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Keats's *Endymion* and Elizabethan Minor Epic

This article considers John Keats's long narrative poem *Endymion* as a revival of the genre of Elizabethan minor epic. Critics interested in the 'Elizabethan' quality of Keats's verse usually focus on his annotation of William Shakespeare's plays, to the neglect of other types of early modern verse-writing that may have influenced him. My article traces certain aspects of the language and narrative of *Endymion* back to three minor epics of the 1590s: Michael Drayton's *Endimion and Phoebe*, Thomas Lodge's *Glaucus and Scilla*, and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. The rural landscapes depicted in these Elizabethan poems, which all feature passages combining the words 'eglantine' and 'nightingales' (near-anagrams of one another), foreshadow the lush pastoral setting of Keats's poem and his love of verbal manipulation. I argue that *Endymion*'s extravagant style represents a self-conscious attempt on Keats's part to recapture the luscious, irreverent, tragicomic idiom favoured by the Elizabethan writers of minor epic. In highlighting these shared qualities, my aim is to re-contextualise Keats's underrated early poem as a unique fusion of Romantic and Elizabethan styles.

Keywords: *Endymion*, Keats, minor epic, source study, metamorphosis, poetry, Elizabethan, Romantic

In a study of "Lamia" published in 1976, Garrett Stewart referred to Keats as a writer of "metamorphic verse" (15). Stewart was using the term "metamorphic" to notice a connection between the style and content of Keats's poetry. Keats's obsessive focus on themes of change and transience is, Stewart contends, borne out stylistically in his poetry: "This rhetoric of metamorphosis dictates everything [down to] the smallest details of morphology [...] the investigative changes going forward in the poet's own idiom and prosody coincide brilliantly with the very theme of change" (4). Stewart's essay highlighted some of the ways in which Keats's poetry, in its blurring of syntactical categories, its verbifications and unusual compound words, can be seen as a restless art. Keats not only

writes about transformation in his plots (Saturn's fall from grace, the shapeshifting of Lamia), but also writes about transformation in a transformative way. The phrase "metamorphic verse" is felicitous for another reason, suggesting a family resemblance, unexplored in Stewart's essay, between Keats's poetry and a set of older English poems of metamorphosis: the so-called 'minor epics' of the Elizabethan era.

Critics have long recognised the influence of minor epic on Keats's verse, especially *Endymion*. Northrop Frye in the 1960s called *Endymion* "a revival [...] of the Elizabethan Ovidian mythological poem, of which Drayton's 'Endimion and Phoebe', Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis', and Lodge's 'Glaucus and Scilla' are examples" (58). R. S. White, fifty years later, echoed Frye in claiming that "[*Endymion*] is partially a Romantic revival of the Elizabethan short epic like 'Venus and Adonis' and 'Hero and Leander'" (*Literary Life* 85).

This essay is an attempt to look more closely at some of the stylistic connections between *Endymion* and minor epic. As well as discussing parallel passages (the traditional bread and butter of source studies), it will consider what White, in his study of Keats and Shakespeare, calls "point[s] of imaginative contact" (*Reader of Shakespeare* 21). It argues not only that certain passages in *Endymion* were influenced by similar passages in minor epic (though I hope to show that this is the case), but also that minor epics reveal an ethos or worldview comparable to that found in Keats's *Endymion*. Elizabethan minor epic is a genre concerned with "mutability," according to Jack Stillinger Keats's "most persistent theme" (131). To position *Endymion* as a rewriting of minor epic is in part to reexplore that much-studied aspect of Keats: his Elizabethan-ness. I also want to re-state the case for Stewart's phrase "metamorphic verse," showing how Keats's reading of minor epic gave him an appropriate poetic imagery and language in which to articulate his thinking about change.

