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Review of *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of
Female Characters in Keats's Poetry* by Karla Alwes

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

Book Review: Karla Alwes.
*Imagination Transformed: The
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Diane Long Hoeveler
*English, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

Centennials and Bicentennials have a way of producing historical reflections and reassessments in their observers. The Keats Bicentennial celebrations that are occurring across the country this year have produced just this state of meditation on Keats's literary and personal achievements. When one looks back at the progress of scholarly discussions of Keats, however, one is able to discern the typical stages that have plagued the other major Romanticists: condemnation, followed by hagiography, bafflement and confusion, and finally various forms of critical faddism. It is also somewhat disconcerting to realize that in the past two-hundred year period only one person has written a book on the evolution of the female character in Keats's poetry. Karla Alwes's book on this theme is a pioneering effort and it is tightly focused on charting the changes that occurred in the depiction of female characters in Keats's works. Whereas the book

has certain strengths, it finally does not move us to any new ground or provide any provocative insights into Keats's mind, his works, or his culture.

Alwes's *Imagination Transformed* testifies to the increasing attention that is currently being given to issues of gender and feminism in the study of canonical English romantic poetry—largely initiated by the publication of Anne Mellor's edited collection *Romanticism and Feminism* (1988). Like the recent spate of books on female characters in Byron's poetry, Blake's corpus, and Shelley's works, and my own book on romantic androgyny, this book attempts to answer the question: how and why were women represented in English romantic poetry? Alwes proposes some fairly conventional and to my mind predictable answers to these central questions, and it seems to me that her book, a close examination of virtually all of the female characters in Keats's poetry, fails because it refuses to transcend the particular to grapple with the general issues raised here—cultural misogyny and institutionalized discourse systems that rely on dichotomous representations of women to make claims for the male psyche.

Let us proceed through the book, however, and examine closely its argument and methodology. Alwes' brief Introduction surveys a few gender theorists (Elizabeth Janeway, Simone de Beauvoir, Carolyn Heilbrun, Gilbert and Gubar) on the role and representation of women in literary works, but these "theories," culled largely from works published over three decades ago, fail to provide Alwes with the theoretical underpinnings she needs to tackle the potential complexity of her topic. Alwes' basic argument is that the women in Keats's poetry were first presented as vulnerable and mortal women, but that gradually they grew wiser and more sophisticated until in the final works they were presented as omnipotent goddesses who represented the power of the imagination itself. Alwes' largest claim is that the development of these female figures parallels the intellectual and imaginative growth of the poet himself, so that we can chart Keats's growing confidence in himself and in his identity as a poet with the shifts in his presentation of women characters.

Now this claim—that women represent the imagination and sense of creativity within the male poet—has long been recognized by

virtually everyone who has written on gender in Keats. The basic problem with this definition, however, is that it fails to recognize that we are talking about androgyny when we talk about women as an internal component—the imagination—of the prior and dominating male psyche. Alwes tentatively realizes the problem at times, but tries to resolve it by claiming that the female characters are androgynous themselves. To say as she does in the Introduction that "[a]s symbol of the imagination itself—both creative and errant—Keats's women represent both the joy of creativity and the fear that Keats often felt over its possible loss" (2), presupposes that the women in the poetry are integral components of the dominant and presiding male psyches in the works. In the very same introductory paragraph, however, Alwes also claims that the female figure in his poems finally "emerges at the end of the collective works [as] a supremely androgynous figure who becomes a 'close bosom-friend' to the male figure" (2). Androgynous figures do not by their very nature stand alone; they always stand as component aspects of one greater totality. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the women in Keats's poetry are not androgynous; they are the feminine components of the prior and originating male psyche and this realization, avoided or elided by Alwes, plagues the method and argument of her study.

Chapter One examines the *Poems* of 1817, specifically "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," "Calidore," "On the Grasshopper and Cricket," and "Sleep and Poetry." According to Alwes, the women who appear in these early works are "disempowered by the same state of mortality that infects the poet who seeks escape, [and who] plays, like nature itself, the role of object to his voyeurism" (13). The early feminine in these poems is sometimes represented as a moon, sometimes a nightingale, and sometimes as the embodiment of poetry itself. These are all, of course conventional and traditional literary associations and suggest how derivative Keats's early work was. The power of his mature work, however, derives from the clear association of women with nature, and his own conflicted and ambivalent response to the demands of the life of the mind and the life of the emotions. Alwes begins to get at the complexity of the issue when she observes that the "female figure that represents the imagination will have forsaken both the earth and her borrowed sensuality, evincing a sexuality that entraps the male through his own desire for her. The desire causes his

own impotence as well because, ironically, it will originate with the search for masculine identity" (19).

Chapter Two examines *Endymion*, and by this time we have identified two major problems with the analysis. This chapter focuses almost exclusively on Endymion and Glaucus, with subsidiary discussions of Peona, Cynthia, the Indian maiden, Scylla, and Circe. In other words, in trying to focus on the female characters Alwes or at least her reader is forced to discover that these women are, alas, subsidiary components of the dominant male psyches presented in the poem. By this time in the book also we be in to feel the overwhelming presence of the notecards shuffling. A very heavy reliance on others—particularly the intellectual mentors acknowledged at the beginning of the book—begins to dominate the discussion. All of this is typical in academic books, of course, but it seems to me that it is time for all of us to go beyond defining scholarship as the cultivation of polite deferential bows to the authority figures in the field.

