

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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ANNO XVII 2009

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PUBBLICAZIONE SEMESTRALE

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA
Facoltà di Scienze linguistiche e Letterature straniere
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Anno XVII - 1/2009
ISSN 1122-1917

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e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@educatt.it (*distribuzione*);
web: www.educatt.it/librario

Redazione della Rivista: redazione.all@unicatt.it - *web:* www.educatt.it/librario/all

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di aprile 2010
presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

FROM SPENSER'S PROEMS IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE* TO KEATS'S *INTRODUCTIONS IN ENDYMION*

LUISA CONTI CAMAIORA

Keats and Spenser

Keats's interest in Spenser was constant and long-lasting. What is retained to be his earliest documented poem, dating from early 1814, is the *Imitation of Spenser*, written in Spenserian stanzas. On 2 February 1815, composing his sonnet *Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison*, to celebrate Leigh Hunt's release, after a sentence of two years' imprisonment for a libellous attack in an article on the Prince Regent in *The Examiner*, 22 March 1812, Keats recalls Hunt's admiration for Spenser and Milton and sustains that the thought of these poets allowed Hunt mental and imaginative freedom, in contrast to his physical incarceration: "In Spenser's halls he stray'd, and bowers fair, / Culling enchanted flowers;" (vv. 9-10)¹. In the *Ode to Apollo* of February 1815, Keats includes Spenser, together with Homer, Virgil, Milton, Shakespeare and Tasso, among the "Bards, that erst sublimely told / Heroic deeds, and sang of fate," (vv. 3-4), and who are asserted to be with Apollo in his "halls of gold" (v. 1). Spenser's poetry is heard in "its martial notes" (v. 31), and when these fade into silence, "From a virgin chorus flows / A hymn in praise of spotless Chastity." (vv. 32-33), a precise allusion to the theme of Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, "Contayning The Legend of Britomartis. Or, Of Chastity"². The *Specimen of an Induction to a Poem*, composed in February-March 1816, is another imitation of Spenser, and it contains a long apostrophe of homage to Spenser (vv. 49-68) that opens with the words: "Spenser! thy brows are arched, open, kind, / And come like a clear sunrise to my mind; / And always does my heart with pleasure dance, / When I think on thy noble countenance:" (vv. 49-52). A further homage to Spenser is Keats's sonnet dedicated to the poet, *Spenser! a jealous honourer of thine*, written at the request of Keats's friend, the author and critic John Hamilton Reynolds, on 5 February 1818, and in which Spenser is apostrophized as "Elfin Poet" (v. 5). Other poetic acknowledgements of Spenser are Keats's return to the use of the Spenserian stanzas of *The Faerie Queene* for his poetic nar-

¹ The text used for the quotations from Keats's poems is *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, P. Wright ed., Wordsworth Editions, Ware 2001.

² The text used for the quotations from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is *Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene*, A. C. Hamilton ed., Pearson Education, Harlow 2001. The indication of the book, stanza and verse of the Proems will be given in the text.

rative, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, composed 18 January-2 February 1819, and his *Spenserian Stanzas on Charles Armitage Brown*, an ironical encomium on his friend, the occasion of which Keats recalls in a letter to the George Keatses, of 16 April 1819: "Brown this morning is writing some spenserian stanzas against Mrs. Miss Brawne and me, so I shall amuse myself with him a little. In the manner of Spenser" (p. 279)³. There then follows the poem.

In the letters, the presence of "the poet's poet" may first be found in Keats's verse-epistle to his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, dated September 1816, in which the Romantic poet celebrates his friendship with Clarke and particularly the influence of Clarke on his early reading. It must be remembered that it was Clarke who first introduced Keats to Spenser by reading to him, probably in 1814, Spenser's *Epithalamion*. Clarke has documented how "That night he took away with him the first volume of the "Faerie Queene," and he went through it [...] as a young horse would through a spring meadow – ramping"⁴. It is therefore not surprising that Keats, remembering the different typologies of verse to which Clarke had introduced him, should mention, as first author, Spenser: "[...] you first taught me all the sweets of song: / The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free, the fine; / What swell'd with pathos, and what right divine: / Spenserian vowels that elope with ease, / And float along like birds o'er summer seas;" (vv. 53-57). This homage had been preceded in the poem by a specific tribute to Clarke's (and thus to Keats's own) knowledge of Spenser, in the mention of some of the characters that appear in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Books I and II: "Who had beheld Belphoebe in a brook, / And lovely Una in a leafy nook, / And Archimago leaning o'er his book;" (vv. 35-37).

Keats's reading of Spenser is further documented in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, 18 April 1817, where the Romantic poet writes: "Just now I opened Spenser, and the first Lines I saw were these:" (p. 17). The verses quoted are taken from Book I of *The Faerie Queene* (Canto V, stanza 1). In fact, the influence of *The Faerie Queene* on Keats has been explicitly declared by the poet's friend, Charles Brown: "It was the *Faery Queen* that awakened his genius"⁵. Spenser remains a point of reference for Keats, who asserts, writing to John Taylor on 5 September 1819 concerning the tragedy *Otho the Great* that he had composed with his friend, Charles Brown: "Since I finish'd it I have finish'd *Lamia* and am now occupied in revising *St Agnes' Eve* and studying Italian. Ariosto I find as diffuse, in parts, as Spenser. I understand completely the difference between them" (p. 336). Indeed, attestation of Keats's reading and re-reading of Spenser's epic may be documented as late as 1820, in a letter to Fanny Brawne, of 4 July, less than a year before Keats's death, and when the poet was already seriously ill. It testifies to Keats's continuing interest in the Renaissance poet: "For this Week past I have been employed in marking the most beautiful passages in Spenser, intending it for you, and comforting myself in being somehow occupied to give you however small a pleasure." (pp. 449-450).

