

Literature Analysis

If Keats Rewrote Tennyson

By Benjamin Marshalkowski

The concept of Keats rewriting the work of Tennyson is an interesting one, because while history tells us Keats lived and died in the Romantic Period, had he not succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 24, it is quite possible he would have lived well into the mid-Victorian Period. One must inevitably wonder how Keats' experiences in such a time period would have changed his perspective and his writing. That being said, in order to speculate on how Keats would have edited Tennyson's work, we must accept the life of Keats as it was, tragically shortened, and spent as a Romantic.

The focus will be on *The Passing of Arthur* and *Ulysses*. Both contain death elements in them, one in the actual death of a king, the other about a mythic king and adventurer in his autumn years, still longing for the adventure of his youth. Studying how Keats would handle such material, one can achieve a better understanding not only of the differences between the two authors, but of the Romantic and Victorian Periods as well.

The most obvious difference between Keats' and Tennyson's work is their style, how they put the words on the page. As form follows function, however, it should be noted that the authors' styles stem from their underlying motives for writing. Keats' preferred style is that of the ode. His investigation into the permanent and transient stems is very personal and important to him, so writing odes allows Keats to make this intensely personal journey through his writing. Tennyson strays from Keats almost constantly, with his own poetry being either narrative or even dramatic in nature. While dramatic, Tennyson's work still contains a passion that is reflective of the Romantic period. Keats would still do a great deal, however, to make the work of Tennyson his own.

Thematically, Keats and Tennyson have some very different ideas, in spite of the similarities of what they write for. Keats, surrounded by death, had an interest in the ideas of transience and permanence. His works were not meant to lament or glorify death, nor were they intended to idealize immortality. Keats' goal was to better understand the nature of that which is permanent and that which will disappear in time. Keats also makes this journey on his own, studying the classics and nature alone through his works.

Tennyson takes a much different journey with his writing. While Tennyson shares an interest in the classics and ancient mythology, his ultimate focus lies elsewhere. Tennyson suffered years of loss and instability, brought on primarily by the loss of his dear friend, Arthur Hallam. During these years Tennyson was silent, but when he finally emerged from them, he produced some of his greatest poetry. He had also regained his stability through

faith. When Tennyson lost his faith, he had nothing to turn to, but once he found it again, it became a foundation for him. This stability becomes a great focus in Tennyson's poetry. Whether it be a king, an ideal or faith itself to cling to, the existence of that anchor is important to Tennyson in his writing and in his own life.

For Keats to rewrite *Ulysses* would be a challenge, not because of what would have to be changed, rather in preserving what shouldn't be changed. While there is a great deal, both stylistically and thematically, that would need to be changed for *Ulysses* to resemble Keats' work, there are certain elements of Tennyson's that bear a resemblance to the ode, and if they were simply scrapped to completely re-write the poem, one would risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

The style of the dramatic monologue is, by definition, the opposite of the lyric poem. The dramatic monologue presents an objective view of its speaker, through what that speaker proclaims. A tradition harkening from the soliloquies of Greek theater, the dramatic monologue provides insight into the character's thoughts and personality. While one of the few opportunities for subjectivity in a theatrical production, in poetry the dramatic monologue is a bastion of objectivity. The characters that are presented, while well rounded with their own tales and personalities, are not personal to the author. Browning made this obvious, referring to the speakers of his poems as "so many voices not my own." The same can be said of Tennyson and Ulysses, a character Tennyson did not even invent. Where the persona of an ode is a facet of the author, these characters are completely separated, only a part of the author insofar as the author sub-consciously puts himself in all of his writing.

While Ulysses and his speech do not emulate the work of Keats, a whisper of his work can certainly be found in the passion Ulysses speaks with. Tennyson's dramatic monologue strays from tradition with the subjectivity Ulysses brings to the speech. Ulysses not only muses on past events, he editorializes on the wisdom of adventure: "How dull it is to pause, and make an end, / To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!" (*Ulysses*, 22-23) These moments of passion could easily be missed but the poem would lose the soul it was imbued with if such lines were taken away, especially when they can represent the sort of personal attention that an ode would give a subject, similar to how Keats uses a persona to consider death in *Ode to a Nightingale*, admitting: "I have been half in love with easeful Death, / Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme" (*Ode to a Nightingale*, 52-53). It is this personal attitude that must be preserved in keeping with Keats' style. It must be so personal, in fact, that the character of Ulysses becomes representative of part of the author, taking on the role of a persona.

In addition to the style, the theme of the poem must change. In *Ulysses* we see the traditional post-Greek version of the king of Ithaca. This stems more from the Romans' less

flattering view of the Greeks, particularly those who destroyed Troy. Regardless, it has since become tradition to portray Ulysses as a restless king who constantly seeks adventure, unhappy while living quietly on Ithaca. Probably the best example of such a Ulysses comes from Dante's *Inferno* where Ulysses met his demise adventuring further and further out until he encountered the mountain of Purgatory and was smote for it. In spite of the fact that the oracle in the *Odyssey* tells Ulysses he will die comfortably in his bed, literature portrays him as forever wandering. Ironically, if Keats were to romanticize *Ulysses*, he would probably return to the Classic Greek interpretation of Ulysses himself.

