

**KEATS AND
SPENSER; A
DISSERTATION**

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Keats and Spenser; A Dissertation by W. A. Read

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A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL FACULTY

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I. Introduction.

1. The Present State of Criticism upon the Relation between Keats and Spenser.

Certain critics have maintained that the genius of John Keats was to a great extent moulded by his study of the poetical works of Edmund Spenser. Lord Houghton says, „Not only are the 'Lines in imitation of Spenser,' with the exception of some indifferent sonnets, the earliest known verses of his composition, but the stream of his inspiration remained long coloured by the rich soil over which it then flowed. Nor will the just critic of the maturer poems of Keats fail to trace much that at first appears forced and fantastical both in idea and in expression, and suspect that some of the very defects, which are commonly attributed to an extravagant originality, may be distinguished as proceeding from a too indiscriminate reverence for a great, but unequal, model.“¹⁾

Beautiful are the words of Mr. Matthew Arnold in which he refers to Keats as „the one modern inheritor of Spenser's beautiful gift; the poet who evidently caught from Spenser his sweet and easy-slipping movement, and who has exquisitely employed it; a Spenserian

1) Keats' Poetical Works, Aldine ed., p. XIV.

genius, nay, a genius by natural endowment richer probably than even Spenser; that light which shines so unexpected and without fellow in our century, an Elizabethan born too late, the early lost and admirably gifted Keats.¹⁾

Again, Mr. W. T. Arnold declares, „The strongest literary influence exercised by any one writer upon the mind of Keats was that exercised by Spenser. Leigh Hunt's influence is strongly marked only in his earliest, that of Milton only in his latest work; but not only is Spenser everywhere both in the volume of juvenile poems and in *Endymion*, but one of Keats' latest and most beautiful poems, *St. Agnes' Eve*, is perhaps the finest example of the use of the Spenserian stanza, out of Spenser, in the whole range of English verse. Spenser was his first love in poetry and even Milton and Shakspeare did not cause him to be forgotten in Keats' maturer years.²⁾

The eminent critic, Mr. Sidney Colvin (followed by Mr. Forman³⁾), agrees with the above-quoted as to the general influence of Spenser upon the poetical work of Keats, but takes a slightly different view as regards the juvenile poem called the *Imitation of Spenser*. He says: „Although, indeed, the poets whom Keats loved the best both first and last were those of the Elizabethan age, it is clear that his own earliest verses were modelled timidly on the work of writers nearer his own time. His professedly Spenserian lines resemble not so much Spenser as later writers who had written

1) Quoted by Mr. W. T. Arnold, *Keats' Poetical Works*, London, 1888, p. XXV.

2) *Keats' Poetical Works*, ed. W. T. Arnold, London, 1888, pp. XXIII—XXIV.

3) *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. Forman, London, 1896, p. XVIII.

in his measure, and of these not the latest, Byron, but rather such milder minstrels as Shenstone, Thomson, and Beattie, or most of all perhaps the sentimental Irish poetess Mrs. Tighe; whose *Psyche* had become very popular since her death, and by its richness of imagery, and flowing and musical versification, takes a place, now too little recognised, among the pieces pre-luding the romantic movement of the time.¹⁾

The view of the last-named critic as to the general character of Keats' first poem appears in a somewhat modified form in J. Hoops' article entitled „Keats' Jugend und Jugendgedichte“²⁾: „In seinen übrigen Jugendidichtungen tritt allerdings der Einfluss der Litteratur des 18. Jahrhunderts vielfach unverkennbar zu Tage; aber aus den vier Stanzen der „Imitation of Spenser“ dasselbe entnehmen zu wollen, scheint doch etwas subjectiv geurtheilt; sie können ebenso gut von Spenser direct wie von seinen Nachfolgern beeinflusst sein.“²⁾

A sharp contrast to all the preceding criticism is furnished by the opinion of Mr. W. M. Rossetti, who finds even in Keats' whole first volume of poems (published in 1817) little in which Spenser's influence is paramount, and is inclined to deny to Spenser any influence upon Keats' latest and best productions. Here are his words: „As we have seen, Keats began versifying chiefly under a Spenserean influence; and it has been suggested that this influence remained puissant for harm as well as for good up to the close of his poetic career. I do not see much force in the suggestion; unless in this limited sense — that Spenser, like other Elisabethan and Jacobean poets his successors, allowed himself very considerable latitude in saying whatever came into his head, relevant or irrelevant,

1) Keats by Sidney Colvin, London, 1889, p. 21.

2) Engl. Stud. XXI, 239.

appropriate or jarring, obvious or far-fetched, simple or grandiose, according to the mood of the moment and the swing of composition, and thus the whole strain presents an aspect more of rich and arbitrary picturesqueness than of ordered suavity. And Keats no doubt often did the same: but not in the choicest productions of his later time, nor perhaps so much under incitement from Spenser as in pursuance of that revolt from a factitious and constrained model of work in which Wordsworth in one direction, Coleridge in another, and Leigh Hunt in a third, had already come forward with practice and precept. Making allowance for a few early attempts directly referable to Spenser, I find, even in Keats's first volume, little in which that influence is paramount. He seems to have written because his perceptions were quick, his sympathies vivid in certain directions, and his energies wound up to poetic endeavour. The mannerisms of thought, method, and diction, are much more those of Hunt than of Spenser; and it is extremely probable that the soreness against Hunt which Keats evidenced at a later period was due to his perceiving that that kindly friend and genial literary ally had misled him into some poetic trivialities and absurdities, not less than to anything in himself which could be taken hold of for complaint.⁽¹⁾

2. The Object of This Paper.

A glance through the preceding pages will make it evident that there is a considerable difference of opinion among critics as to the actual relations existing between Keats and Spenser; the question being a rather important one, it may be worth while to enter into a

1) Keats by W. M. Rossetti, London, 1887, pp. 164—165.

detailed study of the extent and the character of the influence left upon the poetry of Keats by his study of Spenser. With the merits or demerits of the two poets we have nothing to do; nor will any attempt be made to draw a comparison between the extent of Spenser's influence upon Keats and that exercised by other writers save where the influence of the former might be called into question.

In an investigation of this nature, it is clear that the most palpable, if not the most important, proof is to be found, first of all, in the traces left by the one writer upon the language and the metre of the other. A second source of evidence, and one in itself of perhaps greater consequence, but more difficult to point out than the former, will be furnished by the choice of subject-matter with the general method of treatment.

II. Biographical Evidence and Personal Testimony.

Before proceeding to an examination of Keats' poetry, it may be proper to notice the oft-repeated account of his first acquaintance with Spenser. It seems that his friend Cowden Clarke read to him the Epithalamion, probably in the year 1813, lending him at the same time a copy of the Faerie Queene, „through which he went,“ writes Clarke, „as a young horse would through a Spring meadow—ramping.“ His reading was accompanied moreover by signs of a love for word-pictures and poetical images; for instance, says his