Keats therefore obviously knew Spenser well, and indeed Charles Brown has argued

³ The text used for the quotations from Keats's letters is *Selected Letters of John Keats*, G. F. Scott ed. (based on the texts of Hyder Edward Rollins), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass./London 2002. The page number will be indicated in the text.

⁴ Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (1878), Centaur Press, Fontwell 1969, p. 12.

⁵ *The Keats Circle*, H. E. Rollins ed., 2 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1965, II, p. 55.

for the transformative effect of the reading of Spenser's epic on the poetic creativity of Keats: "It was the *Faery Queen* that awakened his genius. In Spenser's faery land he was enchanted, breathed in a new world, and became another being [...] When his soul arose into poetry, it was [thus] imbued"⁶. What is particularly pertinent here however, is the fact that from the documentation provided above it emerges that Keats's interest in the Renaissance poet and his work was particularly marked in the year 1816⁷. This was the year preceding the writing of *Endymion*, which was begun around the 18 April 1817, and which, with its subjoined title, "a Poetic Romance", recalls Spenser's romance epic, *The Faerie Queene*. The relationship between *Endymion* and *The Faerie Queene* has often been commented upon, but generally the commentaries have focused on the allegory, the characters and the events of the two poems⁸. Nonetheless, Patricia M. Ball has noted how, in Keats's *Endymion*, "Each book of the poem is introduced by a preamble spoken in his own voice, with a rather engaging mixture of high seriousness and naïve excitement at his project"⁹, and Stuart Curran has observed that what distinguishes "these four proems is their sense of poetic, even generic, growth and their independent, if not antithetical posture in respect to the verses that immediately follow, which in every case are intimately associated with the prefatory matter"¹⁰, while Andrew Motion has asserted that "in the introductions to his four Books, [Keats] took pains to spell out his main concerns"¹¹. It does not therefore seem far-fetched to analyze Keats's four Introductory passages (henceforth termed "Introductions") to the four books of *Endymion* in the light of the Proems to the six books of Spenser's poem. It may be argued that Keats's Introductions were in part influenced by the contents of Spenser's Proems, given that, as will be shown, many of the themes and topics in the Introductions are referable, either by similarity or contraposition, to analogous topics in the Proems.

Endymion: Book I

A. C. Hamilton has pointed out that the term "proem" was not used by Spenser, but by editors to refer to the introductory stanzas of each book, and the critic observes that

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

⁷ On Keats's encounters with Spenser throughout 1816 and especially his reading of *The Faerie Queene*, see G. Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1991, pp. 143-145. For Keats's admiration for, reading of and responses to Spenser, see *ibid.*, pp. 147-165. On Keats and Spenser and Platonic ideas in *Endymion*, see M. M. Bhattacherje, *Keats and Spenser*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta 1944, pp. 67-134.

⁸ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 165-183.

⁹ P. M. Ball, *The Central Self: A Study of Victorian and Romantic Imagination*, The Athlone Press, London 1968, p. 142.

¹⁰ S. Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, Oxford University Press, New York/Oxford 1986, pp. 149-150.

¹¹ A. Motion, *Keats*, Faber and Faber, London 1997, p. 170. For a political reading of these Introductions, in the context of a generalized political interpretation of the whole poem, see V. Newey, *Keats, history and the poets*, in *Keats and History*, Nicholas Roe ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, pp. 165-193.

this was “a device for which [Spenser] lacked any precedent in classical or Italian epic”¹². Instead, in the opinion of Peter V. Marinelli: “Like Ariosto’s, these proems are a survival in highly artistic form of the minstrel’s opening invocation of the saints or the Virgin”¹³. The allusion to the invocation to the Virgin is particularly pertinent, in that, as Douglas Brooks-Davies comments with regard to the religious overtones introduced by Spenser’s invocation to Elizabeth as “holy Virgin” in the Proem to Book I of *The Faerie Queene*: “Spenser probably means the Virgin Mary in her Dantean role as leader of the nine complementary orders of angels, which is to be read as a compliment to the Virgin Queen Elizabeth, the subject and ultimate inspiration of his epic, since she was regarded as the Virgin of the new Anglican religion”¹⁴.

