William Hazlitt On Romantic Poetic Ideology

The early 19th Century was described by Joshua David Gonsalves as a period defined by ‘manliness in crisis’ within which, expectations of how men should act were continually changing (Gonsalves 2015: 2). The poetic voices who took centerstage during the Romantic era were that of the ‘Big Six’ - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats - all men. Therefore, our historical understanding of Romantic poetic ideology has been witnessed and shaped primarily through a restrictive male lens. Within the 18th to 19th Century, it has been gathered that there are two varied degrees of idolised manhood: the Enlightened man, ‘a rational, intellectual, and culturally refined being;’ and the Romantic hero—a reaction to the formers’ persona—who was instead ruled by by ‘vigour, willpower, and courage’ (Sanislo 2006: 268). However, even amongst the emerging male community of Romanticism, there lay many assumptions concerning gender, often dictating that masculinity was superior to femininity, which in turn failed to understand that gender is a far wider spectrum. In my essay, I intend to critique the idolisation of masculinity during this era, by examining John Keats’ La Belle Dame Sans Merci (1819) and William Wordsworth’s Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey (1798), holding the view that Wordsworth adhered to masculine traditions whilst Keats dared to challenge them. Both writers’ poetical characters juxtapose each other: the former representative of the ‘egotistical sublime’ whilst the latter enacted with ‘negative capability,’ and so I also intend to evaluate how these concepts engage with either the anxiety, egotism, or acceptance experienced by the Romantic patriarchy when faced with “unorthodox” gender identities.

Firstly, to contextualise, Romantic male poets revelled in their passions and experiences, fascinated by mans’ sensual relationship to the world, and so initially, one may be inclined to believe that this attitude was a new and transgressive form of manhood which wholeheartedly accepted effeminate behaviours. Mellor, on the other hand, maintains that this masculinity was in fact, ‘excessive,’ and that the Romantic poets’ prime objective was in ‘the development of the autonomous self’ (Mellor 2012: 334). What this implies is that man’s independence and willingness to control was empowered to a fierce extent: it was not necessarily the world around them which affected their emotions, but rather, their actions. A man’s identity cannot be flexible, he must be direct, courageous, self-fulfilling: this is where the ego becomes central; as his attention is directed inward rather than outward.

In lieu of this, Keats remains to this day as a provocative figure within the discussion of what it means to be a “masculine” or “feminine” poet. However, at the time he was alive, he was mocked by his contemporaries, who saw him as an indolent and overly sensitive boy-man.William Hazlitt was one of the first to allude to these issues, identifying ‘effeminacy’ as ‘a prevalence of sensibility over the will’ practiced by ‘creatures of present impulse’ (Hazlitt 1822: ix). He is particularly critical of Keats’ inability to addend to a traditionally masculine criteria, even implying that the ‘fault’ of his poetry lies in his effeminacy, as he believes it is lacking of ‘strength and substance’ (ibid.). The image which Hazlitt produces of Keats is one which circumscribes his femininity to immaturity, feebleness and a fanciable nature. He compares the poet to his preferred Lord Byron, who exhibited more heroic traits of ‘manly firmness and decision of character,’ whilst Keats flourished in ‘airy dreams’ and ‘delightful description[s] of the illusions of a youthful imagination’ (ibid.). There seems, therefore, to be the opinion that

femininity makes a man passive, indulgent, and even of lower social status. Subsequently, according to John Gibson Lockhart, Keats was a member of the ‘Cockney School of Poetry:’ a group he designated as the ‘meanest, filthiest and most vulgar of Cockney poetasters;’ with the word “Cockney” used here as a slang term falling to an image of an impoverished and rude city-dweller, with connotations to naivety (Lockhart 1818: 520).

