

GOULD ESSAY PRIZE 2019

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Question 7

*'What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat
and breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river.'*
(Barrett Browning, 'A Musical Instrument')

What are the gods of Greece and Rome doing in English poetry?

Introduction

In Keats' corpus, the gods of Greece and Rome fulfil three roles: they bridge the structural gap between the individual and the universal, they facilitate an evocation of Hellenic culture, and they provide a vehicle for intertextual allusion within the English canon. It is only in turning to classical mythology, therefore, that Keats is able to achieve some of his central literary intentions.

Indeed, the second-generation Romantic poets (namely Shelley, Keats, and Byron) all included copious references to the gods of Greece and Rome, but Yujie Su's statistical study demonstrates that "Keats was the one who [made] the most use of Greek mythology" (2016). It is thus justified to consider the Keatsian approach to classical deities in isolation, especially given his own articulation of their significance in the 1818 preface to *Endymion*: "I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece, and dulled its brightness" (Keats, 1818). In considering his *Ode to Psyche*, as well as sections from *Endymion* and *Lamia*, such 'brightness' can be found in full.

Functionality

Given that classical polytheism was based on a system of symbolism and representation (i.e. there was a direct association between deities and their responsibilities), Keats could exploit a unique structural opportunity by including the gods of Greece and Rome in his verse. In drawing on specific mythological characters, the poet may intertwine seemingly personal experience with the universal. Or, to use the terminology of Weathers, they may combine the "reportorial" and the "universal" (1973). This is eminently visible in Keats' *Ode to Psyche*, wherein the poet establishes the narrative of the poem by means of an apparently reportorial framework:

"Surely I dreamt today, or did I see

The wingèd Psyche with awakened eyes?" (Keats, 1818)

The rhetorical interrogation alongside the doublet of first-person verbs of perception ('I dreamt' and 'did I see') creates the impression that the narrator is reporting an individual experience. The speaker elaborates that he "wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly", continuing the construction of a narrative seemingly based in personal participation. That Psyche is part of a group of immortals which were believed to be perceptible in antiquity is therefore crucial: Keats is able to write intimately and sensually about his persona's encounter with her "[i]n deepest grass".

Psyche, whose name in Greek literally means 'soul' or 'spirit', is described in the poem as the "latest born and loveliest vision far / Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy", by which Keats is referring to her relatively late addition to the ancient mythological canon. The Roman author Apuleius only writes his *Metamorphoses* (referred to as *asinus aureus* by St. Augustine) detailing the myth of Eros and Psyche as late as the second century AD, so Keats creates an image of her relative neglect. Psyche is presented as a deity who is utterly ignored: "though temple thou hast none, / Nor altar heaped with flowers"—she lacks the typical signs of religious devotion attributed to her fellow Olympians.

The persona goes on to promise devotion to Psyche despite this historical neglect, responding antithetically to the absences listed in lines 32-35:

"I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.

So let me be thy choir, and make a moan

Upon the midnight hours;

Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet" (43-46)

The tetracolon anaphora of 'thy' in line 46 plays on the personal aspect of the poem's format; Keats' persona is devoting himself to a deity which he himself met. The poet emphasises the acutely individual nature of the speaker's experience by means of the pronominal noun and adjectival phrase in line 43 ('I' and 'my own'). This is therefore a seemingly reportorial poem; in Weathers' words, it is a "report of unique and particular experience" (1973).

However, it is upon such individual experience that Keats is able to allegorise a far more universal poetic statement: a commitment to imagination and the soul. The Romantic movement was born of a reaction to 17th Century rationalism, finding ultimate meaning in intense emotion and experience as opposed to the Enlightenment ideals of industrialisation and social class. Indeed, Keats' very own transition from physician to poet replicates the devotion he articulates allegorically in *Ode to Psyche*. The soul was abandoned by the Enlightenment just as Psyche is seen abandoned in the poem, and Keats' participation in and contribution to the subsequent response of Romanticism parallels his speaker's dedication to Psyche in line 50: "I will be thy priest". Thus, Keats is able to combine descriptions of the universal (i.e. the abstract concept of the 'soul') with those of the individual (i.e. the intricately described encounter which defines the poem). Blake's poetic credo comes to mind, here, in that in many ways Keats is able 'to see a world in a grain of sand'; ancient mythology allows Keats to amalgamate the specific and the general.