This debate on the invocation leads to the important question of the incipit of epic poems, and more specifically the presentation of their subject-matter. Virgil’s “Arma virumque cano” had introduced the topic of arms and the man, Aeneas, of the *Aeneid*. Lodovico Ariosto, in the presentation of his *Orlando Furioso*, had declared: “Le donne, i cavalier, l’arme, gli amori, / le cortesie, l’audaci imprese io canto”, thus adding to the subject-matter of war, warriors, and audacious undertakings, such chivalric romance topics as women, loves, and courtesies. Spenser, in *The Faerie Queene* operated a further change, both repeating and going beyond Ariosto, sustaining that he would “sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds” (I. 1. v. 5), and asserting that “Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song” (I. 2. v. 9). Thus while the women, knights, wars and loves of Ariosto remain, the Protestant poet’s use of the verb “moralize” explicitates his ethic purpose, directed at the presentation of moral truth, while through the addition of the word “faithful” to the loves, as John Watkins has pointed out¹⁵, he counteracts Ariosto’s scepticism regarding the amorous emotion. Furthermore, in the opinion of Douglas Brooks-Davies, although love and battle are the typical pursuits of chivalry, Spenser includes love “because of its fundamental significance as a cosmic principle in Neoplatonic thought”¹⁶. It may further be noted that P. C. Bayley, commenting on the appellative, “Mirrour of grace” (I. 4. v. 2), applied to Elizabeth, observes that it is “a reference to the Platonic notion that all beautiful things on earth are mirrors of the divine beauty”¹⁷.

By the time Keats came to compose his *Endymion*, he had had the further examples of the incipits of Milton: his *Paradise Lost*: “Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden Tree, [...] / Sing Heav’nly Muse” (Book I, vv. 1-2, 6)¹⁸, and his short

¹² A. C. Hamilton, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 29. On the Proems, see also A. Leigh DeNeef, *Spenser and the Motives of Metaphor*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC. 1982, pp. 91-141, and L. Brill, *Other Places, Other Times: The Sites of the Poems of The Faerie Queene*, “Studies in English Literature 1500-1900”, 1994, 34 pp. 1-17, as also his *The Faerie Queene, proems*, in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, A. C. Hamilton – D. Cheney – W. F. Blisset – D. A. Richardson – W. Barker ed., Toronto University Press, Toronto 1992, pp. 294-295.

¹³ P. V. Marinelli, the voice *Ariosto, Lodovico*, in *Spenser Encyclopedia*, A. C. Hamilton – D. Cheney – W. F. Blisset – D. A. Richardson – W. Barker ed., p. 57.

¹⁴ D. Brooks-Davies, *Spenser’s Faerie Queene: A Critical Commentary on Book I and II*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1977, p. 12. On the orders of angels, see K. Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death: Studies in Musical Iconology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1970, p. 194.

¹⁵ J. Watkins, *The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995, p. 61.

¹⁶ D. Brooks-Davies, *Spenser’s Faerie Queene*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Spenser: The Faerie Queene Book I*, P. C. Bayley ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 260.

¹⁸ The text used for the quotations from Milton’s poems is *Milton: Complete Poetry & Selected Prose*, E. H.

epic, *Paradise Regained*: "I who e're while the happy Garden sung, / By one mans disobedience lost, now sing / Recover'd Paradise to all mankind" (Book I, vv. 1-3). It is therefore all the more notable that Keats does not announce the theme of his poetic romance as such. Instead, he opens with the now famous verse, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever" (I. v. 1), and then elaborates on this conceit for thirty-three verses. In his amplification, Keats on the one hand furnishes examples of beautiful things, and on the other comments on their nature and disserts upon their effects on the spirit of man.

Among the objects that Keats lists as shapes of beauty, there are the sun, the moon, trees, daffodils and the green world they live in, rills, the mid-forest brake with its musk-roses. These, it may be noted, are features of nature and landscape, but then Keats goes on to mention elements more specifically linked to poetry and poetic destiny: "the grandeur of the dooms / We have imagined for the mighty dead; / All lovely tales that we have heard or read:" (I. vv. 20-22). Kelvin Everest has commented on the fact that this Introduction "keeps its sense of the separate and differently existing realm of art in tension with the necessary dependence of art upon those very realities from which it is a form of escape"¹⁹, while Tahir Jamil has observed that: "To add to the pleasure offered by Nature, there are works of human imagination and the consolation of immortality which man imagines to be the grand doom of the mighty dead"²⁰, and, according to the critic, these elements appeal to Keats "as forms reflecting the transcendent Beauty beyond human ken [...] reminding him that what he beholds is merely a reflection of the Ideal"²¹. For Mark Sandy, instead, in the description of the things of beauty, there is a dramatization of "the tension between a longing for an absolute and idealised reality and [...] the tragically mutable human condition"²². From the perspective of this analysis, however, the actual presence of these elements is more important than the reason for their inclusion, the fact that the fame achieved by great poets after their death, as also the beautiful stories they have narrated, are specifically recalled – a tribute, perhaps, to Spenser and his *Faerie Queene*. In any case, Keats goes on to assert that these "essences" are not merely felt for a brief moment, but that they, like "the moon, / The passion poesy, glories infinite, / Haunt us till they become a cheering light / Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast / That, whether there be shine or gloom o'ercast, / They always must be with us, or we die." (I. vv. 28-33). In this way, the topic, medium, and the ultimate, craved aspiration of poetic writing are asserted. Only after this does the poet introduce the specific theme of his work, as consequence of his previous argumentation of the persistence and value of things of beauty, one of which the poetic romance is now identified as being: "Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I / Will trace the story of Endymion" (I. vv. 34-35).

The tale of the beautiful shepherd loved by Cynthia, the moon, had already been well present in Keats's mind as poetic argument as early as 1816. In the poem, "I stood tip-toe", originally referred to by the poet as "Endymion" in a letter to Cowden Clarke on 17

Visiak ed., The Nonesuch Library, Glasgow 1964.

