

# Barbara Kowalik

---

## Those Wholesome Feasts: John Keats's Green Medievalism

---

Acta Philologica nr 47, 37-49

---

2015

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

*Barbara Kowalik*

Uniwersytet Warszawski

## ***Those Wholesome Feasts: John Keats's Green Medievalism***

The Romantic poet John Keats imbibed stories of the past like ambrosia, they were to him delicious nourishment – “All lovely tales that we have heard or read – / An endless fountain of immortal drink, / Pouring unto us from the heaven’s brink” (*Endymion* ll. 23–25).<sup>1</sup> Keats particularly enjoyed medieval tales, those he knew from Chaucer and the Chaucerian tradition and from the Robin Hood ballads; among his favourite modern writers, in turn, were those who had, like him, been attracted to the Middle Ages: Spenser, Shakespeare, and Chatterton. Keats often describes poetic creation through an ingestion metaphor. For example, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, which revives the medieval dream-vision convention, the narrator enters a beautiful arbour and before falling asleep partakes of the scattered remains of a divine banquet of summer fruits and, like a “wandered bee,” sips of “a cool vessel of transparent juice” (l. 42). The way the speaker figures himself and the act of poetic creation within the framework of a healthy ecosystem would support the critical observation that Keats displays “a characteristic romantic sense for the interdependence of mind and body” (Kroeber 89). The motif of wholesome nourishment appears also in Keats’s poems of nostalgic retreat into the Middle Ages, where the poet’s present-day concerns are couched in medieval-like literary idiom and imagery. In this paper, I will discuss some of these poems to illustrate what I would call Keats’s pastoral or green medievalism.

First, the notion of green medievalism needs a brief explanation and justification. Although, “[i]n its simplest sense, medievalism refers to the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter and inspiration, and in doing so, explicitly or implicitly, by comparison or by contrast, comment on the artist’s sociocultural milieu” (Pugh and Weisl 1), it is now generally acknowledged that there have been more than one medievalism. Umberto Eco was probably the first critic to distinguish between its various kinds. In his essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,” published in the collection *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), Eco lists “Ten Little Middle Ages,” including for example the Middle Ages as a pretext, as a sight of ironic revisitation, or as a barbaric age. As the study of medievalism has flourished ever since, it has become

---

1 All quotations from Keats’s verse follow his *Complete Poems* edited by John Barnard. Since the analysis is based on numerous poems and abounds in quotations, for the sake of clarity all poem titles in text are set off with italics rather than put in quotation marks.

increasingly apparent that Eco's categories are by no means sufficient, exhaustive, or transparent. Some of them, such as the Middle Ages of Romanticism, disguise, in fact, diverse and complex phenomena. In this article, I would like to address John Keats's green medievalism, which I see as an important form of Romantic medievalism, defined by Eco in somewhat restrictive, Gothic terms of "stormy castles and their ghosts" (69).

Although reading earlier literature from modern ecological perspectives is controversial for "in that it applies a contemporary political view to past poets and their poetry [it] might *seem* anachronistic at best or pure projection at worst" (Lussier 393), yet this kind of "an ecologically oriented literary criticism" has been encouraged (Kroeber 1), deemed "necessary" (Lussier 393), and fruitfully practised ever since Jonathan Bate's influential book *Romantic Ecology* was published in 1991. Thus, for example, a volume of *Romantic Studies* has been devoted to "Green Romanticism" (1996). Literary ecocriticism has led to "the rereading, through modern ecological perspectives, of earlier literature, such as the pastoral, that engaged with our relationship with the natural environment" (Gifford 5). The poetry of John Keats has also been reinterpreted in this context, as in Jonathan Bate's innovative reading of Keats's ode *To Autumn* as an ecosystem.