Indeed, the flexibility afforded to the poet by the inclusion of mythology is fully exploited in the final stanza of Keats' ode, in which the sylvan imagery of the poem develops into a psychological metaphor:

"In some untrodden region of my mind,

Where branchèd thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,

Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind" (51-53)

The once dramatic setting has developed into a metaphorical landscape, and the abstract 'thoughts' are seen to replace physical 'pines'. The reader thus becomes aware of the dissolving boundary between the apparently individual experience of the speaker and the universal concepts at play. The semantic field used to describe the environment after this metaphorical development ('zephyrs', 'Dryads', 'streams') is reminiscent of the natural context of much Greek mythology. The scenario of woodland therefore becomes a macrocosm for the persona's

spirituality, with the "wreath'd trellis of a working brain" dressing the "sanctuary" dedicated to Psyche. Keats is, in the words of Sheley, "supplanting physical with psychological space" (2007). This ambiguity of setting and complex metaphorical layering is only possible due to the inclusion of the gods of Greece and Rome; in *Ode to Psyche*, Keats intertwines the reportorial and the universal beyond distinction. This certainly qualifies as what Aubrey Thomas de Vere regarded the "most remarkable property of his poetry", namely the "degree in which it combines the sensuous with the ideal" (1849).

Cultural Relationships

In *Endymion*, Keats employs programmatic invocations of his Muse in order to establish his position in the English canon. In the first book, he exhibits modesty in asking his Muse only that he might "stammer where old Chaucer used to sing" (1.134). The direct address in such invocations (here, "O kindly muse!" in line 128) is not only an inclusion of an ancient mythological concept, but necessarily an alignment with ancient literature. The nine Muses, born of Mnemosyne and Zeus, were responsible for artistic inspiration, and poets writing in Greek and Latin invoked them in identical ways. Most notably, perhaps, at the beginning of the Homeric epics: *The Odyssey* begins,

"Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns

driven time and again off course" (Homer trans. Fagles, 1996)

In addressing a Muse, Keats places himself within the poetic tradition which he perceives as the zenith of artistic achievement. Including ancient mythology in this way therefore allows Keats to make implicit claims about how his poesy should be perceived in relation to his predecessors. This was a career-long concern for the poet, confessing in a letter that he "would sooner fail than not be among the greatest" (Keats, 1818).

In the fourth book of *Endymion*, Keats devotes some 29 lines to invoking the "loftiest Muse", that of his "native land". This invocation suggests a "progressive teleological narrative

of history" (Shank, 2015), in which English culture exists not in contention with, but as a later development of, Hellenic civilisation:

*"O first-born on the mountains! by the hues
Of heaven on the spiritual air begot!
Long didst thou sit alone in northern grot,
While yet our England was a wolfish den;
Before our forests heard the talk of men;
Before the first Druid was a child,
Long didst thou sit amid our regions wild
Rapt in a deep prophetic solitude." (4.2-9)*

The poem's speaker can only escape the confinement of extended narrative by the justification of mythological engagement. The anaphora of temporal phrases ('long', 'while', 'before', 'before', 'long') indicates the panoramic view of cultural history which Keats is attempting to provide. England is presented as only flourishing culturally in the present moment, an antithesis of the 'wolfish den' which it was centuries beforehand. Keats implies that he has arrived as one of the figures who might allow English culture to flourish, and interrupt the English Muse's 'deep prophetic solitude'.