Chapter Three examines the mortal women of the poetry—Isabella, Madeline, and Bertha—drawn from the gothic period of Keats's career. Alwes claims that these women represent feminine passion and reveal Keats's growing realization that he needed to "accept the real as the ideal" (64). In these works Keats progressively moves toward the realization that cannot "control the imagination through romantic narratives that require the female, the representative of the poetic imagination and thus personification of an often overwhelming passion, to be mortal (87). The inability to complete "The Eve of St. Mark" is due, Alwes argues, to the mortal status of Bertha who as a mortal is simply not strong enough to invest the male with either his identity or his immortality. When she observes that "[t]he female must be strong enough to invest the male with his own identity" (93), we can only note that to do so will mean her absorption into the controlling male psyche. Again, the androgynous ideology is assumed as the controlling metaphor, while the complexity of its dynamics are not understood or applied.

Chapter Four examines "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and *Hyperion*, and focuses on the increasingly passive male hero dominated by the powerful female goddess-figure. Surely Endymion and Lorenzo were passive male figures before this period, however,

and what appears to me to constitute the change in these works is the increasingly virulent misogyny and sexual anxiety, particularly evident in "La Belle Dame." But Alwes particularly dislikes the notion of labelling this woman or any other as a "femme fatale," "an epithet that denies rather than validates the process of change, for it reduces the poet's enthrallment to self-imposed destruction rather than to a relationship expressive of the anxiety with which Keats consistently delineated his imaginative powers" (8). Such a label, she further claims, places the woman in the position of being defined only in relation to the masculine consciousness and perception. But I would claim that there is quite simply no other ontological position from which to be defined, particularly if one is studying poetry written by a man.

Chapter Five explores the presentation of the feminine in the great odes, and reads Psyche, the nightingale, the urn, "beauty" (in "Melancholy"), and the "maiden most unmeek" (in "Indolence") as the embodiments of "the masculine desire for the feminine quality of changeability" (115). The supposed amorphous and transformative power of the female culminates for Alwes in "Keats's own tenacious belief in the duality of the female nature"; in short, women possess the power simultaneously to "ruin" or "save" the hero (142). Surely this is simply another version of the "virgin/whore" syndrome that we see written large across the pages of literary history. The discussion in this chapter seemed to me the most unoriginal and probably the most derivative in the book. Virtually every paragraph contained the observations of some prior critic on these very well-worn odes. And surely this is an issue that needs to be forthrightly addressed by all young scholars working in this heavily-trodden field. As for me, I would admit that I have been as intimidated as anyone by the patrilineal presence of the critical precursors, but I have resolved to keep the ideas of others safely confined to my footnotes.

Chapter Six, "Lamia," examines the female as "characterized by the unrelenting ambivalence produced by the constant flux of an imagination in turmoil" (144). A work that seethes with ambivalence and disappointment, "Lamia" presents the woman as a goddess and a demon, the incarnation of the frightening power of the imagination to contort and manipulate everything except death. Alwes moves closest in this chapter to a biographical reading, asserting that Lamia was

modelled at least to some extent on Fanny Brawne and Keats's increasingly frustrating relationship with her. The famous letter (Rollins, *Letters* 1:341) in which Keats confesses to being always "full of Suspicions," "evil thoughts, malice spleen" while amongst women is also invoked, but neither is pushed or developed in provocative ways. This is an eminently safe book, another issue which as a profession I believe we have to examine and reassess.

The final chapter analyzes the women who appear in *The Fall of Hyperion* and "To Autumn." In these final poems we can chart Keats's "final attempts at [depicting] an imagination able to escape mutability" (161). Crucial to this attempt is the role of the female, who is "at once admonitory and forgiving," "maternal and desexualized, and finally degenerated" (161-62). Alwes sees Moneta as the "most powerful female of the poetry," largely because "she is also the most articulate" (163). But does anyone believe Moneta is a female character in her own right, speaking her own words, and not simply a representation of the muse-component in the poet's psyche? Alwes wants to believe that "Moneta is the only female able both to grant and sustain the identity sought[;] she is an evolution rather than a repetition of the theme, and the male's identity, in a desexualized female, comes from her brain" (170). I am afraid that the opposite is more accurately the case. It is the male poet's brain that is creating Moneta, not the other way around, no matter what the conventions of the poem.

Finally, Alwes asserts that because of the admonishments delivered by Moneta, Keats becomes the poet capable of creating "To Autumn," the androgynous apotheosis of the poetic imagination. The rhetoric in this section bears the traces of the romantic ideology itself: Keats's supposed success in transcending Iris "androcentric" vision is the dominant claim made throughout this discussion. But to assert that the mature Keats was radically different from the early poet who "defined the female primarily as an aberration of his male self" and who believed that visions were "fathered" rather than "mothered," is in the final analysis to engage in wishful thinking (173).

The need to try to construct a myth of progress or an evolutionary consciousness is strong in our academic culture today, but it is as faulty as any other attempt to impose our own ideologies on poets who held very different ones. It seems to me that we will

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begin to assess and appreciate Keats and Iris works in this, his bicentennial year, when we accept the poetry and its vision for what it is and what it is about, not for what we would like it to be about.