

Faeries and Visions: The Use of Medieval Conventions in Romantic Literature

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Abstract

One of the most fascinating aspects of Romantic literature is the recurrent use of medieval literary conventions as a means of illustrating a particular theme or emotional situation that is as relevant to the present as it may have been to the past. Some of the period's best works, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to John Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci," utilize a medieval setting to this specific end. Yet Coleridge and Keats both revise these respective poems in order to soften some of their original archaisms. My paper explores this interesting retraction as both fulfilling the Romantic idea of appealing to mankind on a common, comprehensive level, without any imposed separation in diction, and likewise as a means of hearkening back to an idealized past. Considering that several other authors of the Romantic period, including George Gordon, Lord Byron, Joanna Baillie, and Matthew Lewis, regarded a medieval setting as best to illuminate errors of the present or sentiments that transcend time and place, there is little doubt that there is a certain quality in medieval legend that appeals to the Romantic imagination. The illusion of a window to the past, created with no immediate reflection on the current lives of men and women, inspires the same sense of open and unoffended credulity that we find in fairytales, and allows the author to steer the reader towards a specific theme fundamental to humanity as a whole. So it is that in Romantic literature we find the earliest roots of the modern fantasy genre, mixing truth with the seeming unreal, and discovering in escapism the very feelings or difficulties of the real world that we may have taken up the book to avoid.

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1. Medieval Conventions in Romantic Literature

There is something in the myths and legends surrounding the "Dark Ages" that captivates the imagination of Romantic poets and playwrights. Many authors of the Romantic period employ medieval themes as well as language and setting in their works. The conformities associated with medieval tradition allow them to achieve that same peculiar imbalance of fantasy and realism that we find, for instance, in fairytales. So it is that, in a setting at once fantastic and otherworldly, the Romantic author may draw either on a sense of loss in what is past, or underscore the emotional quirks in human nature that continue to persist. In a more radical vein, the guise of a fantastic time-that-never-was is the perfect vehicle for subtly protesting social conventions.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was well aware of the debt he owed medieval literary tradition when he wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Indeed, *The Rime* was originally published in 1798 under a title rife with archaisms, *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*. Here, the implication of an enduring medieval current is so strong that Coleridge includes a quote from William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as he has the wedding-guest cry, "Now get thee hence, thou grey-beard Loon! / Or my Staff shall make thee skip" (15-16). The latter line is lifted entirely from Shakespeare's tragic history, alluding to the artistic tradition of an embellished past serving as a moral lesson in this Renaissance text, as Shakespeare relates the life of the historical medieval king, Leir of Britain, in an entirely

imagined context. This mode of adding didactic intrigue to a time and event long passed is a large part of Coleridge's poem as a whole. Though the revised edition of 1817 replaces the archaic "sate" (21) with "sat," and changes to lowercase particular words that had formerly been capitalized as an arcane means of emphasis, the overall medieval evocation remains constant. In the tale of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge creates a sense of mystery that lies at the heart of the medieval time period when a belief in the presence of devils and angels and the supernatural repercussions of leading a wicked life was commonplace. This defined reality of a black and white existence, of necessary virtue and sinners won to repentance, is made immediately plain by Coleridge's representation of the wedding guest. Coleridge implies that the Ancient Mariner's chosen interlocutor is a shallow fellow caught up entirely in the thrill of a passing moment, unwilling to listen or perceive anything other than amusing distraction. In the 1798 version, the Mariner collars the Wedding Guest only to be interrupted:

"But still he holds the wedding-guest—
There was a ship, quoth he—
'Nay, if thou'st got a laughsome tale,
Marinere, come with me'" (9-12).

This stanza was omitted in Coleridge's 1817 revision, but it suggests that the Mariner's listener is not chosen at random, as he is here described as an individual more open to what is laughable—a "laughsome tale" being in its very definition some preposterous narrative—than a more sobering truth, one containing a dire warning. As the 1798 *Rime* is every bit as enjoyable as its edited version, perhaps more so with colorful elements like this, it seems strange that Coleridge would feel compelled to alter it until we consider the 1798 poem's reception as well as the intended purpose of the *Lyrical Ballads* in which it was first published.

