

LIFE IS AN ALLEGORY : A Study of the Spenserian Elements in "Eve of St. Agnes" by Keats

By Ruth Bartlett

"A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory, and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the scriptures, figurative.....they are very shallow people who take everything literally."¹ These phrases from part of a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, under date of February 18, 1819, may well be applied to the writing on which John Keats was then engaged. For in another part of the letter, dated February 14, he mentioned that he hoped to send them soon the "Pot of Basil," and "St. Agnes Eve." Was this allegorical spirit, as well as the medieval vein in his poetry, a part of Keats's indebtedness to Spenser? Two months later, continuing this diary-like correspondence with his brother and sister-in-law, in America, the poet slips in some playful Spenserian stanzas on his house-mate, Charles Brown,² thus showing his pre-occupation with the form in which "Eve of St. Agnes" is written.

While this poem shows most notably the artistic influences of Spenser, other works published later, after some time spent in the medieval atmosphere of the cathedral town of Winchester, have many echoes of Spenser in the use of allegory, appeal to the senses, sound and atmospheric effects. Careful study will show that *Endymion* and *Lamia* owe much to Keats's Elizabethan model. Yet in no sense is the young Romantic poet of the nineteenth century an imitator. Rather he is so steeped in the poetry of Spenser, as also in that of Shakespeare, that he often becomes one in kinship with the earlier masters. Especially, in the last two years of his life, as he builds a world of his inner being as defense against reality, he seems to find an especial kinship with Spenser. His letters refer as naturally to Archimago and Florimel as to names of contemporaries. During

Notes :¹ *Letters*, p. 226 ;² *Letters*, pp. 244-245.

his last illness, he wrote to his beloved, Fanny Brawne, that he had marked for her the most beautiful passages in Spenser.¹⁾

Spenserian echoes and touches to be found in much of the poetry of John Keats may be studied at close range in the "Eve of St. Agnes": allegory, versification, medievalism, language, sensuous appeal, use of words for rare effects of feeling and atmosphere. In considering briefly each of these points, we shall do well to note clearly the differences, as well as the similarities, of the two poets.

The versification, the Spenserian stanza, is so obvious a connection between the two as to require little comment, chosen very appropriately as it was by Keats for a story of medieval atmosphere and magic. It is worthy of note that Keats in scrupulous, as Renaissance poets were not, in excluding any classical allusions such as are found frequently in Spenser and Ariosto. In verse form likewise, Keats disregards the classic pattern of regularly stressed and unstressed syllables, following rather the early English tradition of stress words, usually three to a line of ten syllables:

Out went the taper, as she hurried in (xxlli)
And diamonded with panes of quaint device.
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes (xxiv).

On the other hand, note the effect produced by a succession of strong syllables:

The lover's endless minutes slowly passed.

Such rhythmic patterns are of frequent occurrence in the *Faerie Queene*; an example is taken from Book I, Canto V, xviii:

As when a wearie traveler that strayes
By muddy shore of broad seven-mouthed Nile,
Unweeting of the perilous wandring wayes,
Doth meete a cruell craftie crocodile.

In comparing the vocabulary of Keats with that of Spenser, we

Notes; ¹⁾ *Keats* by Betty Askwith, p. 244.

find that the Elizabethan poet consistently uses archaic words and forms throughout, whereas the young romantic judiciously scatters them here and there to suggest the medieval atmosphere. In choice of phrase it is quite possible that he was following Chatterton, whom he greatly admired, and of whom he writes to his brother George, "The purest English, I think—or what ought to be the purest—is Chatterton's..... Chatterton's language is entirely northern. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's, cut by feet."¹

Examples of archaisms in "Eve of St. Agnes" are verb-forms in *-eth*: *saith*, *riseth*, *turneth*, *laugheth*, *keepeth*, the prefix *a* in *a-cold*, *amort*; *argent* and *gules* from medieval heraldry; dialectic words *mickle* and *cates*; *delicates* seems to be a Keatsian invention, after the manner of Spenser; definitely Spenserian are *elves*, *fays*, *faery fancy*, *wan*, *otherwhere*, that were still current in Elizabethan England; *that mansion foul* straight out of the *Faerie Queene*. Variety and richness of language belong equally to both poets. In Keats we find occasional sly bits of humor, peculiarly his own, giving a faint touch of irony, if not satire, to his medievalism. His sense of the ridiculous appears in such expressions as "Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume," (xiii) and the description of the mailed figures in the hall:

"and his weak spirit fails

To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails." (ii)

Sensuousness, a characteristic shared with Spenser, is especially to be observed in the "Eve of St. Agnes," but of equal significance is his complete control of the sensations as they are made to fit into the pattern and framework of the allegory. As Spenser is many times carried away with his images, losing sight of his main intent—for example, the Bowre of Blisse in Book II, Canto XII—so the young Keats in *Endymion* is swept along "without judgment." In contrast, "Eve of St. Agnes," revised many times in manuscript, corrected in proof from changes made by the editor, has been written

Notes: ¹ *Letters*, p. 313; ² Letter to his editor, John Taylor, June 11, 1820, *Letters*, p. 360.

“with judgment.”