¹⁹ K. Everest, *John Keats*, Northcote House, Hordon, Tavistock 2002, p. 45.

²⁰ T. Jamil, *Transcendentalism in English Romantic Poetry*, Vantage Press, New York 1989, p. 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²² M. Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2005, p. 38.

December²³, the fable is the fourth and final one proposed at some length, after the briefer presentations of the myths of Love and Psyche, Pan and Syrinx and Narcissus. It is therefore all the more surprising that in the Introduction to his mythological romance Keats should dispose the story as central focus, and foreground instead “a thing of beauty”, of which the myth of Endymion and Cynthia then becomes an exemplification.

The highlight on beauty may be due to the many allusions to this quality in the Proems of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, where one of the most recurrent adjectives is “fair”, in the sense of “beautiful”. The epithet is applied by Spenser to objects and abstractions, as also to personages, mythic and otherwise²⁴, including the object of his eulogy, Queen Elizabeth I, who is apostrophized as “O fayrest Princessse vnder sky” (II. 4. v. 6), and who is constantly referred to in terms of the loveliness of light and brightness. With regard to this last point, it may be noted that Keith D. White has pointed out how, in *Endymion*, “Light becomes the ultimate symbol of pure beauty”²⁵.

Another incentive to the exaltation of the myth of Endymion and Cynthia as “a thing of beauty” may reside in the fact that in the Proem to Book III of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser mentions Cynthia twice as “fayrest”. First, Spenser recalls how Sir Walter Raleigh had celebrated in his verse “His *Cynthia*, his heauens fayrest light” (III. 4. v. 6). Raleigh’s poem was *The Ocean’s Love to Cynthia*²⁶, in which the identity of the moon-goddess Cynthia was attributed to Queen Elizabeth I, and Spenser writes of the beauty of the poem’s sweet verse, by means of which his “senses lulled are in slomber of delight” (III. 4. v. 9). After this, Spenser proposes to imitate Raleigh, hoping that “his fayrest *Cynthia*” (III. 5. v. 5), Elizabeth, will not refuse to allow herself to be portrayed in his poem.

Keats’s presentation of his spatial parameter for the composition of his poem may also owe much to Spenser’s Proems. Keats conceives of his composition as a journey through nature’s scenery, asserting that he will “quickly dress / My uncertain path with green, that I may speed / Easily onward, through flowers and weed.” (I. vv. 61-62). This recalls the first stanza of the Proem to Book VI of the *Faerie Queene*, in which Spenser writes of “The waies, through which my weary steps I guyde, / [...] / Are so exceeding spacious and wyde, / And sprinkled with such sweet variety, / Of all that pleasant is to eare or eye” (VI. 1. vv. 1, 3-5), as also the second stanza, in which he asks the Muse to “Guyde [...] my footing, and conduct me well / In these strange waies,” (VI. 2. v. 7). In both poets, therefore, the composition of their poem is seen as treading a path through the beauties of nature.

²³ See G. F. Scott, *Selected Letters*, p. 10.

²⁴ For example, “fayrest *Tanaquill*” (I. 2. v. 5), “Faire *Venus* sonne” (I. 3. v. 2), “faire beames” (I. 4. v. 5), “the Moones fayre shining spheare” (II. 3. v. 6), “fayre mirrhour” (II. 4. v. 7), “that fayrest vertue” (III. 1. v. 2), “faire vertue” (V. 1. v. 4), “fayre Europa” (V. 5. v. 9), “a fayrer flowre” (VI. 4. v. 1), “colours faire” (VI. 4. 9), “Faire Lords and Ladies” (VI. 7. v. 8).

²⁵ K. D. White, *John Keats and the Loss of Romantic Innocence*, Rodopi, Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA. 1996, p. 19.

²⁶ The fragment of this poem that has survived is entitled: “The 21st and last booke of the Ocean to Scinthia”. On Raleigh’s representation of Elizabeth as Cynthia, see A. Zurcher, *Getting It Back to Front in 1590: Spenser’s Dedications, Nashe’s Insinuations, and Raleigh’s Equivocation*, “Studies in the Literary Imagination”, 38, 2005, p. 198, note 39.

Endymion: Book II

Keats's Introduction to Book II of *Endymion* elaborates the theme of the power of love and of how its records remain in the mind and memory more than the records of war, thus proving the superiority of love over warfare and the fall of empires. The Romantic poet argues that the woes of Troy fade from the brain whereas the story of Troilus and Cressida is remembered. Continuing the exemplifications of his theory, Keats asserts that Themistocles consulting the oracles before battle, Alexander the Great crossing the Indus with his army, and Ulysses blinding the Cyclops, have a weaker hold on the mind of man than the loves of the female protagonists of Renaissance texts. Andrew Motion points out how "Keats is careful only to reject the history of martial conflict and its powers [...] he means to show that it repels him only if it is defined by exclusively political interests [...]" In other words, an idea of history which does not allow for the 'sovereign power' of love is misconceived²⁷. Instead, Ayumi Mizukoshi sustains that Keats, in "Exalting Elizabethan heroines and dismissing classical heroes [...]" attempts to reverse the traditional hierarchy of poetic genres²⁸. It is probable that Keats wished to comment both on history and on poetic typologies. What is relevant for this study is that the heroines mentioned are Juliet of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Imogen of his *Cymbeline*, Hero of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, and Pastorella of Book VI of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