### The Motif of the Feast

In Book I of *Endymion*, a banquet is prepared by the shepherd community for the god Pan: the ritual feast takes place in the midst of primeval forest on the sides of a hill, with trees overhung with "precious fruits" (I. l. 66), when "the dairy pails / Bring home increase of milk" and "the year / Grows lush in juicy stalks" (I. ll. 44–46), and before "the bees / Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas" (I. ll. 51–52). The priest carries a white vase "of mingled wine" in his right hand, and in his left "a basket full / Of all sweet herbs," including wild thyme, bay leaves, and parsley (I. ll. 54–56), and of these "teeming sweets" enkindles "sacred fire" and gives the wine to the earth to drink (I. ll. 224–27). The hymn sung to Pan catalogues the produce that willingly offers itself in advance to the shepherd-god, including the "ripened fruitage" of fig trees, the "golden honeycombs" of "yellow-girted bees," the "fairest-blossomed beans and popped corn," and the "low creeping strawberries" (I. ll. 252–57). This pastoral, pre-agrarian feast recreates the myth of natural, blissful production and consumption of food and provides "an image of ecological wholeness," to use Jonathan Bate's words, wherein nature and culture are inextricably interrelated ("John Keats" 261).

Feasting can also be for Keats a prerequisite to melancholy. In the *Ode on Melancholy*, Delight, the reverse of Melancholy, is depicted in terms of blissful consumption, in a startling image of the "the bee-mouth" that "sips" (I. l. 24), and it is stated that the shrine of Melancholy can be "seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine" (I. ll. 27–28). A feast invariably accompanies Keats's descriptions of love as well. In *Endymion*, "gentle girls [...] in

a little cup / Will put choice honey for a favoured youth" (I. ll. 209–11) and erotic passion is boldly evoked through the metaphor of eating and drinking: "She took me like a child of suckling time, / And cradled me in roses" (III. ll. 456–57), "half awake I sought her smooth arms and lips, to slake / My greedy thirst with nectarous camel-draughts" (III. ll. 478–79); in the bower of Adonis, Endymion is invited to a gorgeous feast: purple wine "alive with sparkles," juicy pears, sweetest cream, softest plums, and "manna picked from Syrian trees" (II. ll. 441–52). In *The Eve of St Agnes*, a poem recreating a medieval Gothic atmosphere, the lover Porphyro plays the lute and lays out for Madeline a banquet as a prologue to lovemaking: a heap of candied apple, quince, plum, and melon, sooth jellies, lucent syrups sweetened with cinnamon, exotic oriental fruit like manna and dates, and spiced dainties (ll. 264–70).

An interesting if weird variation of the feast of love occurs in *Isabella*, where the heroine buries the head of her murdered lover in a garden-pot of "sweet basil" (l. 416), which she moistens and feeds with her own tears to make it grow "thick, and green, and beautiful" and smell "more balmy than its peers / Of basil-tufts in Florence"; the plant splendidly spreads its small "perfumed" leaves (ll. 426–27, 432). The poem closely follows its source, a tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which, however, has been adapted by Keats in accordance with his own mania for edible plants. Interestingly, basil is not only an indispensable element of Italian cuisine, the basic ingredient of the pesto sauce, but in the Mediterranean region fresh basil leaves have also been a traditional symbol of death and sensual love and have been used in magic as an aphrodisiac (Ferris 48–49). Isabella's apparently ridiculous action can therefore be interpreted as a way of achieving unity with her lover.