In Keats' study of transience and permanence, it can be deduced that Ulysses is constantly in search of adventure in the hopes of immortalizing his name. With the Greek belief of the afterlife being an eternity in a dim, misty cavern, it's no surprise that the Greeks would have a Beowulfian interest in establishing a legacy in memory in the world. Ulysses could justify his wanderlust as a search for immortality, to the extent that humans can achieve it. For Keats to conclude an ode of Ulysses', however, he would have to fulfill the oracle's prophecy. Ulysses would have to accept his transience, understanding that immortality is not everything. He would not vow "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (*Ulysses*, 70). Ulysses might conclude that even if his story were immortal, he would never enjoy it. It is a similar epiphany to that of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, as looking on the scene of the lovers, the speaker consoles, "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss" (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 17-19). While Ulysses' story may forever be told and idealized, it will not stop Ulysses from dying, for true immortality is something he can never claim. As an old man, this poem would be his chance to realize all this, accept his transience, and be happy for all he has done and lived through in his life.

The Passing of Arthur presents a new set of challenges. While the narrative form is closer on the literary spectrum to the lyric poetry of Keats' odes, Tennyson's style helped to romanticize Ulysses monologue, where *The Passing of Arthur* carries with it the seriousness and objectivity that is so characteristic of the Victorian era. A concrete legend, telling the events following the battle between King Arthur and Sir Modred, this poem is much less personal than Ulysses' monologue, though the relationships between the characters provide a great deal of potential for a more personal account.

As Tennyson has written it, *The Passing of Arthur* represents everything that an ode is not. It is third-person omniscient narration of facts without subjectivity or abstraction. The details are all concrete and the imagery is vivid, but there is no feeling of Bedivere's loss of King Arthur. Indeed the only sense of human emotion not spelled out for the reader is Bedivere's longing to keep Excalibur instead of throwing it into the lake. Beyond this any emotion is simply explained outright and the tale moves on. Perhaps Tennyson was

hardening himself against the loss of Hallam and wanted to avoid opening old wounds by writing about Bedivere's feelings of loss. Nevertheless, it is a decision Keats would not have made. To write from such a detached perspective would not do justice to the characters involved and their feelings on the matter.

Instead, Keats would have taken one of the characters involved and used them as a persona. The obvious choice would be Bedivere. On a practical note, Bedivere is still alive to talk about King Arthur and looked up to him as a leader, so he would have great reason to speak about him. In addition, Keats could channel his own emotions on losing those around him into Bedivere's character, making him an ideal persona to represent Keats coping with loss, without being Keats himself.

The telling of the tale would have to change as well. Instead of an account of events, expressed in an almost biblical fashion, the poem would become Bedivere's reflection on the day in question. There may be details, as given in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, as the speaker describes the sacrifice scene while questioning the priest, "TO what green altar, O mysterious priest, / Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies, / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?" (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 32-34), but Bedivere's focus would be on subjective analysis of the events and of the life of Arthur. For as the speaker describes the scene on the urn, he then realizes its implications, particularly in light of the scenes permanence, concluding, "And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 38-40). Similarly, Bedivere would have to go beyond the telling of the tale and endeavor to analyze what it means.

This would change the very subject of *The Passing of Arthur*. The tale, instead of being another chapter in the accepted glory of the life of King Arthur, would be an analysis of why Arthur was so glorified. Indeed, King Arthur's is the most famous and longest surviving legend of British culture. Due to the invasion of the Franks, most of ancient British culture was lost and even stories like Arthur's were imbued with French ideas, but the core tale of Arthur survives. Once again, this is as close as humankind can come to the permanence that Keats writes about.

Arthur, the great king he was, having successfully completed various heroic tasks and been mortally wounded in defense of his country and his honor, would forever be remembered in story and legend. From Keats' perspective, Arthur achieved permanence through his reputation. Arthur suffered the trials of his life and emerged victorious, and so his reputation would remain. Indeed, Keats' lines in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* may have referred to the story of Arthur, "Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours." (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 47-48) As Arthur suffered the tragic human experience, so his story will out survive all of us who live through our own tragedies. Perhaps that is the nature of the

elusive permanence we seek, Keats may conclude, that we achieve permanence in how we live, not in whether or not we die.

Tennyson and Keats both wrote great works, and to argue one is better than the other is simply a matter of opinion. What differs between their work is where their priorities. Keats focuses on his personal interest in the transient and the permanent, and he would alter Tennyson's work to show that. He would make Tennyson's work more personal to express his own feelings through it, making Tennyson's characters into his own personas. This would be difficult using established characters, but it certainly could be done and can provide interesting insights regarding the characters used and how they are altered. Tennyson's poems would be much more personal and lyric, but they would maintain their basic themes.

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