Again in comparison with Spenser, Keats appeals to all the senses, whereas Spenser chiefly makes use of those that serve the mind—sight and hearing—and only infrequently reminds us of those serving only the body—smell, taste, and touch—all of which hold high place with Keats. “Ah, bitter chill it was!” Thus from the opening stanza of “Eve of St. Agnes” we are made aware of the cold in almost every line, nor do we cease to shiver throughout the narrative, even though Madeleine seems to be warmed by her dream. In further comparison with Spenser, it is interesting to note that although the Elizabethan poet introduces the reader to many uncomfortable and disagreeable sensations, he stays out of cold climates, possibly because his models were of the Mediterranean regions—Homer, Virgil, and Ariosto. Keats, on the other hand, is quite at home, in the northland, besides being himself very sensitive to cold.

The sensation of sound, not a dominant theme, is lightly touched with a suggestion of unpleasantness, echoing perhaps the poet's dislike of Winchester's church music: “the music, yearning like a god in pain,” (vii) or “The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide.” (iv) More melodious, if not overly cheerful, we hear “her hollow lute in chords that tenderest be..... ‘La belle dame sans mercy.’” (xxxiii) Other sounds than music are suggested in the “buzz'd whisper,” (x) Old Angels “shuffling along,” (xi), “Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees,” (xxvi) “quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet,” “the door upon its hinges groans,” (xli) “the boistrous, midnight, festive clarion.” (xxix)

Full as the poem is of imagery, perhaps the most impressive picture is that in stanzas xxiv and xxv of the stained glass casement with the moon shining through upon Madeleine. To delight the eye, Porphyro, while Madeleine fasts, heaps up those “delicates” in gold and silver dishes. Old Angela tells the lover it is a feast night and she is too old and feeble and dizzy-headed to arrange the food properly. As Porphyro, in stanza xxx, brings from the closet dainties tempting to eye and palate, the reader is momentarily

carried from the cold chamber to southern cities, and is perchance reminded of the lines from Spenser :

They bring them wines of Greece and Araby
And dainty spices fetcht from furthest Ind. (*Faery Queene*,
Book I, Canto I, iv)

Aspects of allegory and medievalism that are peculiarly Keats's own can be attributed, in part at least, to the poet's lack of a genuine Christian faith. He had no love for cathedrals or their services, but found them amusing and at times annoying. His attitude is in sharp contrast to that of Spenser, who was at the same time a harsh and bitter critic of the Catholic church of his day while deeply in sympathy with the faith and teachings of the medieval church. Keats bases his story on a medieval superstition, which he treats in a mood of gentle mockery that is extended to all the trappings of the baronial castle. Neither Spenser nor Keats believes in dragons and Blatant Beasts, but Spenser is deeply concerned with the ideas of which they are symbols. Keats finds the outworn symbols meaningless except as they are used to serve some practical purpose.

The superstition of the dream and the night of revelry provide opportunity for the lover to reach his darling, lodged in the castle of his enemies. Madeleine believing that if she fasts she will see her lover in a dream, wakes to a real lover, while the rest of the household have drunk themselves into insensibility. The old servant, lame, lazy, and weak-witted, after serving her purpose, "died palsy-twitched, with meagre face deform" (xlii) The uselessness of penance is typified by the Beadsman of numbed fingers and frosted breath, sitting in his cold ashes,

"after thousand aves told,

For aye unsought for, slept among his ashes cold." (xlii)

Porphyro after to praying to the saints, answers his own prayer by venturing in where, by chance, he meets, not enemies thirsting for his blood, but weak and simple old Angela. As he rides away in the storm, the baron and his guests are disturbed by nightmares, doubtless induced by their heavy feasting. The dragons

prove harmless, and even the dog, recognizing one of the family, allows the lover to steal away with Madeleine. Thus repeatedly does the poet use gentle ridicule to satirize not only medieval superstitious and religious beliefs, but also medieval romance itself. "They are very shallow people who take everything literally."

Finally it should be noted that Keats in using legend and allegory, never loses touch with reality. A few outstanding examples may be quoted:

The carved angels, ever eager eyed,
Stared where *upon their heads the cornice rests*,
With *hair blown back*, and *wings put cross-wise on their breasts*. (iv)

Then there's old Lord Maurice, *not a whit*
More tame for his grey hairs. (xii)

She *hobbled off with busy fear*. (xxi)

Where lay the Porter, in *uneasy sprawl*,
With a huge empty flagon at his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and *shook his hide*. (xli)

A *chain-drooped lump* was flickering by each door;
.....

And the long carpets(*) rose along the gusty floor. (xli)

*Surely Keats knew better than to lay carpets in a medieval manor, but he could not refrain from this bit of the ludicrous, which somehow seems in keeping with attention to accurate realistic detail, wrought unobtrusively into the composition. We are reminded that Keats is not under the spell of the medieval atmosphere he has created, an escapist from reality, but a conscious literary artist as well as an acute observer. Nor is the poem touched with "sham medievalism," as suggested by Betty Askwith in her study of Keats. The poet in "Eve of St. Agnes" has used the medieval story and its setting to draw from it rich imagery, atmosphere, and sensuousness, at the same time subtly conveying the idea that it is not meant to be taken too seriously. It is, if you like, an allegorical satire.

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