Keats uses the ingestion metaphor for poetic inspiration and to describe various emotional states, from happiness and erotic infatuation to melancholy. The feasts frequently depicted in his poetry, whether divine, angelic, paradisaical, or mortal, in primeval, ancient, or medieval times, are invariably composed of natural ingredients, mostly fruit, spices, and herbs, preferably wild grown, and of wine or juice for drink. Honey collected by wild bees is a regular component of this pristine banquet. Bees occupy a central place in Keats's imagination, where the poetic persona humbly identifies with "the bee-mouth," underscoring ingestion as a principal mode of poetic creation but also of every creature's life. These Keatsian feasts embody what Jonathan Bate describes as the co-existence and inter-assimilation of the self and society with an ecosystem ("John Keats" 259).<sup>2</sup>

2 Lionel Trilling observes that the most intense experiences in Keats's life were connected with food (16–18). Keats's biographer Robert Gittings attributes the omnipresence of food in Keats's writing to his ancestry of innkeepers: his "sensuous and almost schoolboy preoccupation with eating and drinking, and his celebration of both in poetry and prose, could have the simple explanation that these were the actual business of his forebears" (29). In an ecocritical reading, however, Keats's wholesome feasts can be seen as a way of inscribing poetry and other cultural, human preoccupations into the cycle of natural food production and consumption.

## Green Eating in Keats's 'Medieval' Poems

Honey was also one of the favourite foodstuffs of Hildegard of Bingen, a medieval polymath: a Benedictine abbess, visionary, mystic, composer, philosopher, advisor to rulers, writer of theological, botanical, and medicinal texts, as well as letters, liturgical songs, and poems, supervisor of manuscript illumination, and founder of phytotherapy. Hildegard recognized and exploited the healing properties of honey, which in her view were incomparable to those of any other foodstuff (Ferris 91–94). Her attitude to natural products amidst her numerous and varied activities is a vivid example of the wholeness of medieval culture and nature and is as such (rather than as a specific source for Keats's poetry) brought into the present discussion.

I read the motif of the wholesome feast in Keats's poetry as a condensed expression of nostalgia for the Middle Ages. In his short medieval-inspired poems, Keats employs the image to evoke a lost golden era. In *Robin Hood* the evocation of "spicy ale" (l. 32) and "honey" produced by maid Marian's "wild bees" (ll. 46–47) is preceded by a sound sequence encompassing the quietude of "the forest's whispering fleeces" (l. 9), "the bugle" (l. 11), the twanging bow (l. 12), "jesting" (l. 18), "some old hunting ditty" thrummed "on an empty can" (ll. 26–27), "the merry morris din" (l. 33), and "the song of Gamelyn" (l. 34) to produce a vision of "those days" that are irrevocably "gone away" (l. 1), when the life of nature and of humans were harmoniously intertwined, as implied particularly by the "mid-forest laugh" repeated by "lone Echo" (ll. 15–16). The orchestration of different sounds on an equal basis of enumeration suggests the absence of hierarchy and subjugation. The human sounds betoken such joy, freedom, and fellowship as is prerequisite to singing, dancing, music-making, and story-telling, implicitly far away from the noise and injustice of the city and state, while the wild bees seem to go as unoppressed as the humans. Maid Marian presides gently over this world like Diana, originally a spirit of the woods and wild nature, reinterpreted by Jonathan Bate as "a spirit of ecological wholeness" ("John Keats" 260).

*Robin Hood* ends with an attempt to recreate the spirit of the medieval past through a merry song composed by the two Romantic poets – John Keats and his friend and addressee John Reynolds, himself author of *Robin Hood* sonnets. The Romantic poets' called-for imitation of old carols and lays – "So it is – yet let us sing, / Honour [...] to bold Robin Hood, / Sleeping in the underwood! / Honour to maid Marian, / And to all the Sherwood-clan! / Though their days have hurried by / Let us two a burden try" (ll. 49, 57–62) – may be interpreted as defining a programme for contemporary poetry in terms of green medievalism.