In this way, Keats's Introduction leads back to Spenser, who had attributed a notable importance to love by placing it, as has been seen, in equal and balanced position to war in the presentation of the subject-matter of his epic. This is confirmed in the Proem to Book I by his request, addressed to Cupid, god of love, to come to his aid bringing his mother, Venus, goddess of love, and Mars, god of war²⁹. Furthermore, in Spenser's Proem to Book IV there is a paean on love. Looking back at the past, the Renaissance poet argues that "all the workes of those wise sages, / And braue exploits which great Heroes wonne, / In loue were either ended or begunne" (IV. 3. vv. 3-5), and he cites the example of the father of philosophy³⁰, "Which to his *Critias*, shaded oft from sunne, / Of loue full manie lessons did apply" (IV. 3. vv. 7-8). Here is explicitated that association of heroes with love that Keats expresses in one of Endymion's speeches in Book I of the poem: "Aye, so delicious is the unsating food [love] / That men, who might have towered in the van / Of all the congregated world, [...] / Have been content to let occasion die, / Whilst they did sleep

²⁷ A. Motion, *Keats*, p. 182.

²⁸ A. Mizukoshi, *Keats, Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure*, Palgrave, Basingstoke/New York 2001, p. 140. The critic also points out, *ibid.*, of Keats and Hunt, that, "In their bourgeois aesthetics of pleasure, romance, pastoral and Greek mythology significantly overlap in terms of their subversive as well as their pleasurable qualities" and that these literary modes "promote personal feeling, pastoral relief and pagan pleasure, in opposition to epic poetry, characterised by its historic pomp and the hero's moral and martial virtues". According to G. Kucich, *Keats's literary tradition and the politics of historiographical invention*, in N. Roe, *Keats and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 253, instead, Keats's assertion of preference "calls attention to the capacity of the imagination to select and develop alternative models of history".

²⁹ D. Brook-Davies, *Spenser's Faerie Queene*, p. 11, observes that the poet "links war and love to imply the harmonious union of Mars and Venus".

³⁰ Spenser uses the expression, "the father of Philosophie" (IV. 3. v. 6), *parens philosophiae*, which was the traditional appellative of Socrates, but Socrates spoke to Phaedrus, and not to Critias, in the shade of a plane tree.

in love's Elysium" (I, vv. 816-818, 822-823)³¹. Keats's Introduction to Book II thus takes up both the concept of the importance of love and that of the pre-eminence of amorous endeavours with respect to martial ones in the history of the undertakings and achievements of man.

After highlighting the importance of the stories of love of the past, Keats concludes the Introduction to Book II by reflecting on himself as narrator of a love romance. Here a significant distinction from Spenser emerges. Spenser presents himself in the Proem to Book I as the poet whom the Muse had first masked in pastoral style, and then had compelled to undertake the fitter task of writing an epic. The Renaissance poet clearly states that he has begun his composition "enforst" (I. 1. v. 3) by the Muse, and so that, although he recites the topos of unworthiness, writing of his "farre vnfitter taske" (I. 1. v. 3), and characterizing himself as "all too meane" (I. 1. v. 7) and as "weaker Nouice" (I. 2. v. 2), nonetheless he explicitly asserts that "the sacred Muse areeds [him]" (I. 1. v. 5), that is, advises and counsels him. He therefore addresses the Chief of the nine Muses³² asking for aid: "Helpe then, O holy virgin chiefe of nyne, / Thy weaker Nouice to performe thy will", "O helpe thou my weake wit, and sharpen my dull tong" (I. 2. vv. 1-2, 9). Analogously, in harmony with his presentation of Elizabeth as the Protestant Virgin, the poet beseeches the Queen, "Goddesse heauenly bright" (I. 4. v. 1), to shed her salvific and repairing grace on his poetic faults and limits: "Shed thy faire beames into my feeble eyne, / And raise my thoughtes too humble and too vile / To thinke of that true glorious type of thine, / The argument of mine afflicted stile:" (I. 4. vv. 5-8).

Moreover, in the Proem to Book VI, Spenser asserts that his subject-matter, Fairy land³³, is so delightful that it makes him forget all his exhaustion and furnishes the strength and power to alleviate the dullness of spirit and inspiration: "My tedious trauell doe forget thereby" (VI. 1. v. 7); "It strength to me supplies, and chears my dulled spright" (VI. 1. v. 9). Consequently Spenser can conclude with another prayer, this time to the Muses, to guide his steps in the ways he is traversing, ways "where neuer foote did vse, / Ne none can find, but who was taught them by the Muse" (VI. 2. vv. 8-9). Two implications derive from this. First, Spenser claims the uniqueness of his endeavour by asserting that he is traversing a poetic area untrodden by any other foot. Second, he affirms that the enterprise can only be embarked upon with the help of the Muse and, given that the

³¹ A. C. Hamilton, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 410, notes that T. Cooper, "Dictionarium Historicum Poeticum" in *Thesaurus linguae Romanae et Britannicae*, London 1565, had defined "Heroe" as "he that for the loue of vertue susteineth great labours".

