

V. 2. 1
9941

THE SOURCES AND FUNCTION OF MYTH
IN JOHN KEATS'S POETRY

11/11/11

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO

The Department of English Language and Literature,
The University College for Women,
Ain Shams University,



In Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
In
English Literature

24994



821
A.M

BY
ALI MOHAMED ALI MOUSTAFA
Under The Supervision of
DR. THORAYA G. HERAKLY

Ain Shams University

1987

5

TO MY PARENTS.



C1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE:	
<u>Part I</u> : The Concept of Myth: A Definition and an Interpretation	8
<u>Part II</u> : Keats's Own Peculiar View of the Concept and Meaning of "Myth"	28
CHAPTER TWO: Keats's Technique and Manipulation of Myth, With Reference to His Early Poetry	46
CHAPTER THREE: The Function of Myth in John Keats's More Mature Poetry	76
CHAPTER FOUR: The Function of Myth in John Keats's Mature Poetry, With the Intention of Showing the Degree of Development in His Art	126
CONCLUSION	176
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	198

CL

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

CK

The purpose of this thesis is first, to examine and define the concept of myth as a fundamental element in the poetry of John Keats; and secondly, to show, through a careful study of the poet's own work, the degree of evolution or development in his art. This is made possible through tracing his technique and the very special way by which he handles and manipulates myth, first with reference to his early then later and more mature poetry.

The investigation suggests that through his use of myth, Keats succeeded in producing some of the greatest poetry ever written in the English language. This study shows that, although at the beginning of his career as a poet, he drew heavily on Greek and Roman, as well as Elizabethan sources in his use of mythology, yet in his mature stage he developed a new and unique concept of myth, which is peculiarly his own, displaying a great deal of original genius and creative ability.

Mythology, with its mysterious and fascinating world of gods, demigods, satyrs and dryads holds a peculiar appeal to most poets and writers. Each of them

has attempted to draw upon it with varying degrees and for different purposes.

Keats's approach to myth is unique. He drew on classical myths on account of his interest in the literature of the past, especially the ancient Greek lore. Such rich reservoir of ancient myths have undoubtedly left its impact on the poet's mind and poetic inspiration. For him, the ancient world of classical mythology stood for the depths of human culture and experience. Classical myth has become, for him, a kind of native language, through which he could convey his vision and insight into human life. In other words, Keats found in myth a perfect medium of expression for his subtle ideas and deep understanding of the mystery of life.

Keats has always tried to dig out the roots of classical myth which he believed to provide an explanation for the origin of poetry. In his opinion, myth, nature and poetry are one. A sympathetic reader of his poetry can feel the active presence of myth that is genuinely interwoven with his intense delight in all the beautiful manifestations of nature. Keats's poems are saturated with fauns, nymphs and dryads who throb with life amid the serene beauty of the natural scenery. They are, in his own words, there behind every bush and rose. Moreover, Keats, as a sensitive poet, shares in the processes

of nature as if they are taking place within himself. Nature has always kindled his imagination and excited his poetic inspiration. The poet believed that the old myths grew out of the natural happenings.

Ancient classical myth, which is the main source of inspiration for Keats, is coloured by his own stamp of thought and feeling. This is because he has put much of himself in it and introduced various modifications into its texture and meaning, thus creating his own personal myth. In his hands, the ancient myth is modified in such a way as to carry his beliefs on life, art and society.

The choice of "Myth and its Function in John Keats's Poetry", as the basis of my analysis, is prompted by the fact that there has been no full-length study of this subject by any of the scholars or critics of Keats. It is true that his poetical works in general have been subjected to endless critical discussions in various forms: book-length studies, reviews in newspapers, attacks and parodies in verse, articles in periodicals and the like. But all these critical works are mainly concerned with Keats the man and the artist, or with separate poems. Moreover, most critics dealt with the poetry per sé, without tracing the close relationship

between the poet's work and the sources he drew upon. Douglas Bush devoted a number of studies to "mythology", but these were mainly in connection with the romantic tradition in English poetry in general. G.S. Kirk discussed "Myth: its Meaning and Function", but the discussion deals mainly with myth in ancient and other cultures. Raphael Patai wrote about "Myth and Modern Man" but the study does not concentrate on Keats and his manipulation of mythology in any particular or comprehensive way.

In writing about "The Sources and Function of Myth in John Keats's Poetry", an attempt is made, in chapter one, towards an understanding of the meaning of the term "myth" and the variation of emphasis in its use in works preceding Keats and the influence this had on his work. Next, a comparison is held between Keats's concept of myth and that of the Elizabethans, with the intention of finding out the affinities and differences (if any), between both concepts. The sources of myth which Keats drew upon and the influences which shaped his concept of myth have been a subject of discussion and detailed study.