In another *Robin Hood* lyric, *Lines Composed on the Mermaid Tavern*, Keats evokes the medieval golden age in similar terms of carefree leisure and comradeship, though the feast is transferred from the forest to an old tavern in Cheapside, claimed to be the choicest "Elysium" for "souls of Poets dead and gone" (ll. 1–2). Here the clan of Sherwood is replaced by the community of bards, whose heavenly banquet in the style of *Robin Hood* implies and elevates a green notion of poetry. The sweet wine from Canary Islands served by the tavern's host (l. 6), "Sipping beverage divine,

/ And pledging with contented smack / The Mermaid in the Zodiac" (ll. 20–22), accompanies Robin Hood's fare, which is suggested to be superior even to "fruits of Paradise":

Or are fruits of Paradise  
 Sweeter than those dainty pies  
 Of venison? O generous food!  
 Dressed as though bold Robin Hood  
 Would, with his maid Marian,  
 Sup and bouse from horn and can.  
 (ll. 7–12)

This feast is neither vegetarian nor utterly unrefined, yet the deer's flesh dressed à la Robin Hood is apparently as fresh and pure as possible and the service is wonderfully simple.

In the *Ode to a Nightingale*, in turn, the poetic persona, disillusioned and sick with the world, yearns after a green space of sunshine, song, dance, and mirth, after "a draught of vintage [...] that hath been / Cooled a long age in the deep-delvèd earth, / Tasting of Flora and the country green" (ll. 11–13), and desires to retreat into a recognisably medieval space of "Provençal song," performed by the troubadours (l. 14). In this image, the longed-for intimate bonding with the earth, envisaged in terms of penetrating its inside, mediated through a natural life-maintaining substance, and indicative of Keats's ecological consciousness is again associated with the medieval period.<sup>3</sup> Wine, a recurrent motif in Keats's poetry, which extols especially Mediterranean wines, was highly valued by Hildegard of Bingen, whose monastery was surrounded with vineyards and who based most of her recipes on wine for she appreciated its healing properties, definitely preferring it to water and recommending wine particularly against depression and tiredness (Ferris 85–88). Keats in the *Ode* likewise longs for the restorative power of wine, stemming from a miraculous alchemy of the vine and the soil.

The apparent idealisation of the medieval world in these poems, through the *topos* of the golden era with its associate elegiac note, the sense of irretrievable loss, goes hand in hand with an implicit criticism of the present age.<sup>4</sup> If Robin and Marian were transported into the modern world, suggests the speaker of *Robin Hood*, they would go crazy: "He would swear" to see all his oaks fallen "beneath the dockyard

3 For a reading of the *Ode to a Nightingale* in the context of incipient cultural consumerism see Tagore, who finds in the *Ode* "one of the most elaborate and complex representations of a body that experiences life through consumption, but then incurs the risk of being consumed by this very process" (67–68).

4 Evans points out that a "nostalgia for the 'vanishing' peasant lifestyle" was a main concern not only of John Keats but of William Blake as well; both poets "contrasted urban alienation with the 'sublimity' of nature and 'natural man'" (248–49). Veronica Ortenberg observes that Blake was "the first to place himself strongly in the anti-industrialisation camp" and was to be followed by "so many later writers, philosophers, Pre-Raphaelite painters and William Morris" (45).

strokes” and “rotted on the briny seas” (ll. 43–45), while she would weep that “her wild bees / Sang not to her” and would be surprised to find out “that honey / Can’t be got without hard money!” (ll. 46–48).<sup>5</sup> Keats deplores the economy which narrowly exploits nature to serve selfish human pursuits. As has been inferred from his ode *To Autumn*, he envisaged “a larger economy than the human one,” where “bees are there to pollinate flowers, not to produce honey for humans to consume” (Bate, “John Keats” 259).