In his article "The Style and Spirit of the Elder Poets: *The Ancient Mariner*," Richard Payne writes that "the archaisms in the *Ancient Mariner* were almost universally condemned by contemporary critics of *Lyrical Ballads*" (368). William Wordsworth himself, in a 1799 letter, expresses the opinion that *The Ancyent Marinere* "has upon the whole been an injury to [*Lyrical Ballads*]...the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on" (368). This is a critical point when we consider that the *Lyrical Ballads* was intended to appeal to a broad audience. The original version's use of archaic language distanced its contemporary readers, alienating rather than establishing a sense of familiar immediacy.

Yet Coleridge was a poet much taken with mediated visions of the past. He greatly admired Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, a poem rife with medieval dialect considered archaic even by Spenser's own contemporaries (Andrew King 22). Coleridge himself confessed that the best poetry is "by no means new, nor yet of recent existence in our language...The whole 'Fairy Queen' is an almost continued instance of [poetical] beauty" (379). In his 1798 version of *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, Coleridge aimed to revive "the best tradition of the 'elder poets' [as established by] Chaucer, Spenser, and the poets of the earlier seventeenth century" (Payne 380). In the end, however, his desire to appeal to a wider audience outweighed his desire to preserve medieval linguistic archaisms. The final 1817 version retained "the spirit of the elder poets" (384) while being simultaneously more accessible to the average reader and illuminating its mystical truth through a lens of fantastical improbabilities.

In a similar fashion, John Keats's poem *La Belle Dame sans Merci* underwent a revision of its overtly medieval original 1819 conception. As Theresa Kelly argues in "Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci,'" Keats clearly "acknowledges a line of poetic indebtedness and ambition that goes back to Spenser and allegorical romance" (333). The title of the work itself may have been taken from a fifteenth-century French poem of the same title by Alain Chartier in which the persona weighs the pros and cons, whys and wherefores of courtly love in the guise of a debate between a knight and his lady. In *Belle Dame*, Keats's persona addresses a "knight-at-arms" (824) who is himself preoccupied with his lady. Yet it is here that any similarity between Keats and Chartier's respective writing ceases. *La Belle Dame* describes a knight whose object of desire is pitilessly lacking in mercy. What the concluding tone of Keats' poem may be is certainly debatable. Keats was himself the victim of unrequited love, pursuing a woman who seemed rather to take advantage of his ardor than to return it, much as the "belle dame" pursued her knight and his predecessors for no apparent reason other than to ultimately possess them in her retinue of trapped souls. Like Coleridge before him, Keats employs various medieval archaisms throughout the first version of *La Belle Dame*, as with his particular spelling of "faery's child" (l. 14) as opposed to the modernized revision of "fairy's child" in the later 1820 version. In this regard, critic Jerome McGann points out that the use of "wight" instead of "knight-at-arms" in Keats' later revision "makes the narrator of Keats's poem more objective by creating a distance between him [the narrator] and the 'wight'" (336). Perhaps the mysteriousness of a "wight," unidentified by dress or occupation, does indeed create a divide between narrator and subject that was otherwise lacking. Yet the conversion of "knight" to "wight" seems not so much a distancing