'Minor epic' is a confusing name for what are, by most standards, pointedly un-epic poems. These Elizabethan narrative poems, fashionable in the 1590s, are neither epic in scope (1000 lines being their conventional limit) nor in their Ovidian subject matter (love affairs between gods and mortals). Minor epics, also known as 'epyllia' (the history of this nomenclature is complex: see Bär), are marked by their ingenuity of wordplay and highly ornamented style of verse. They start out with a comic tone, but typically end with the tragic death, or else the irreversible transformation (into a flower, a brook, a constellation), of the loved or loving mortal. Although I have had to restrict the present discussion to the three minor epics listed by Frye in the quotation above, there is evidence for Keats's

familiarity with other entries in the minor epic genre; Charles Browne's list of Keats's books shows, for example, that Keats owned a copy of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, in a nineteenth-century edition published by Samuel Weller Singer and containing George Chapman's continuation of Marlowe's poem (Lau 128–129). The ideal purpose of this article would thus be to serve as a starting point for further discussions of Keats and minor epic.

1 Michael Drayton's *Endimion and Phoebe* and *The Man in the Moone*

The critical foundation for an understanding for Keats's interest in Michael Drayton's two excursions into the minor epic genre was laid in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century by Sidney Colvin in *Keats* (1887) and *Keats: His Life and Poetry* (1917). Claude L. Finney later built on Colvin's work on Keats and Drayton in his two-volume work *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, as well as in an important journal article, "Drayton's 'Endimion and Phoebe' and Keats's *Endymion*."

Among contemporary Keats critics, allusions to Drayton are rare. Kelvin Everest invokes Drayton alongside two other Elizabethan poets, Chapman and George Sandys, to state briefly that "Keats's wider reading in the Elizabethans [...] becomes increasingly evident in 1817" (45). More recently, in her 2022 conference paper "'Honour to the Woods Unshorn!': Sustainable Keats," Fiona Stafford touched upon Keats's familiarity with Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1612) in the context of a discussion of the eco-political resonances that early modern and medieval writers held for Keats. However, since Colvin and Finney the matter of Keats's engagement with Drayton's verse has generally received less critical attention than it warrants.

A knowledge of Drayton's narrative poetry provides the likeliest explanation for Keats's peculiar decision to base his first long poem on the story of Endymion and Phoebe, a story without much precedent for treatment in English verse. Apart from John Lyly's comic play *Endymion*, known to Keats through his friend Charles Wentworth Dilke's edition, Drayton had been the only English poet to treat the Endymion-Phoebe story at length. He did this twice, in *Endimion and Phoebe* (1595), published at the height of the craze for minor epic, and in *The Man in the Moone* (1606), a rewriting of his first attempt.

There is a strong material case for Keats having drawn on the second of these, *The Man in the Moone*, in conceiving, planning, and writing his own *Endymion* poem. Charles Browne's list of Keats's books shows that Keats owned an edition of Drayton's poems published by John Smethwycke. This was one of the several editions of Drayton's poems Smethwycke published between 1608 and 1632 (Lau 142). Whatever the exact year of publication, it is certain that, like all Smethwycke's editions, Keats's volume contained *The Man in the Moone*.

The Man in the Moone is echoed strikingly several times in Keats's *Endymion*, as Colvin and Finney both noticed. Drayton's poem starts with preparations for a festival to Pan; Keats's poem starts with the feast itself. In Drayton's poem, the moon-goddess Phoebe appears draped in a blue mantle embroidered with maritime images, including whales and a shipwreck; in Book III of Keats's poem, the sea-god Glaucus wears a blue cloak "o'erwrought with symbols" (200), including a whale, and later in the same book the spell-bound Glaucus is forced by Circe to watch a shipwreck whose victims he is unable to save.

Keats's reading of *Endymion and Phoebe*, Drayton's earlier treatment of the *Endymion* story, is harder to prove. He did not own the poem, which had become a rare antique by the nineteenth century, but Finney nonetheless makes a convincing case for Keats having been influenced by the poem ("Drayton and Keats" 807). Again, similar images are to be found in the two poems. The Mount Latmos setting of Drayton's poem is the mirror image of Keats's: both feature mazy forest paths and trees whose branches and leaves meet overhead (Drayton 23–48; Keats 1:79–86).¹ Drayton's "sweet bubling fountaines" (45) mirror Keats's "cold springs [...] warm[ing] their chilliest bubbles in the grass" (1:102–103). In addition to such similarities of imagery, there are interesting resonances across the plots of the poems. In both Keats's *Endymion* and Drayton's *Endymion and Phoebe*, Phoebe woos *Endymion* in the guise of a nymph; in both poems, *Endymion* is unaware that the object of his love is an immortal goddess prior to a climactic revelation scene; and both poems feature a procession close to the end, in which an array of gods and goddesses, including the personified signs of the zodiac, travel across the heavens on their way to the marriage of *Endymion* and Phoebe.

