

## A DISCOURSE ON KEATS' PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN HIS LITERARY WORKS

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The objective of this paper is to analyze John Keats' portrayal of women in his literary works. The list of Keats' women friends is very short and no affair of Keats with women has come to our knowledge. During his boyhood he only dreamed of love. But very early in life a phantom glanced upon his sight for a moment and disappeared for ever. This must have been in 1813, for in the sonnet addressed to her in 1818, he says that five years have not erased from his mind the vision of this lady whom he had first seen for a few minutes at Vauxhall, and who had tangled him in her beauty's web. The midnight sky reminds him of her "eyes' well memori'd light," the "rose's dye" of her cheek, and every budding flower of her lips Sir Sidney Colvin concludes that the lines "fill for me a brimming bowl" were suggested by this passer-by in the poet's life. This fairest form that this eyes have ever beheld the melting softness of her face, the beaminess of her bright eyes, the paradise of her breast-has killed his zest for knowledge and poetry, and he yearns lady and "a fair creature of an hour" whom he fears he would never more see belong to the same class. The unnamed woman to whom his sonnet beginning "Had I a man's fair form is addressed may also be mentioned in this connection. The poem, of little value as poetry, is interesting because it expresses the painful feeling that his diminutive stature is a hindrance to any woman's loving him. Keats' obsession with the smallness of his stature finds expression in one of his letters written to Bailey from Scotland: "I do think better of womankind that to suppose that they care whether Mister John Keats five feet high like them or not" (Letter 79).

During his apprenticeship under Mr. Hommond he was introduced by his brother to the well-to-do family of trades people named Matthew. George Felton Matthew became his intimate friend, and for his cousins, Caroline and Anne Matthew, Keats wrote the poems *To Some Ladies* and *On Receiving a Curious Shell* and a copy of *Verses*. But the attraction of the Matthew sisters did not last long for after the first year we hear nothing more of them. Evidently "the thinness of their natures", as Miss Lowell suggests, could not provide Keats with "the mothering" that he needed.

What the Matthew sisters could not give him he received from the better endowed Reynoldses, the family whose acquaintance he made in the autumn of 1818. Marianne and Jane, the older sisters, were friends of Keats for a time. The youngest sister Charlotte was only fourteen when Keats was introduced to the family. Her piano playing at a little later date gave great enjoyment to Keats who wrote the words to air played by her.

There was no woman with whom Keats was ever on such easy and cordial terms of intimacy as Miss Georgiana Wylie. She was the daughter of a navy officer. Her "attractive irregular cast of beauty", (Sidney Colvin) wit and sentiment fascinated the poet's brother George. But Keats on his own account had a great liking for her. At the request of her brother, Keats wrote for him the lines beginning "Hadst thou liv'd in days of old" which George sent her as a valentine. The poem praises the beauty of the young lady who, had she lived in ancient times, would have been a Muse or a Grace. Keats paid another complaint to this "nymph of the downward smile and sidelong glance" in Sonnet VI in *The Poems*

published in 1817, while in Stanzas to Miss Wylie, also written for George, and published posthumously, he speaks to her in the passionate language of the lover to his beloved. George married her in 1818 and emigrated to America. Keats' warm affection and regard for his sister-in-law continued throughout his life. "There was something original about her, and John seemed to regard her as a being whom he delighted to honour," said a friend of Keats of medical student days, who saw the poet in the company of his brother and his wife on the eve their departure to America. He wrote many charming playful affectionate letters to 'Sister George'. The fragment of a fairy fantasy enclosed in a letter to her and George deserves special mention. Keats also "framed her golden name in Capitals" in an acrostic. He always spoke of her freely and without sex-consciousness. "I have a tenderness for you," he wrote to her, for, as he admitted, he could write what he could not pronounce to her in her presence, "I have tenderness for you and an admiration which I feel to be as great and more chaste than I can have for any woman in the world." (Letter 94) She was the object of his thoughts when he was in "the unearthly, spiritual and ethereal" mood. She appeared to him as "a glorious human being." (Letter 94)

The love passages in Keats' poems can hardly be read with pleasure. His youthful heroes behave under the influence of love somewhat like Keats himself. We have seen how his letters to Fanny show a want of manly dignity and restraint. His heroes are no stronger than he himself. Passion makes them limp and effeminate. All their faculties are enslaved and weakened by love. Nowhere are the "lapses into sickly voluptuousness and sugared vulgarity" and his false attitude to women more glaring than in his early poems where he plucks "of luxuries bright, milky, a poesy soft and rosy, and his soul is lost in pleasant smotherings." (I Stood Tip-toe 132)

Endymion gives us occasional glimpses of a noble conception of love. But soon he lapses into "self-indulgent luxury" where love becomes again an "ardent listlessness." (Endymion 825). Keats' own nerveless and cloying abandonment to sensual passion is clearly illustrated by Endymion's delicious dream in which he meets his beloved. He stretches his indolent arms and grasps her naked waist with bliss, at which they tremble to each other with dotting cry. How completely Keats was under the influence of the sense is seen by the way in which he "denies and dishonours his ideal" by the over-honey'd description of ecstasies:

Let me entwine thee surer, surer- now  
How can we part? Elysium: who art thou?  
.....  
Enchantress! Tell me by this soft embrace,  
By the most soft completion of thy face,  
Those lips, O slippery blisses, twinkling eyes,  
And by these tenderest, milky sovereignties-  
These tenderest and by the nectar-wine,  
The passion-

This is indeed the flesh asserting its glorious godhead and what is deplorable is that Keats makes the goddess, the embodiment of ideal love, a willing partner in this "sugary squalor". Well might it be said after this experience of Endymion that he had known love's madness, and that he had swooned, drunken from pleasure's nipple, and that he had tasted her sweet soul to the core.

## References

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2. \_\_\_\_\_. *Selected Letters of John Keats Based on the texts of Hyder Edward Rollins, Revised Edition*. London: Harvard University Press; 2nd edition, 2005.