Furthermore, Keats is able to articulate his own artistic insecurities and preoccupations within the invocation of his Muse later in this section of *Endymion*. In a letter of 1818 to James Augustus Hessey, the poet asserted "I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest" (Keats, 1818), revealing an acute objective to reach artistic permanence and status among the 'greatest' of Keats' poetic predecessors. This fixation is evident in lines 26-29 of the self-same section:

*"Long have I said, how happy he who thrives
To thee! But then I thought on poets gone,
And could not pray - nor could I now - so on*

I move to the end in lowliness of heart." (4.26-29)

After the effervescent celebration of the speaker's Muse, exhibited by the breathless enjambment between lines 26 and 27, there is an immediacy in the caesura and the conjunction which follow. The perceptible change in tone from joyful to desperate is aided by the perfect iambic pentameter of 'but then I thought on poets gone', a veritable drudge compared with trochaic substitution which began the previous line. The stilted interruptions in line 28 further establish a despondent speaker, and the enjambment of the last two lines in the section produces a weighty, dragging effect that replicates the speaker's movement 'in lowliness of heart'.

The metre therefore indicates a realisation of the magnitude of the artistic achievement for which Keats aims. It is through the strategic involvement of a Hellenic god—the English Muse—that Keats is able to incorporate his personal concerns into a non-personal text. Keats' hope that, in his case, the Horatian maxim of '*ars longa, vita brevis*' (art is long-lasting, life is short) holds true is seated naturally within a textual engagement with ancient deities. Shank argues that,

"The notion of British culture, in the Romantic period, was inseparable from how it was thought to relate to the culture of ancient Greece, so the notion of cultural translation becomes bound up with a consideration of the identity of the self." (Shank, 2015)

It may be seen that, within the programmatic invocation of his muse which begins book four of *Endymion*, Keats intertwines panoramic cultural comment with acutely personal reaction. The gods of Greece and Rome facilitate this combination as Keats aims to 'culturally translate' in his poetry.

Intertextuality

At the opening of *Lamia*, Keats' inclusion of the gods of Greece and Rome invites intertextual links and creates a distant literary realm within which the poet might craft his narrative. The poem begins

*"Upon a time, before the faery broods
Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,
Before King Oberon's bright diadem,
Sceptre, and mantle, clasped with dewy gem,
Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns"* (Keats, 1819)

Here, Keats uses mythological figures to create temporal distance. The reader is immediately met with the anaphora of the temporal conjunction 'before', placing emphasis on the ancient setting which the poet is evoking. The 'faery broods' are medieval mythological figures, who are seen to inhabit the landscape once roamed by the 'Nymph and Satyr'. The poet is therefore asking the reader to look far beyond recent mythological context, and recall the gods of Greece and Rome.

The poet's choice to mention 'King Oberon's bright diadem' is not an insignificant one. Oberon, the king of the fairies, is most notably found in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, wherein he contributes to a plot of enchanted erotic desire. This implicit intertextual reference plays with the reader's cognisance of mythology in literature. Keats is deliberately pointing to not only a mythological era before Shakespeare, but an ancient literary context. The passage continues, mentioning "ever-smitten Hermes", "high Olympus", and "Jove's clouds" (note the mixture of Greek and Roman nomenclature). Importantly, the poet's knowledge of such figures is entirely dependent on literature. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, alongside other great works of ancient literature, canonised ancient myths such that Keats (and indeed Shakespeare) could draw on their characters.

The inception of *Lamia* establishes a setting far away from the poet and reader's reality. Not only does the poet look to an archaic spiritual identity, but also to a universe which, by the time of writing, was uniquely existent in literature. In this sense, the gods of Greece and Rome offer a concentrated escape from the realities of time and place; in the words of Tilotama

Rajan, they allow Keats to satisfy his "desire for escape from the present into a mythic or imaginary space" (1980).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the gods of Greece and Rome are doing much more than acting as characters in Keats' poetry. They allow Keats to traverse the gap between the universal and the personal by means of their representative functions, they provide a context for cultural comparisons between the Hellenic era and Keats' England, and they offer a route into a mythic realm preserved by literature. Far from 'dulling its brightness', Keats uses the "beautiful mythology of Greece" (Keats, 1818) to illuminate his poetic corpus and relate his artistic genius to the greatest of his poetic predecessors.

(2283 words)

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