If Drayton's poem had become so rare by the nineteenth century, how did Keats get his hands on a copy of it? Several intriguing alternatives provide starting points for further research. Finney suggests that Keats

¹ Parenthetical citations are to line numbers in Drayton's poem, and to book and line numbers in Keats's.

was shown the poem by one of his literary friends, possibly either Charles Cowden Clarke or Leigh Hunt, both of whom were collectors of rare books and admirers in particular of Renaissance poetry (“Drayton and Keats” 807). To these two should be added Charles Dilke, who had prepared an edition of Lyly’s court comedy *Endymion* for the publishers Rodwell and Martin in 1816, as part of the second volume of his six-volume *Old Plays* series. It is possible that, in the course of his editing, Dilke tracked down Drayton’s poem and showed it to Keats. Alternatively, Keats might have been shown a copy of the poem by his publishers Taylor and Hessey, whose roles in the book trade put them in a position to track down rare books Keats wanted to access. Another possibility, also raised by Finney, stems from the fact that, in Keats’s lifetime, sixteen quotations from Drayton’s *Endymion and Phoebe* were to be found in the two copies of the Elizabethan anthology work *England’s Parnassus* then held in the British Museum library: perhaps Keats encountered Drayton’s rare poem in this fragmentary form.

Amy Lowell suggests a fourth option. While writing her biography of Keats she attempted to verify Finney’s assertion that Keats had read *Endymion and Phoebe*, discovering during her research that a copy of the poem had been held by the library of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey in Keats’s lifetime (Finney, *Evolution of Keats* 248). Thus, this is a poem that, although rare, was available in several of the literary archives of Regency London, accessible to someone interested in Drayton and actively seeking out editions of his works. Given their strong echoes in Keats’s *Endymion*, it is probable that Keats had read both of Drayton’s poems, *Endymion and Phoebe* as well as *The Man in the Moone*, despite owning only a copy of the latter.

2 Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and Thomas Lodge’s *Glaucus and Scilla*

Keats’s admiration for *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare’s contribution to the minor epic genre, is already well known to Keats scholars. From his letters, we know that Keats was reading the poem when he wrote *Endymion* in 1817, which White has called his “Shakespearean year” (*Reader of Shakespeare* 50). In a letter written to John Hamilton Reynolds during the composition of Book IV in April 1817, Keats enthuses about the description of the snail in *Venus and Adonis*, “whose tender horns being hit, shrinks backwards in his shelly cave with pain” (Gittings 39). Mem-

orably, Keats refers to Shakespeare as “the Whim King” in this letter, an indication of the features Keats admired in *Venus and Adonis*: namely, its whimsy, its playfulness, its meticulous and surprising conceits. There are, in addition, several parallel passages that can be adduced to reinforce the connection between Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Keats's *Endymion*, some of which I touch on in the final section of this article.

In contrast to the well-established link between Keats and Shakespeare, the connection between Keats and Thomas Lodge has not previously been explored at length. But there are compelling reasons for viewing Lodge's minor epic *Glaucus and Scilla* (the genre's original poem) as an influence upon both the plot and style of *Endymion*. Most obviously, Keats incorporates the Ovidian story of Glaucus and Scylla (which describes a sea-god's unrequited love for a sea-nymph who is later turned into a rocky sea-cliff as punishment for her hard-heartedness) into the third book of *Endymion*, although he rewrites its tragic denouement as a happy comedy. This is the same myth that forms the basis of Lodge's minor epic. Moreover, Keats and Lodge take a similar approach in their physical descriptions of Glaucus and other classical deities, imbuing them with comic physicality. Losing his temper, Glaucus “fold[s] his arms” and “shake[s] his heavie head” in Lodge (8),² while Keats describes him as “grasping his stole [...] with convulsed clenches waving it abroad” (3:230–231). This opens up the intriguing possibility that the comic humanising of classical gods the nineteenth-century literary establishment deplored as an ugly innovation on Keats's part,³ was in fact a thematic feature he borrowed from a centuries-old English poem.

