes into Psyche's new fane the notions that are presented as antithesis.

In a Pindaric ode, the third part shows the synthesis. It is a higher stage after the conflict between thesis and antithesis. In the beginning of this stage in 'Ode to Psyche', Keats presents an intense yearning for pure antique piety and restoration of antique gods in defiance of a Miltonic world. However, Miltonic allusion does not vanish here. Keats maintains a shadow of Milton by using his words again, because what Keats searches for is not only to regain the divinity that Milton destroyed. Of Keats's restoration of Psyche in this ode, Vendler points out:

Psyche's restoration, for Keats, must be not only the restoration of her cult—voice, lute, pipe, incense, shrine, grove, oracle, and prophet—but also the restoration of her atmosphere and presence. Milton's austere language permits itself nostalgia but no more; Keats, as Psyche's worshiper, requires the radiance of present conjuration. The radiant eroticizing of the interior landscape of the mind, as it is decked and adorned and decorated, is Keats's chief intent, as he makes himself a mind seductive to Psyche.14

He intended to mix his own eroticism with Milton's gravity. After the harsh criticism Endymion received, he banned his serene eroticism, but he regains the eroticism here in the Psyche's new fane. He duplicates his own restoration in the restoration of the divinity of gods that Milton had usurped. For Keats, it was most important to overlay his restoration onto Milton, because it was Milton who had deprived him of his most excellent essence, his innocent eroticism, but it was also Milton who gave him quietude, which granted his work some serenity and stability, and so, he chose to use or deny Milton's words and phrases one by one. Kenneth Allott regards Keats's adoration for ancient piety as a regret for losing such a

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precious innocence and points out that 'Keats's regret embraces his own loss of an earlier innocence'\textsuperscript{15}.

However, Keats's work does not end with only regret. Vendler remarks on Keats's linguistic repetition of 'heal' in the second and third stanzas and explains it as follows:

What is the wound that is being healed? It is, in Keats's view, a wound to poetry itself, inflicted by Christianity. Because Christianity banished the pagan divinities, good and bad alike, the body of poetry inherited from the ancient world was, by Christian poets, mutilated.\textsuperscript{16}

Keats overlapped the remedy for himself with the remedy for a poetry mutilated by Christian poets. The presentation of ancient piety and the denial of Milton work as a kind of initiation. Through it, he produces a new fane for Psyche:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane

In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,

Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:

(II.50-53)

Here, the 'fane' that the poet builds for the new goddess rhymes with 'pleasant pain'. It reminds us of the pain that Keats had experienced through *Endymion* to the abandonment of *Hyperion*. It should be 'pleasant', because he could touch Milton's rich world though reading. It is not a vague pain, but an acute and specific one. For Keats, pain and pleasure were inseparable and were essential to the growth of one's soul. He explains worldly misery as a vale of the soul, remarking in his letter before this ode:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please "The vale of Soul-making" Then you will find out the use of the world…\textsuperscript{17}

After the explanation above, Keats distinguishes intelligences from souls. Intelligences have their sparks of divinity, but they do not have identities. When they acquire identities, they become souls. It is 'a World of Pains and troubles' that gives identities to intelligences. For Keats, every suffering or pain is necessary for his intelligence to grow into soul, Psyche. For him, pain was not only sore but also precious. Furthermore, Keats continues 'Instead of pines'. 'Pines' of course means the trees that frighten Psyche in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, but at the same time, placed so near to 'pain', 'pines' contains the meaning of agony. Keats declares here in his fane pains are not mere agonies but they are 'pleasant' ones that promise him growth.

Moreover, instead of this pine, 'branched thoughts/shall murmur'. The wording 'branched' of course alludes to the 'boughs' (I.38), which implies the enthusiastic antique pieties. These branched thoughts shall murmur in 'untrodden region in my mind'. Here, Keats finds a totally new place in his mind, where he and Psyche are not the 'latest' ones who were refused all honour. Vendler says,

The ode ['Ode to Psyche'] declares, ... that the creation of art requires the complete replacement of

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\textsuperscript{16} Vendler, 50.

\textsuperscript{17} Letters, ii, 101-02.
all memory and sense-experience by an entire duplication of the external world within the artist's brain...\(^{19}\)

Borrowing Vendler's words, I would say in his internal world Keats reconstructs the memories that Milton and Christianity destroyed. As I mentioned before, Keats had once been robbed of his own sincerity by Milton. He regains his former sincerity and furthermore, by using words from Milton's work, he lets his antithesis be expressed by bringing Milton's words into his internal fane.