³² D. Brook-Davies, *Spenser's Faerie Queene*, p. 11, comments: "This is the traditional invocation to the Muse, but, in accordance with the Neoplatonic notion of the union of opposites, Spenser's Muse is a composite figure. He calls upon the 'chiefe' of the nine Muses, usually either Urania, Muse of astronomy and the highest knowledge [...], or Calliope, Muse of heroic poetry. But in Spenser's own *Tears of the Muses*, 55, Clio, Muse of fame and history, is the 'eldest Sister'". The critic also observes how H. Gibbons Lospeich, *Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1932, p. 84, has pointed out that epic derives its subject matter from history so that Renaissance writers did not distinguish carefully between the roles of Calliope and Clio.

³³ Fairyland's connection with India has been argued by E. Jane Bellamy, *Spenser's Faeryland and "The Curious Genealogy of India"*, in P. Cheney – L. Silberman ed., *Worldmaking Spenser. Explorations in the Early Modern Age*, University of Kentucky Press, Lexington, KY 2000, pp. 177-192. This, together with the specific mention of "Indian Peru" in the Proem of Book II may have suggested to Keats the introduction of the Indian Maiden in Book IV of *Endymion*.

poet is in fact undertaking it, it means that the Muse must be aiding him. Consequently, although Spenser continues to underline the difficulty of his undertaking, it is clear that in his mind the Muses' help is assured.

Keats, instead, has not been constrained to write; on the contrary, he explicitly asserts that he moves along his poetic path not only without the benevolence or request of the muses but also without any help from them. Indeed, he "thus far, discontent, has dared to tread, / Without one muse's smile, or kind behest, / The path of love and poesy." (II, vv. 36-38). Furthermore, it is not the delightfulness of his undertaking that drives him on, but the pessimistic conceit that repose is worse than commitment: "But rest, / In chaffing restlessness, is yet more drear / Than to be crush'd in striving to uprear / Love's standard on the battlements of song. / So once more days and nights aid me along, / Like legion'd soldiers." (II, vv. 38-43). In this way, with the metaphor of warfare and its explanation of the necessity of collocating the flag of Love on the battlements of song, Keats distinguishes himself from the assurance of Spenser.

Furthermore, although in both poets the idea of treading a pathway is the same, Spenser expresses his fatigue when he has already written five books of his poem, each of twelve cantos, so that he may well be tired by the weight of composition of his epic. Keats instead, has merely written one book of 992 verses when he expresses the need for "days and nights" to continue with the poetic romance, that already now appears to him to be a citadel of poetry to be conquered. Thus while the final impression left by Spenser is one of confidence in his work and potential, that transmitted by Keats is one of a despondent contention with a difficult enterprise.

Endymion: Book III

Keats begins his Introduction with a strong indictment: "There are who lord it o'er their fellow-men / With most prevailing tinsel: who unpen / Their baaing vanities, to browse away / The comfortable green and juicy hay / From human pastures; or, O torturing fact! / Who, through an idiot blink, will see unpack'd / Fire-branded foxes to sear up and singe / Our gold and ripe-ear'd hopes". (III, vv. 1-8). As Miriam Allott observes, here Keats attacks "the reactionary régimes of the day, which had gathered strength following the restoration of the monarchy in France [...] and the Congress of Vienna (1814-15)"³⁴, and analogously, John Barnard has considered the verses "an attack on the Tory government and other reactionary regimes, which echoes Hunt's articles in the *Examiner*, August

³⁴ *The Poems of John Keats*, M. Allott ed., Longman, London 1972, p. 206. For a political reading of the Introductions, in the context of a generalized political interpretation of the whole poem, see V. Newey, *Keats, history and the poets*, in *Keats and History*, N. Roe ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, pp. 165-193. On the political resonance of Keats's poems in general, see R. Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: The Search of the Pure Commonwealth*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC/London 2000, pp. 181-199, and J. N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 82-122.

1817”³⁵. Morton D. Paley further points out that here “Keats adopts a strategy extensively employed by radicals in the 1790s by associating his own side with fertility [...] in contrast to the unproductive nature”³⁶ of those he is attacking.

Keats proceeds with his Introduction: “With not one tinge / Of sanctuary splendour, not a sight / Able to face an owl’s, they still are dight / By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests, / And crowns and turbans.” (8-12). In these verses the poet’s criticism extends to the clergy, and Nicholas Roe has commented that there is here involved an attack “on the Church of England, in which [Keats] echoes the sentiments of Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner* newspaper, which he had read since his schooldays”³⁷. Hunt had ridiculed the French clergy for wearing what he had called “the Roman purple” of Cardinals’ hats in *The Examiner*, 31 August 1817, 550-551³⁸, and in these lines Keats’s is apparently recalling this.

In the verses that follow, Keats continues: “With unladen breasts, / Save of blown self-applause, they proudly mount / To their spirit’s perch, their being’s high account, / Their tiptop nothings, their dull skies, their thrones - / Amid the fierce intoxicating tones / Of trumpets, shoutings, and belabour’d drums, / And sudden cannon.” (12-18). Keats’s friend, Richard Woodhouse, annotated in the interleaves of his copy of *Endymion* that “[Keats] said, with much simplicity, ‘It will easily be seen what I think of the present Ministers, by the beginning of the 3rd book”³⁹. In this part of the Introduction Allott identifies a probable recollection of the peace celebrations after the abdication of Napoleon (6 April 1814) “which culminated in the ‘national jubilee’ of 1 Aug. 1814, a date chosen as the centenary of the accession of the House of Brunswick”⁴⁰, and it is not therefore surprising that, as Elizabeth Cook documents, this passage was described by one reviewer as a “jacobinical apostrophe”⁴¹.