One of the main aims of this study is to illustrate how Keats applied and manipulated myth in his poetry and the extent of his success in using myth as a medium

of expressing and conveying his unique vision of life and art. In order to achieve this purpose, it was necessary first, to examine Keats's use of myth in his early poetry and secondly, to consider the developments which occurred in his manipulation of myth in his later poetry, with the purpose of showing Keats's maturity both as a myth-maker and an artist. Hence the examination of Keats's use of myth in his poetry has included selected poems from the Volumes 1817, 1818 and 1820, which best represent and exemplify Keats's approach to myth and its stages of development.

Chapter two examines Keats's technique and his manipulation of myth in the early poetry; the premises clearly reveal Keats's groping attitude towards myth and the positive influence of Spenser and the Elizabethan poets in this respect. Keats's "Epistle To George Felton Mathew", "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill", "Sleep and Poetry" and "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles", from the 1817 Volume, are clear examples of Keats's early approach to myth.

In chapter three, an examination of Keats's use of myth in his major work Endymion (the 1818 Volume), is attempted, with the purpose of pointing out the degree of development in Keats's insight into the genesis and

meaning of myth and of his beginning to find in it an appropriate mode of expressing his thoughts and emotions.

The purpose of chapter four is to examine Keats's technique and his use of myth in some representative poems of the 1820 Volume which clearly show Keats's maturity both as a myth-maker and as an artist. Keats's "Hyperion. A Fragment" and "Ode to Psyche" as well as such later work as "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and "Ode To Autumn", clearly reveal an unmistakable evolution in his manipulation of myth and a positive maturity in his myth-making faculty. The examination has also included "The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream", published in 1856, on account of its importance to an understanding of the first Hyperion and because it serves to reveal Keats's maturity of thought at its best.

The main aim of the thesis, as its title suggests, is therefore devoted to the study of Keats's work in the light of his very special and individual use of myth. However, in the process of doing so, it is hoped that the work would also help to shed light on Keats's mind and art and to reveal a unique and an unusual artist at work - an artist who undoubtedly took great pains to achieve perfection in a very special and admirable way.

Hence the work aspires to bring forth some of Keats's undeniable merits and to show his creativity in so far as he was able, through his use of myth, to objectify his personal emotions and raise them to the level of universality. In this he succeeded in fulfilling his life-long objective of becoming among "the greatest poets of all times"; for he gave us through that very special technique a concrete example of his concept of the "Negative Capability", which in Keats's own opinion, is the basic and essential precondition of every great artist. The following pages, it is hoped, will summarize the evidence on which this hypothesis is based.

CHAPTER ONE

PART 1: THE CONCEPT OF MYTH : A DEFINITION
AND AN INTERPRETATION .

PART 2: KEATS'S OWN PECULIAR VIEW OF THE
CONCEPT AND MEANING OF "MYTH".

CHAPTER ONE

PART I: THE CONCEPT OF MYTH: A DEFINITION AND AN INTERPRETATION

The term "myth" has stimulated a great deal of discussion and excited much controversy among writers, critics, thinkers and men of letters at all times. Psychologists, anthropologists, historians and linguists all seem to have been preoccupied with the concept and meaning of myth. As Patai rightly observes, in Myth and Modern Man, "we are still as far as ever from a generally agreed upon consensus as to the meaning of myth".¹

Nevertheless, what concerns us here is the "definition" or rather the "interpretation" of "myth" as literature. My aim, in fact, is to examine closely the manipulation of myth as a method or technique in literature in general and the meaning and intention of the term as handled by Keats in particular. However, it would be useful if we first have a quick survey of the meaning and definition of the term as used by varied

¹ Raphael Patai, Myth and Modern Man (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 9.

writers in different eras of history as that will of necessity throw more light on the subject of our study.

The words of St. Augustine, in his Confessions (xi-14), would perhaps most aptly express the predicament of anybody who is pressed for a brief and comprehensive definition of myth. He writes:

What is myth? 'I know very well what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked and try to explain, I am baffled'.¹

To Ruthven, myths, "seemingly immune to rational explanation", can nonetheless "stimulate rational enquiry". This, in the writer's opinion, "accounts for the diversity of conflicting explanations, none of which is ever comprehensive enough to explain myth away".²

It is relevant at this point to make a clear distinction between the term myth and mythology. G.S. Kirk, for example, mentions in his book, Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures, that the Greeks used muthos to denote "a tale or something one uttered,

¹ Quoted by K.K. Ruthven, in Myth: The Critical Idiom (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 1.

² Ibid., p. 1.