Keats’s vision of the Middle Ages actually parallels that of Geoffrey Chaucer’s short poem *The Former Age* which likewise employs the *topos* of a lost golden era, initiated already by the antique poets Ovid and Boethius but locates the happy age before Nimrod, known as the founder of cities and builder of the tower of Babel. Keats, on the other hand, identifies the golden age with Chaucer’s time, as indicated by the mention of the song of Gamelyn in *Robin Hood*, which was attributed to Chaucer in Keats’s time, and by the phrase *grené shawe*, borrowed from *The Friar’s Tale*.<sup>6</sup> Both the medieval and the Romantic poet juxtapose the glories of the past with present-day decay in comparable terms, relying principally on food imagery. Chaucer’s depiction of the former age opens with the statement that first people “helde hem payed of the frutes that they ete” (l. 3), which are subsequently described as scarce in spite of being but food for pigs, “pounage” (l. 7), specifically acorns, beechnuts, hawthorn berries, or an apple for a change (l. 37). We are told that first people knew only wild corn, which they husked and ate moderately, “nat half ynough” (l. 11). The vineyard at that time lay unpruned and untilled, says Chaucer, and nobody yet ground spices in the mortar, so people did not drink spiced and sweetened wine, “clarre,” and did not have spiced sauces, “galantyne” (l. 16), but drank “water of the colde welle” (l. 8). Lacking fat foodstuffs, people were not overindulged with excess. Not much less than Keats is Chaucer aware of the health and ethical aspects of a more natural lifestyle, even though he envisions the latter in much more ascetic terms.

Finally, in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, the motif of the feast marks the temporary fulfilment of a medieval-like romance of a knight-at-arms and a fairy mistress: “She found me roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna-dew” (ll. 25–26). The love’s repast is perfectly natural, consisting of roots of wild plants whose names are not given, suggesting unknown species, perhaps aphrodisiacs or ingredients of love-potions, and of course wild honey. The compound *manna-dew*, found also in *Endymion* (I. l. 766), suggests the mysterious food which God gave the Israelites in the desert (cf. Exodus 16.21), but Keats apparently thought of manna as an actual fruit. In his ballad, the sad end of the fairy romance is painfully contrasted with the imagery of nature’s plenty at harvest time, “The squirrel’s granary is full, / And the harvest’s done” (ll. 6–8).

5 For a reading of Keats’s Robin Hood poems in the biographical context and as a response to modern capitalism as well as to the old poetic tradition see Mitchell.

6 For more information on Chaucer’s influence on Keats see Lau.

## Echoes of *The Floure and the Leafe* in Keats's Poetry

Keats's fascination with the fifteenth-century dream-vision poem of unknown authorship, wrongly attributed in his time to Chaucer, is recorded chiefly in the sonnet *Written on a Blank Space at the End of "The Floure and the Lefe,"* but other echoes of that late-medieval love allegory in his verse are also worth mentioning. The dream-vision genre as such evidently greatly appealed to Keats for he adapted it also in the meditative poem *Sleep and Poetry*, whose epigraph is taken from *The Floure and the Leafe*, lines 17–21. The lines describe the narrator's failure to fall asleep: "As I lay in my bed slepe full unmete / Was unto me, but why that I ne might / Rest I ne wist, for there n'as earthly wight / [As I suppose] had more of hertis ese / Than I, for I n'ad sicknesse nor disese" (*The Floure and the Leafe* ll. 17–21). The closing emphasis in this passage on the absence of sickness and disease is probably what Keats took notice of, both as a man educated in medicine and somebody with a long family history of struggle against terminal illness, but he also puts his finger on the paradox inherent in the medieval poem: its being a dream-poem wherein the narrator fails to fall asleep.

Keats's own poem follows the medieval convention of insomnia. The opening invocation to Sleep, implored as "Soft closer of our eyes! / Low murmurer of tender lullabies! / Light hoverer around our happy pillows!" (ll. 11–13), is reminiscent of the way the sleepless narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* calls upon the god of sleep Morpheus and promises anyone a feather bed in exchange for sleep (ll. 231–69). As in *The Floure and the Leafe*, continuing the Chaucerian tradition, the insomnia in Keats's verse leads to poetic creation, whose nature is the poet's chief concern, as visible in the long central invocation to the gods of Sleep and Poesy, where Keats acknowledges the importance of repose: "yet I must not forget / Sleep, quiet with his poppy coronet, / For what there may be worthy in these rhymes / I partly owe to him" (ll. 347–50). It is worth noting the poppy, to which Keats frequently refers in his poetry. This wild flower's significance seems to be here the same as in the ode *To Autumn* as interpreted by Jonathan Bate: the poppy is mentioned "not only for aesthetic effect [...] but also as a reminder of medicinal value. 'The fume of poppies' makes us think of opiates against pain and care" ("John Keats" 259).