Vincent Newey, analyzing this part of the Introduction, argues that “what gives the protest particular edge is the accusation against wealth, the ‘system’, as well as regalities, the given hierarchy of power”⁴², and he perceives in Keats’s words not only a reference to “the oppressed creative spirit” so that Keats “drives a wedge between worth and rank, and desert and privilege” but also “a commitment to the idea of genius independent of worldly titles”⁴³. On the other hand, Nicholas Roe provides a relatively negative evaluation of this Introduction, sustaining that, though it is “characterized by a sort of unstable, childish exuberance [...] the verse is clogged with awkward parentheses ... [and that] As

³⁵ John Keats: *The Complete Poems*, J. Barnard ed., Penguin Books, London 1988, p. 600. J. Barnard, *Endymion: “Pretty Paganism” and “Purgatory Blind”*, in H. de Almeida ed., *Critical Essays on John Keats*, G. K. Hall, Boston, Mass. 1990, p. 52, even asserts that “*Endymion* is a rejection of the unheroic and oppressive values of the rulers of Regency Britain”.

³⁶ M. D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999, p. 278.

³⁷ John Keats: *Selected Poems*, N. Roe ed., J. M. Dent, London 2000, p. 277.

³⁸ See M. Allott, *Poems of John Keats*, p. 206.

³⁹ *John Keats: Complete Poems*, J. Stillinger ed., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass./London 1982, p. 435.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴¹ *John Keats: Selected Poetry*, E. Cook ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 226.

⁴² V. Newey, *Centering the Self: Subjectivity, Society and Reading from Thomas Gray to Thomas Hardy*, Scholar Press, Aldershot 1995, p. 105.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

political invective, the lines are almost wholly obscure"⁴⁴.

The contents of this Introduction to Book III are obviously connected to the specific political situation of Keats's time. In Spenser's Proems too, there is a reference to contemporary politics. In the Proem to Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, there is the mention of "The rugged forehead that with graue foresight / Welds kingdomes causes, and affaires of state" (IV. 1. vv. 1-2), who had criticized the epic of Spenser. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. annotates that "tradition has it that Spenser is referring to William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, Elizabeth's chief adviser, who apparently disapproved of the first three books of the poem because they disciplined the reader in virtue not explicitly, but under the guise of allegorical romance, which he supposed many readers would not understand"⁴⁵. A. C. Hamilton, instead, retains that Burghley, Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer, was critical of the contents of the concluding five stanzas of the first edition of the poem because "Anyone in his official capacity may well have been offended by the erotic ending of Bk III, enough for [Spenser] to cancel it". In fact, the stanzas were replaced by stanzas 43-45 in the 1596 edition of the poem.

Whether Burghley was offended by the eroticism of Spenser's epic or by its allegory is less important than the fact that Spenser introduces and responds to this political figure. More important is the motivation that Spenser himself attributes to the displeasure of Burghley, namely, the praise of love and the exaltation of the love debates in the poem. Indeed, the poet explicitly asserts that Burghley "My looser rimes (I wote) doth sharply wite, / For praising loue, as I haue done of late, / And magnifying louers deare debate; / By which fraile youth is oft to follie led, / Through false allurement of that pleasing baite, / That better were in vertues discipld, / Then with vaine poemes weeds to haue their fancies fed." (IV. 1. vv. 3-9). In the opinion of Spenser, Burghley retained that *The Faerie Queene* induced youth to folly, by pandering to the enticements and fantasies of love, instead of disciplining in virtue. The poet's reply is that such people as Burghley judge love wrongly, because they are unable to love, and he defends love in that "it of honor and all vertue is / The roote" (IV. 2. v. 6).

In the same way as Spenser attacks Burghley, it may be said that Keats attacks the regimes of his time. Indeed, commenting on the Proem to Book V of *The Faerie Queene*, A. C. Hamilton, sustains that Spenser "posits a causal relationship between moral and political degeneration and the physical disorder of the universe"⁴⁶, and this is what it may be sustained Keats does in re-proposing the moral criticism in Spenser as political criticism in the Introduction to Book III. Indeed, just as Spenser opposes to his critic the value of love, so Keats opposes, to the negative forces at work in his world, the operations of the Moon.

Furthermore, in the Proem to Book II of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser had hypothesized the possibility of other worlds within the Moon and stars: "What if within the Moones fayre shining speare, / What if in euery other starre vnscene / Of other worldes he happily should heare?" (II. 3. vv. 6-8), also developing, as Brook-Davies observes, the

⁴⁴ N. Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p. 205.

⁴⁵ E. Spenser: *The Faerie Queene*, T. P. Roche, Jr. ed., Penguin Books, London 1987, p. 1166.