The androgyny which lay behind Keats’ personality - whilst criticised by past writers - is now regarded as a reaction against the definitive masculine energy of the Romantic poets. Watkins notes, for example, that ‘One motivating desire in Keats’ poetry […] is to shape meaning out of, and express hope in the face of, certain powerful political, economic, and cultural conditions associated with historical transformation’ (Watkins 1996: 106). As a man of limited education and poor upbringing - who was distinctly more effeminate in comparison to his male contemporaries - Keats transgressed the status quo, situating his appeal as a marginalised and sympathetic figure espoused by feminist critics, who later declared that ‘if gender is a social construct, and to be socially powerless is to be “a woman,” then Keats can be classed among women’ (Homans 1990: 342). Thus, if to be a male poet was to therefore act with ‘steadiness’ and security in oneself (Hazlitt 1822; ix), then Keats further transcended gender boundaries in an even more advanced way than merely embracing his social exclusion: what he began to construct was the poetics of ‘no self’ and ‘no identity’ (Keats [1818] 1958: 387). The result of this he named ‘negative capability;’ the ability to be fuelled by ‘uncertainties,’ ‘mystery’ and ‘doubt’ (ibid: 193). What this coveted was that a poet’s identity should be fluid and unfixed, because when he is not obliged to reach ‘after fact or reason’ (ibid.) then his imagination becomes boundlessly unconstricted. Recent critics have agreed that Keats’ culturally installed poetic character of negative capability was an ‘ideological construction,’ (Wolfson 1995: 2) with Wolfson even going as far as to rename it ‘“feminist” capability’ (ibid: 3) due to its embrace of anti-patriarchal agenda.

This said agenda which Keats was opposing was the intellectual and aesthetic certainty perpetuated by that of the ‘egotistical sublime;’ his interpretation of Wordsworth’s distinctive style (Keats [1818] 1958: 387). The poetics of this character is focused not on the subject, but on the observer; and how he is solely affected by a scene.The dangers of the egotistical sublime - which led to Keats’ disdain for the ‘bullying egotism’ of Wordsworth (Homans 1990: 343) - can be traced within ‘the overwhelming assertion of the poet’s self and identity’ (Garber 1968: 417). Wordsworth himself has stated that his work serves the masculine; within the Preface to Lyrical Ballads he announces his poetic ideology by declaring, “What is a Poet? […] He is a man speaking to men.’ The poet’s ego excels here: he acts like the spokesperson of a masculinity built on ‘domination and exploitation’ (Watkins 1996: 31), to which his male peers should aim to emulate and female peers should refrain from. It is further revealing that Wordsworth favours point of view narratives in which he is both poet and speaker within the text. Garbar maintains that his narration keeps a line between ‘emotional distance and personal involvement’ in regards to the subject he is portraying, often leading to a worldview prescribed by one solitary perception (Garbar 1968: 411). This we can find by applying a feminist reading of Tintern Abbey, in which the worth of Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy is not simply underestimated, but completely unrecognised.

In the first stanza, the poem is not directly embedded with themes alluding to companionship between himself and the close friend who accompanies him;

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

That on a wild secluded scene impress

Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect

The landscape with the quiet of the sky. (5-8)

The marvel Wordsworth feels for nature is individual to him. It places him into a meditative state of ‘seclusion’ and introspection, shown by the poem’s blank verse and free-flowing rhythm, which resembles that of a dramatic monologue or an entry in a diary. The male possession of nature is implied through Wordsworth’s claiming of the ‘lofty cliffs’ which have influenced his ‘lofty thoughts' (line 128), suggesting that he is now mature and experienced enough to fully quantify the beauty of nature. Essick interprets that this mindset translates as: ‘I think abstractly; therefore, I am masculine’ (Essick 1994: 295). However, despite this pursuit of meditative enlightenment, there appears to in fact, lie a great deal of anxiety within Wordsworth in regards to his gender identity. The pleasure he attains from nature is in its ability to conjure up memories of his ‘boyish days,’ (line 75) and this theme of memory within the poem is interconnected with Wordsworth’s egotism. Essick believes that there are ‘two Wordsworths’ present in the text: the one in the past, which represents the feminine; and one in the present, who represents the masculine. Therefore, the poem supports a narrative which claims that ‘there are only two genders, and that one naturally hierarchizes itself over the other’ (ibid: 292). In regards to his former self, Wordsworth reflects ‘I cannot paint / What then I was’ (line 77-78), an expression which ironically echoes Keatsian negative capability, as he seems to possess uncertainty in regards to his previous persona. Rather than accepting this doubt however, Wordsworth removes himself from the ‘aching’ (line 86) and dizzy’ (line 87) time of ‘thoughtless youth’ (line 92), preferring his current ‘elevated thoughts’ (line 97), a phrase which implies that he has reached a peak stage of virtuous ‘moral being’ (line 113). The tone in this passage is a condescending reflection of masculine autonomy within the egotistical sublime, overall stating that manhood can only be accessed through knowing one’s ‘purest’ (line 111) self.

