

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 elegiac—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.² 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, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whispering roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:

¹ Hyder Edward Rollins ed., *The Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1958 (2001)), ii, 108. All quotations from Keats's letters are from this version.

² H. W. Garrod, *Keats* (London: Oxford UP, 1926). M. R. Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development* (London: Oxford UP, 1933). Walter Jackson Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962).

³ 吉賀憲夫「"Ode to Psyche"における Keats と Milton」『愛知工業大学研究報告. A, 教養関係論文集』第14号, 1973.

'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 aurean 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 aurean 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

⁴ Jack Stillinger ed., *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1978). All quotations from Keats's work are from this version.

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 fledged<d>, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear.⁵

Psyche without wings shows her lack of knowledge. She is 'upflown' 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.⁶ 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 to-day, or did I see/ The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?'). 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

⁵ *Letters*, i, 277.

⁶ *Letters*, i, 277. Beth Lau, *Keats's Paradise Lost* (Florida: UP of Florida, 1998), 98-99.

⁷ *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', ll.30-35)

The oracles are dumb,
 No voice or hideous hum
 Runs through the archèd roof in words deceiving.
 Apollo from his shrine
 Can no more divine,
 With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving.
 No nightly trance or breathèd spell
 Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.
 ('Nativity Ode', ll.173-80.)⁸

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".⁹

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

⁸ Douglas Bush ed., *Milton: Poetical Works* (London: Oxford UP, 1967). All quotations from Milton's work are from this version.

⁹ Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (New York: Oxford UP, 1963), 492.

¹⁰ Herbert Read, *The True Voice of Feeling* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 67.

¹¹ *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 [f] 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 fame. 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.

¹³ Miriam Allott ed., *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Longman, 1971), 518.

all memory and sense-experience by an entire duplication of the external world within the artist's brain...¹⁸

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;
(ll.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 vacillations. 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 vacillation. 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.

²⁰ David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth Shelley and Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1969), 222.

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.