The initial lines of *Sleep and Poetry* parallel the *reverdie* openings of medieval dream-poems. The images of a gentle "wind in summer," or "the pretty hummer / That stays one moment in an open flower" and "buzzes cheerily from bower to bower"; of "a green island, far from all men's knowing," the "healthful [...] leafiness of dales," and the "nest of nightingales" (ll. 1–7) have been summoned from "a high romance" (l. 10) and echo, in particular, the conventional opening of *The Floure and the Leafe*, where spring arrives with "many an wholesome aire," clothing every plain with "new greene," and where "small floures" spring "here and there in field and in mede," while "out of every seede / Springeth the hearbe" (ll. 6–12).<sup>7</sup> As with the poppy, the medicinal effect of this *locus amoenus* is equally important as its other functions: of providing a setting for a romantic story, "a bowery nook" which will

7 All quotations from *The Floure and the Leafe* follow Derek Pearsall's edition of the poem.



be “elysium – an eternal book / Whence I may copy many a lovely saying / About the leaves, and flowers – about the playing / Of nymphs in woods, and fountains; and the shade” (ll. 63–67); and of creating a highly aesthetic surroundings – by analogy with the wall paintings, statues, edifices, and arbours that abound in medieval dream visions, Keats describes at the end of *Sleep and Poetry* the numerous works of art, including paintings by Poussin, Claude, and Titian, which surrounded him in the library of Leigh Hunt’s Hampstead cottage where he was spending the visionary night. At its end, even though it was “a sleepless night” (l. 410), the narrator, like the narrative persona in the Chaucerian dream-poem tradition, is ready to write his vision down: “I rose refreshed, and glad, and gay, / Resolving to begin that very day / These lines” (ll. 411–13).

Echoes of *The Floure and the Leafe* appear also in Keats’s short verse, notably in the *Ode to a Nightingale*. As Gittings informs us, Keats was rereading the medieval poem in John Dryden’s modernization (463), so Dryden’s phrases reappear in the *Ode* (e. g. Dryden’s *with Extasy of Bliss* is paralleled by Keats’s nightingale singing *in such an ecstasy*, and both texts refer to hawthorn and pastoral eglantine). The speaker of the *Ode* retreats into the nightingale’s abode, which is the kind of secluded pastoral retreat familiar from *The Floure and the Leafe*. Furthermore, Keats’s sonnet *A Dream, after reading Dante’s Episode of Paolo and Francesca* makes use of the dream convention while its storm, whereupon Keats’s persona imprudently yet so romantically identifies with the lovers, is reminiscent of the sudden storm in *The Floure and the Leafe*. Finally, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* has a kind of dream-within-dream framework recalling medieval dream narratives as it envisages a knight telling “the latest dream I ever dreamt” (l. 35).

### A Poem as Garden: Keats’s Sonnet on *The Floure and the Leafe*

In the sonnet inspired by *The Floure and the Leafe*, Keats enters the sweet-smelling, healing space of a medieval arbour and joins the knights and maidens of the vision. In his dreamy desire “to lie meekly upon the grass” (ll. 12–13), the lyrical persona seems to side with the company of the Flower, but more generally the sonnet strives to recreate the atmosphere of the medieval piece. What about that belated and derivative dream allegory fascinated Keats so much? The medieval narrative is from the start steeped in green and presided over by a feminine nature spirit, first manifest in the sleepless yet dreamy female narrator and then present in various forms of femininity throughout the vision. Thus, the narrator walks out of her chamber into a pleasant grove of great oaks laden with new leaves, where the grass is fresh of hue, and follows a narrow, untrodden path overgrown with grass and weeds to enter a delightful garden, shaped like a pretty parlour and enclosed by an impenetrable hedge of sycamore and eglantine thick as a castle wall, where the short grass feels like green velvet under foot. It is from this green room that she observes a rich field and its pastimes. The sweet scents of spring plants, particularly eglantine and a fair medlar tree in blossom, are said to have a healing power. A goldfinch leaps