between the narrating persona and the hapless knight, but rather a means of eliminating any barriers between the past and the present that would distance the reader from the poem's subject. So while Keats employs the medieval conventions of the good knight ensnared by the feminine wiles of a magical being, he, like Coleridge, eliminates the archaisms of his early *Belle Dame*. His decision to preserve all the enchantments and supernaturalisms inherent in medieval fantasy, however, succeeds in conveying the timeless yet common experience of unrequited love.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats once again considers love from a less than ideal perspective and utilizes the conventions of the romantic medieval tradition in order to do so. The poem's primary female character, Madeline, is "like a saint / she seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest, / Save wings, for heaven" (ll. 222-224). Simultaneously, she is "like a mermaid in sea-weed" (l. 231). The combination of these two portraits creates an intense blend of the mythical and the religious, an applied syncretism hearkening to Celtic mythology and early Arthurian legend alike. Yet Keats verges on satirizing the medieval representation of true love, spinning what is, in essence, a fairytale black and twisted, hanging on the same bitter thread that twines *La Belle Dame* and her unfortunate suitor. Disappointed affection is the true reality of romance. Clearly alluding to the twin representations of unrequited love in these two respective poems, Keats has Madeline's young suitor Porphyro play "an ancient ditty, long since mute, / in Provence call'd, 'La belle dame sans mercy'" (291-292). However, in *St. Agnes* it is not a man who finds himself taken aback by the bittersweet reality of disillusioned love, but a woman. In Madeline's dreaming fancy, her lover's voice "was at sweet tremble in [her] ear, / Made tuneable with every sweetest vow" (ll. 308-309) and his "sad eyes were spiritual and clear" (l. 310). But on waking he has become a figure "pallid, chill, and drear" (l. 311). What is curious here is Madeline's use of "sad" in describing Porphyro's look, an intimation that it is far better for men and women to dwell in that unattainable vision of what should be rather than face the harsh disappointment of cold reality. As critic Catherine Maxwell points out, in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, reality itself is pregnant with "latent ambiguities...which suggest that the story is less than ideal" (992), leading to the conjecture that Porphyro himself may be the *Belle Dame* who will only destroy the object of his affection. In this subtle yet satirical fashion, Keats redefines medieval chivalric romance with uncompromising skepticism and so overturns an idealized vision of love.

When George Gordon, Lord Byron draws upon medieval literary conventions in *Manfred* he, like Keats, subverts an idealized past but not to throw into sharp relief the bittersweet pathos of shared human experience. Instead, through the medium of a fantastical play, he challenges the social conventions of his time, disguising his intent with castles and magic in order to make his criticisms seem more circumstantial than deliberate. The character of Manfred is that of a feudal lord who has committed unspeakable crimes against man and nature; he caused the death of his sister and is often to be found in the company of devils, due to his proficiency in the dark arts. In keeping with medieval conventions, Faust-like, he ought to be damned to Hell, but Byron revolts against such an inevitable end. In *Magic and English Romanticism*, Anya Taylor describes Byron's perspective towards occultism as not so much a source of control over elemental spirits as it is an assertion of individualism, for "magic...elevates the superman over his inferiors" (224). Byron "uses magic to lift the extraordinary individual," and to this end creates a character who will not admit society's scorn or praise, being himself a "lonely superman, [who] refuses to conform" (224). Manfred, she argues, is "an allegory of man: the disappointed magus [who] asserts his freedom by summoning elemental forces, [rejecting] the conventional consolations of religion" (229). If this is the case, and Manfred does indeed challenge moral conventions, particularly that of the Christian worldview though the narrative context is clearly medieval, then it is little wonder that even the good Abbot who attends the dying sorcerer is uncertain whether Manfred's soul is saved or lost as he reflects that Manfred's "soul hath ta'en its earthless flight; / Whither? I dread to think; but he is gone" (412-413). "Dread" may imply a certain horror in conjecture, but even so the fact remains that the Abbot is unwilling to condemn Manfred to Hell. Byron's sympathy for his antihero may well be born of his own resistance to Christian condemnation of his rakish lifestyle, for as critic Raymond Chapman puts it, "medievalism was becoming less of a remote fancy and more of a protest against the spirit of the age" (38). By making use of traditional medieval figures such as the virtuous Abbot and kindly shepherd, and pitting them against the more ambiguous character of Manfred, Byron could be challenging Christianity's condemnation of certain vices, and in so doing, justifying his own lifestyle without making a more obvious and consequently more personal allusion to it and inviting an unwelcome, closer scrutiny of himself.

There are other examples of medieval influence in Romantic literature, of course. Joanna Baillie, a popular playwright of the period, might be said to critique England's corrupt aristocracy in *De Monfort*, as she relates the bitter tragedy that destroys the eponymous antihero who, in clinging to a tradition where serfs never advance beyond the station they are born in, ultimately destroys himself. Coleridge may have been compelled by a reverence for medieval literary artistry, but finally he too uses the traditional medieval setting primarily as a means of addressing hopes for spiritual and thereby social enlightenment. No matter how magical and fantastical the play or poem, these authors, however subtly, weave a didactical intent into their narratives in the certainty that, after all, the best way to instruct is not by direct confrontation and condemnation, but from behind the fanciful tapestry of make-believe.

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