Furthermore, Essick claims that poet’s ‘association of his former self’ is prevalent in Dorothy (Essick 1994: 297) and evidence for this can be found in the line, ‘may I behold in thee what I once was’ (line 123). His following address to his sister treats her in as someone who is infantile and meek, having no knowledge of ‘solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief’ (line 146); this assumes that women have no embedded life experience from either their childhood or adulthood. Man however, is the ‘worshipper of nature’ (line 155), a spectacle which Dorothy currently does not have the intellect to understand. Wordsworth may be suggesting that he feels pity for feminine qualities, but Essick instead argues that in fact Dorothy’s treatment within the poem is evidence of Wordsworth’s ‘own fears of marginality’ (Essick 1994: 301), since the Romantic era was identified as a time where ‘women’s writing developed against canonical (masculinist) literature’ (Watkins 1996: xi). Therefore, the poet’s overarching anxiety concerning his gender was in actuality, a fear of ‘women’s real dominance’ (Homans 1990: 346), because by losing his patriarchal authority he would be unable to ‘pursue masculine empowerment’ in areas such as marriage, social class, and ownership (Essick 1994: 300).

As discussed earlier, Wolfson notes that Keats was intent on resisting the masculine ego represented by Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey, however Homans argues against this view, claiming that in actuality, Keats only defines his ‘poetry as a woman,’ while ‘[making] it clear that it is not he himself who is the woman’ (Homans 1990: 343). She protests that his poetic

character was instead constructed as a form of self gain, with its primary aim placed in confronting the critics who called his poetry immature and idle, contrary to a message which criticised the domineering patriarchy. Keats' negative capability was instead devised to disguise the 'masculine appropriation of the feminine' (ibid: 344) with the visage of the imaginative 'Man of Genius' (ibid: 352), and thus established a rivalry against other male poets he thought himself unique from while overall staying adamant in 'keep[ing] women distinct as objects of vision' (ibid.). However, I would contest against this assumption, and interpret that the declaration of having 'no identity' is essentially a rejection of the ego so integral to patriarchal characteristics. To illustrate, in his letter to Richard Woodhouse, Keats expresses that he is 'everything and nothing,' (Keats [1818] 1958: 387) and concludes that 'even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live' (ibid: 388). This revelation concerning his identity is not something which 'shocks' him, it instead causes 'delights' (ibid: 387). If the 'soul' which he is living in in is a feminine one, then he believes it is not something which should be feared; he instead humbly accepts his androgynous and scattered form. Therefore, rather than 'appropriating' the feminine, I believe that Keats holds a deep empathy and identification with women; he does not simple 'melt into the Other,' but 'becomes the Other conventionally associated with the female' (Mellor 1993: 175). To expand on this point further, I would like to provide a reading of La Belle Dam Sans Merci and how it subverts gender stereotypes instead of adhering to them.