There is also a passage in an October 1817 letter to Benjamin Bailey in which Keats possibly makes use of Lodge's poem. Keats writes: “a long poem is a test of invention which I take to be the polar star of poetry, as fancy is the sails, and imagination the rudder” (Gitting 27). Compare that with the following couplet from Lodge's *Glaucus and Scilla*: “Discourse was steersman while my barke did saile, / My ship conceit, and fancie was my bay” (115). As well as the rhetorical similarity of these passages (both take the form of a tricolon), the same conceit of the ship of poetry steered by fancy features in both passages.

² Parenthetical citations of Lodge's poem are to stanza number.

³ See especially John Gibson Lockhart's comments on *Endymion* in “Cockney Poetry No. IV”, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 17.3 (1819), where he complains that Keats “vulgarise[s]” figures from classical mythology, turning them into “Cockney rhymester[s]” (522).

As with Drayton's two minor epics, there are striking similarities of imagery between Lodge's minor epic and Keats's *Endymion*. To take just one example, Lodge's poem ends with a procession of happy nymphs to Neptune's palace, comparable to the celebration of reunited lovers in Neptune's palace in Keats's poem. Although no evidence exists for Keats's direct ownership of Lodge's poem, he could have encountered it, alongside Drayton's, in fragmentary form in the copies of *England's Parnassus* held in the British Museum library, or perhaps in its complete form in the libraries of Hunt or Clarke.

3 Keats, Minor Epic, and Metamorphic Style

I turn now to some of the stylistic habits Keats's poem shares with minor epic, while continuing to notice parallel passages that strengthen the case for Keats's familiarity with the genre. Returning to Stewart's description of Keats as a "metamorphic" poet, quoted at the beginning of the article, I argue here that Elizabethan minor epic gave Keats a mythic imagery in which to express his thinking about change; and that their witty, overdetermined grammar and rhetoric allowed him to express that thinking in a style that can itself be called metamorphic.

In Keats's *Endymion*, words morph into other words. For Keats, to proceed by the logic of phonemes, as opposed to the logic of what he disdainfully called "consequitive reasoning" (Gitting 36), was a perfectly legitimate way to write poetry. He honed his ability to write in such a way partly through his close reading of minor epic, a genre in which the Elizabethan 'witty' style of poetry is ramped up to extremes. All Romanticists know the phrase "pastoral eglantine" from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," but it is interesting to notice that the conjunction of "nightingale" and "eglantine" in Keats's poetry first appears two years earlier, in *Endymion*: "The rill, / Thou mayst haply delight in [...] Its sides I'll plant with dew-sweet eglantine" (4:695–701). Keats continues nine lines later, "and a nightingale shall light tame on your finger" (4:710–711). The conjunction of these two pastoral details, nightingale and eglantine, also appears in two of the minor epics this article discusses. Drayton's Mount Latmus is clad in "roses and sweet eglantine" (51); in the same sentence he mentions "The Nightingale, woods herald of the spring" (55). In Lodge's poem, nymphs "jest [...] in the Nightingale's report, / And on the prickle of the eglantine" (16). It is characteristic of the playful sonic textures of minor epic that these almost-anagrams are paired so frequently

within the genre. The letters of “eglantine” can be rearranged to make a “nitengale” which is, admittedly, missing a few of its feathers. In detailing Keats's metamorphic style, Stewart writes that “meanings [in Keats are] sparked by the slightest frictions of sound, definition, and linkage” (3). It is interesting to contextualise this statement of Stewart's by examining the ways in which Keats's metamorphic poetry, which often generates new words by scrambling the sounds and letters of preceding ones, has much in common with the witty and fluid verbal surfaces of minor epic. The “nightingale-eglantine” association that Keats uprooted from Elizabethan verse is one way of illustrating this.