from bough to bough, eating here and there of sweet buds and flowers, and then starts singing. A nightingale sitting in a fresh green laurel tree, whose smell mingles deliciously with that of eglantine, answers with her own song. The narrator, ravished with pleasure, declares that the “wholsome savours” (l. 123) and the natural music were more comforting to her than anything in the world and far more pleasant than “meat or drinke” (l. 121).

The medieval poem refers to the cult of the flower and the leaf, an amorous courtly game popular in France, in which each side argued the relative merits of the flower and the leaf. In the poem, the latter's followers are dressed in white and wear on their heads garlands woven of fresh green leaves. The ladies dance and sing in a circle; their wreaths are made of laurel, woodbine, or *Agnus castus*. The knights-at-arms joust; their garlands are made of leaves of evergreen oaks or laurel; some carry in their hands bright branches of laurel, oaks, hawthorn, or woodbine, and many more which the narrator cannot recall. Afterwards the company take shelter together in the shade of a beautiful laurel tree and dance reverently around it.

The adherents to the Flower, on the other hand, are dressed in green and wear chaplets of red and white flowers; they roam together, the ladies and unarmed knights hand in hand, accompanied by a group of minstrels playing diverse musical instruments, and then dance around a tuft overspread with flowers, located in the middle of the field, and sing a song in praise of the daisy. However, their flowers soon wither in the heat of the day and are beaten by the wind of the storm and they themselves get scorched by the sun and faint, and then get dripping wet and bruised in the summer storm of rain and hail.

In this allegory, the cult of the Leaf elevates chastity or else fidelity in love, and honour and valour in battle, whereas the worship of the Flower signifies fickleness and flirtation as well as idleness, with the storm symbolizing the extremes of passion. As the narrator's fictional guide, a lady in white, explains, the Leaf signifies the ideal of business, particularly in the field of chivalry, which flourished in the past and was most nobly manifest in the Nine Worthy or, closer to the present, in the Order of the Garter, whereas the Flower stands for the realm of Flora and idleness.

Nevertheless, the followers of the Leaf readily sympathize with and try to soothe the hurts of the lovers incurred in the storm. They lead them to a hedge, where they make great fires to dry their clothes, while of the herbs growing nearby they make sunburn lotions, “Very good and wholsome ointments new” (l. 409), and go about gathering “Pleasant salades, which they made hem eat / For to refresh their great unkindly heat” (ll. 412–13). Finally, the queen of the Leaf invites the lady of the Flour to dine with her, providing her with company as well as with horses and all necessities, so that the two parties depart from the meadow together singing pleasantly. Likewise, the nightingale and the goldfinch get seated each on the hand of respectively the Lady of the Leaf and the Lady of the Flower and start singing again, presumably in honour of the respective sets of values.

Although the narrator declares in the end her own temporary adherence to the Leaf, the moral message is not hard pressed home.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a balance is achieved, symbolized by the simultaneous birdsong and the mirroring colour schemes of the parties: the white garments adorned with varicoloured precious stones like rubies and pearls and the green garlands of the Leaf, on the one hand, and the green garments and the garlands of red and white flowers, on the other. A similar search for common ground between opposite ways appears also in *The Assembly of Gods*, another fifteenth-century poem, where the “monacorde” (l. 7), agreement, between Reason and Sensuality is sought and found, reflecting perhaps a wider trend in late-medieval allegorical narrative.