His new fane furnishes his own experiences: original sincerity, loss, pine, and growth. It shows an organic figure. He expresses it as follows:

Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;

\((1.54-55)\)

Allott points the similarity with *Endymion* in this scenery.\(^{19}\)

Upon the sides of Latmos was outspread
A mighty forest..........................
..................................................
.........................the space of heaven above,
Edg'd round with dark tree tops... (i, 63-64, 85-86)

A dark space hemmed by trees in this ode has a similarity with Latmos in *Endymion*, but they are different in their allusions to wings; trees 'fledge' the mountain in the ode. For Keats, to fledge is the symbol of attaining maturity, and it is the mountain, not Psyche, that is described as fledged. When he adds maturity to the innocence of *Endymion*, he obtains an ideal world for him. Pindaric ode is the formula of a song of triumph. When Keats chose this style, he felt a triumphal feeling uniting Miltonic gravity and his own innocence.

While his fane, namely his mind, gets fledged, Psyche herself loses the figure of a goddess in the last stanza. She is written with 'a casement ope at night,/ To let the warm Love in' (ll.66-67). Here, Psyche is waiting for her husband. The description reminds us of infant Psyche who waited for her husband without any knowledge. Perkins says,

Psyche was a mortal maiden loved by Cupid. After many vicissitudes the lovers were united, and Psyche was made immortal. In Keats's poetry there are a number of such couplings of mortal and immortal lovers. Cynthia and Endymion, the elfin lady and the knight of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Lamia and Lycius, are the primary examples, but there are also minor episodes of this type in *Endymion*.\(^{20}\)

Though Perkins picks up as the same examples, there is a huge difference between Cynthia and Endymion and the other pairs. In the last scene of *Endymion*, Endymion is divinized and he vanishes into the immortal world. However, in Keats's other works, the mortal stays mortal, and the mortals agonize over the loss of the immortal world they glimpsed for an instant. Cynthia and Endymion are never the same as Keats's other mortal-immortal evolvements. In this sense of loss, Keats found a place where intelligences are made into souls. To be a soul, intelligence needs to keep experiencing. Psyche with her infant image shows Keats's continuous evolvement. His intelligence continuously becomes a fledged soul in his mind, a mature mind with experience. Here he shows not a

\(^{18}\) Vendler, 49.

\(^{19}\) Allott,520.

rigid world, which shuts out new beauty like Miltonic Christianity, but a fluent world which can always include change and novelty.

To complete his new fane, Keats finally divided his third part into the present third and fourth stanza; in doing so, his ode deviated from Pindaric style and became a ronde with a mirror structure. The present formula makes a big mirror structure: the uniting of Cupid and Psyche in the first stanza corresponds to their separation in the fourth stanza, and Psyche's inadequacy in the second stanza corresponds to her sufficiency in the third stanza. The expressions are not placed chronologically—Psyche is described as a goddess in the first stanza and as human in the fourth stanza—so the readers who know Psyche transforms from a human to a goddess in Apuleius' myth have to go back to the poem's beginning. We readers follow the huge circle with the poet in the ode and experience the conflict between thesis and antithesis, and their fusion and the achievement of the new fane repeatedly. Thus, Keats made a new poetic style that continuously gives a place for experience as well as Psyche's fane.

**Conclusion**

The system Keats organized in 'Ode to Psyche' was a new one, taking the Pindaric ode and progressing to a ronde with a mirror structure. The poem begins from a strong affirmation of moderate, mythic freedom in first stanza, conflicts with Miltonic restraint in second stanza and fuses Miltonic restraint with the construction of a new fane in poet's mind in third and fourth stanzas.

Pindaric odes were originally written to celebrate victory. What Keats celebrated was of course the victory of his soul. It was long forsaken, but at last, he gave his soul suitable divinity in this ode. However, when he had completed his new fane in his mind, the structure became unsuitable for his notion any more. His new fane was not made for battle with Milton or Christianity but for continuous growth of mind. His dividing of the poem's final part shows the movement of his mind and brings his work a new effect. His ode becomes a big mirror structure, and it indicates Keats's vacillation, which he always shows in his growth through going back and forth between reality and the poetic imaginary world. His spirit was continuously refined through this vacillation.