The beginning of the poem opens with the speaker meeting a 'withered' (line 3) and 'haggard' (line 5) 'knight-at-arms' (line 1) in a meadow after encountering the belle dame. Wolfson explains that Keats often used the trope of the knight within his poems as he read them as a 'faded hierarchy,' wanting his depictions to differ from the 'model which the present state of manhood [drew] conceptual strength' (Wolfson 1995: 11). The results often led to 'silly' and 'satirical' poems which provided a 'self-consciously modern perspective on cultural invested structures of authority'(ibid.) and this attitude is prevalent in La Belle Dame. The first stanzas immediately parody literary portrayals of the knight by placing the quintessential male protagonist and symbol of chivalrous, dynamic action into a pitiful and subdued state. The word choice used to describe the man's sickly appearance is also telling; his skin is as pale as a 'lily' (line 9), his sweat like a 'dew' (line 10) and the red flush on his cheeks like a 'rose' (line 11). Flowers and dew conventionally have connotations to femininity and delicacy, thus these associations place him into an even more emasculated and passive position. Furthermore, the rose alludes to erotic temptation, foreshadowing his succumbing to the belle dame's seduction. When the knight begins to tell his tale, however, he occupies the expected role of the hero, and more significantly, the role of the observer;

I met a lady in the meads,

Full beautiful—a faery's child,

Her hair was long, her foot was light,

And her eyes were wild. (13-16)

The knight's description of the woman constructs a scene of voyeuristic discovery; there is a mythical and enigmatic quality to her, fabricated through a dream-like and idealised image of femininity. The repeated mention of her 'wild eyes' also suggests a feral persona, as if she is an animal challenging to be conquered and tamed. As soon as the knight makes contact with

her, he begins to behave with a possessive demeanour; Farnell notes that ‘a certain form of enchainment’ resides within his act of decorating her with ‘garlands’ and ‘bracelets’ (Farnell 2011: 201), and by displaying her on his horse, he treats her like an esteemed prize. After sharing a night together, it is implied that the woman has a much darker side, as the knight - along with many other who have been enchanted by her - have been left ‘death-pale’ (line 38) and ‘starved’ (line 41) on ‘the cold hill side’ (line 44). Critics of the poem have stated that this ‘foregrounds masculine discourse’ as the knight and the speaker are guilty of portraying ‘the lady as a space onto which the masculine can write its pleasure’ (Tsujita 1995: 57) since the speaker presents the knight in a sympathetic and woeful manner, while depicting the woman as a femme fatale without a heart. This reading however, assumes that ‘Keats the Poet’ is present in both the speaker and the knight; in actuality, the aim of the poem is to trick the reader, by at first abiding to a male authoritative narrative, before making a mockery of it with the twist at the end. It does not propose that women are dangerous, but that male sexual greed and fetishisation is dangerous; the knights do not fall in love with her, they pursue her with lustful intents of ownership. What is additionally significant is that it the details of whichever atrocities the belle dame committed are left ambiguous; the reader remains unaware of her actions and whether they involved sex or violence, only given the image of the emasculated knights who cry ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci / Thee hath in thrall!’ (line 39-40). Their punishment therefore, is the loss of authoritative masculine identity: the belle dame conducts her feminist revenge by treating men in a way which they may intend on treating women; as docile and debilitated objects.

It is undeniable that there was a formidable sense of power held by the patriarchy during the Romantic era. For decades leading up to today, Keats’ poetry has been devalued due to generalised assumptions that it was lazy, superficial and unsophisticated. Most of these reviews developed from the opinion that Keats was too feminine, and so did not deserve to be taken as seriously as his peers. However, he embraced his androgynous image, whilst Wordsworth seems to be in a continuous ploy to assert and maintain a masculinity which was obsessed with the self. His low opinion of the feminine is owed to his pride, and in Tintern Abbey he would rather believe he is a completely different person compared to his past identity which was built on conventionally feminine traits. This mindset, however, is less of a showcase of intellect and more one of masculinity anxiety, eager to continually overpower women and reside as the dominating being. Keats’ on the other hand, disputes this attitude: firstly, by placing power in the feminine and punishing the masculine in La Belle Dame Sans Merci; and secondly, by viewing identity and gender as adaptable concepts which can expand creative potential if one enables their negative capability.