In *Endymion*, a poem in which “mingle” and “merge” are common words, words themselves merge and mingle. Keats's is a style of hyphenation, and never more so than in *Endymion*, where new meanings are generated cooperatively, through the yoking together of different parts of speech into new, metamorphosed units: “rainbow-large” (1:776), “subtle-cadenced” (1:494), “forest-wild” (1:494), “mournful-strange” (1:497), “night-swollen” (l. 215). The compound adjective is one of Keats's most obvious Elizabethan mannerisms, echoing Drayton's “fomy-tusked boar” (262), “civet-breathing air” (349), “nectar-dropping dewes” (254), and “starry-painted sky” (77) from *Endimion and Phoebe*. The goddess Venus is called “the love-sick queen” in both Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Keats's poem (Shakespeare 175; Keats 1:482). The phrase “blue-vein'd violets” in *Venus and Adonis* (125) is echoed in Keats's description of Phoebe's feet as “bluely vein'd” (1:625). The word “Honey” is used as a prefix four times in *Endymion* (not including common usages such as honeycomb and honeymoon): Keats writes of “honey-words” (3:428), “honey-whispers” (1:967), “honey-dew” (2:7), and – the instance his critics took most offence at – the “honey-feel of bliss” (1:904). John Wilson Croker, in his review of *Endymion*, scoffed at this phrase as a neologism, listing it among the “new words” with which Leigh Hunt's “simple neophyte” “adorns our language” (207–208). Perhaps Croker, as a respectable member of the British literary establishment, would have revoked this censure had he known that his scoffing at Keats was only one letter away from scoffing at Shakespeare. For Shakespeare, in *Venus and Adonis*, is also fond of using “honey” as a prefix. In addition to “honey passage” (452), and “honey secrets” (16), he writes of a “honey fee” in the line “the honey fee of parting tendered is” (538). This phrase merely grows the tail of an “l” in Keats's phrase “the honey feel of bliss”.

While compound words are a feature of Elizabethan style in general, minor epic, with its ornate description, was especially enamoured of this

device. I do not, of course, intend to claim that minor epic is the only source in which Keats could have encountered compound adjectives (they abound in other forms of early modern writing, including Shakespeare's plays), but they crop up so frequently in minor epic as to almost become a hallmark of the genre. It is therefore possible to see compound adjectives – as well as compound nouns and other versions of compound meaning – as one aspect of a wider metamorphic style that Keats responded to in minor epic, making it an element of his own style.

4 Conclusion

More research could be done to strengthen the link between Keats's *Endymion* and minor epic. In particular, analysis of the libraries of friends of Keats's such as Hunt and Clarke might help to establish a basis for his familiarity with these poems, while new close readings, of the sort I have begun to sketch out in the previous section of this article, might further show the ways in which Keats's polyvalent, punning approach to classical myth was directly inspired by the narrative verse of England's Elizabethan poets of metamorphosis. *Endymion*, however, is far from being the mere pastiche of Shakespearean style that *Otho the Great* comes perilously close to at times. One of Keats's innovations was to abandon the ironic distance that governs these Elizabethan poems, exploring the theme of changeable love with a sense of authorial agon that is more Romantic than early modern, more akin to Shelley's *Alastor* than to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. Such readings should therefore take note of the new strands Keats's poem weaves around its Elizabethan DNA.

In this article I have argued that Keats discovered in minor epic an apt vehicle for expressing his thematic concern with metamorphosis. Minor epic is a genre in which we find the theme of metamorphosis combined with a style of metamorphosis, prosodically and syntactically. We also find this conjunction of a metamorphic theme with a metamorphic style in Keats's *Endymion*. Keats discovered a range of effects interwoven in minor epic – anagram, compound adjective, as well as other effects not discussed here including oxymoron, pun, and paradox – effects that compress semantic variants within the same grammatical space, tending to undermine any notion of identity as stable or essential. The discovery of this changeable style in minor epic afforded Keats the perfect vehicle for translating his own metamorphic imaginings into verse.

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