⁴⁶ A. C. Hamilton, *The Faerie Queene*, p. 508.

conceit that “The power of *ubertas* is given to the sphere of the moon”⁴⁷. An analogous theme is developed by Keats in the second part of his Introduction, where, to the reactionary regimes previously attacked, the poet counter-poses the natural forces of the cosmos: “Aye, ’bove the withering of old-lipp’d Fate / A thousand Powers keep religious state” (III. vv. 29-30). These powers, embodied in the gods of mythology, govern the world in water, fire and air and, “with gorgeous pageantry enrobe / Our piece of heaven” (36-37), showering their benevolence on the universe: “Yet few of these far majesties, ah, few! / Have bared their operations to this globe – ” (34-35). In the opinion of Anthony John Harding, what is particularly striking of these forces, after the clamour of the potentates of the earth, is “the silence of the divine powers and the divinity of silence”⁴⁸. Of those few entities who have revealed their operations to the world, the Moon is described by Keats as “the gentlier-mightiest” (III, 43), and in this way Keats comes back to the theme of his romance: Cynthia. There follow two apostrophes to the Moon⁴⁹: “O Moon! the oldest shades ’mong oldest trees / Feel palpitations when thou lookest in: / O Moon! old boughs lisp forth a holier din / The while they feel thine airy fellowship. / Thou dost bless every where, with silver lip / Kissing dead things to life.” (vv. 52-57). Keats then proposes his panegyric of the Moon’s influence and operations stressing, like Spenser, her productivity and underlining the benedictions of her sway on nature, on animals and birds, as also on the creatures in the sea and the sea itself.

Endymion: Book IV

In the Introduction to his book IV Keats finally introduces the Muse, and specifically the “Muse of my native land!” (IV. v. 1). She has sat “alone in northern grot” (IV. v. 4), while other places and peoples enjoyed the blessings of the nine traditional Muses, and, with regard to this, Keats remembers, first the Bible (IV. v. 10), then the singing out of the Nine with the classical poets (IV. vv. 11-14), and then Dante (IV. vv. 14-16). Ultimately, however, the muse of England wins “A full accomplishment” (IV. v. 18), so that “The thing is done, / Which undone, these our latter days had risen / On barren souls.” (IV. vv. 18-20). The allusion is to the fulfilment of poetical promise in the work of Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton. As Stuart Curran points out, this Introduction “celebrate[s] the integrity and independence of a British muse and the poet’s sense of his cultural responsibility”⁵⁰. Indeed, Keats turns from the glory to the English muse to the difficulties inherent in his writing of *Endymion*: “Great Muse, thou know’st what prison, / Of flesh and bone, curbs, and confines, and frets / Our spirit’s wings” (IV. vv. 20-22). According to Michael

⁴⁷ D. Brook-Davies, *Spenser’s Faerie Queene*, p. 118.

⁴⁸ A. J. Harding, *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia/London 1995, p. 212.

⁴⁹ P. Hamilton, *Metaromanticism: Aesthetics, Literature, Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 2003, p. 98, has commented on the fact that “the indiscriminate stream of apostrophes [...] raises also the idea of a benevolent nature”.

⁵⁰ S. Curran, *Poetic Form*, p. 149.

O'Neill the echo of Macbeth's longing not to be "cabined, cribbed, confined"⁵¹, present in these verses, indicates "how hard it is for the poet to find his own inspiration"⁵², and for Andrew Motion Keats, in his invocation to the Muse, "appeals for the Classical age of revive the present as it had the Elizabethan period"⁵³.

This idea of a depressing present state in contrast to a previous happy age and the conceit of the need for revival may be retained to be a reworking of the theme of Spenser's Proem to Book V, where the Renaissance poet expatiates at length on what he considers to be the decadence of his time; in particular he asserts that, from the golden age, the world has precipitated into an age of stone. In the past, in the ancient reign of Saturn, "it's sayd, / That all the world with goodnesse did abound: / All loued vertue, no man was a-fraid / Of force, ne fraud in wight was to be found: / No warre was knowne, no dreadfull trompets sound, / Peace vniuersall rayn'd amongst men and beasts, / And all things freely grew out of the ground" (V. 9. vv. 1-8). Instead, Spenser raises his lament, "Of present dayes, which are corrupted sore" (V. 3. v. 4). Indeed, for the poet everything has been turned upside down: "For that which all men did vertue call, / Is now cald vice; and that which vice was hight, / Is now hight vertue, and so vs'd of all: / Right now is wrong, and wrong that was is right, / As all things else in time are changed quight." (V. 4. vv. 1-5).

Seeming to echo Spenser, Keats laments, more than a reversal of moral parameters, an existential dejection, a sense of decline, not so much in virtue, as in creativity and inspiration: "despondency besets / Our pillows; and the fresh to-morrow morn / Seems to give forth its light in very scorn / Of our dull, uninspired, snail-paced lives." (IV. vv. 23-25). No wonder, then, that Keats feels it particularly difficult to write his poem, concluding that the only thing to do is to "move to the end in lowliness of heart" (IV. v. 29).

Conclusion

It has here been argued that it is possible to find certain parallels and correspondences as also a series of contrapositions and contrasts between some of the subject-matter and topics of Spenser's Proems to the six books of his *The Faerie Queene* and Keats's Introductions to the four books of his *Endymion*. A number of analogies and reversals have been documented to render feasible the hypothesis of the existence of this influence. In any case, a comparison of Spenser's Proems and Keats's Introductions to the Books of *Endymion* certainly helps to focus and promote a clearer understanding of some of the themes and motifs at work in Keats's poetic romance.

⁵¹ *Macbeth*, III. iv. 23.

⁵² M. O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p. 196.

⁵³ A. Motion, *Keats*, p. 201.