From the summary of the poem it should be quite apparent that the healing effect of nature is as important here as its symbolic significance and aesthetic impact. Underlying *The Floure and the Leafe* is the medieval lore of the medicinal properties of the wild plants of the meadow, of which the herbal lotions and the refreshing salads are made. As notes Derek Pearsall, the poem’s modern editor, the *salades* were probably made of parsley and lettuce, which were recommended for those who were overheated, while lettuce was also thought to be an anti-aphrodisiac (l. 412n). Another likely ingredient of the salads and lotions would be, I suggest, humble plantain, growing in every meadow and widely used in popular herbal medicine for centuries. Plantain was applied to wounds and blisters and its fresh leaves were added as an ingredient to salads. Hildegard of Bingen recommended it for reducing fever (Ferris 75).

In addition, Hildegard knew the healing properties of precious stones, like the authors of popular medieval lapidaries. The abundance of jewels on the clothing of the party of the Leaf may signify, among other things, a healing power. The “diamonds” they are wearing (l. 149) were regarded by Hildegard as the most precious of stones, which only those pure themselves could wear and use for healing, and are thus in harmony with the purity of the party of the Leaf, but more practically the diamond was also thought to be capable of curing physical and spiritual wounds, reducing fever, protecting against madness, mitigating all kinds of abuse, including sexual passion, and fighting evil (Ferris 117–18).

Keats’s response to *The Floure and the Leafe* was enthusiastic. “What mighty power has this gentle story!” he exclaims in his sonnet (l. 10). It is unlikely that he was captivated by the quality of the verse, which according to Derek Pearsall is not very high, or by the moral in favour of the Leaf for, feeling the cold raindrops on his own face, his persona identifies rather with the company of the Flower.<sup>9</sup>

8 This tolerant attitude of the medieval poem is particularly manifest in comparison with its eighteenth-century reception by Dryden and Pope, as discussed by Kathleen Forni (382–85).

9 The fact that Keats, identifying with the company of the Flower and perceiving the other group somewhat condescendingly in terms of “white simplicity,” implicitly sympathizes with the lovers has been overlooked by critics. Kathleen Forni, for example, suggests that Keats in his response to the medieval poem “is drawn to the descriptions of pure communion with nature, an identification which in the increasingly industrialized, fallen world of the eighteenth century represented an Edenic past” (386). While this observation is fundamentally true, it is also true that in contrast with Dryden, whose translation of the poem is overly didactic, Keats’s sonnet implies an ethical revaluation in line with his own Romantic sensibility.

Instead, Keats was charmed, I would suggest, by an interweaving and mutual assimilation of culture (the courtly festivities) and nature. He transposes the latter's soothing action onto the poem itself: "This pleasant tale is like a little copse: / The honeyed lines do freshly interlace / To keep the reader in so sweet a place" (ll. 1–3).<sup>10</sup> Keats describes the medieval poem in almost medicinal terms of providing healing and comfort (this was actually a requirement of medieval poetics, followed by authors of story collections like Chaucer and Boccaccio). *The Floure and the Leafe* has, to use Derek Pearsall's phrase, "the air of a modern guide to wholesome living" (2).

In his own sonnet, Keats expands the original poem's natural imagery by adding the images of "the tender-leggèd linnet" (l. 8) and "the mournful robins" (l. 14). His excitement is not only about the balsamic effect of nature, though, but concerns, rather, an all-embracing mingling of the natural and the cultivated, the latter being visible in the manmade qualities of the arbour or the dazzling trappings of the two parties, whose clothes and armour are made of the finest materials, follow the latest fashions, and are lavishly embroidered and decorated with jewels. Also, the royal retinues of the Flower and the Leaf, the music-making, the performance of dance-songs currently in vogue, a roundel and a *bergerette*, enrich the vision of the courtly festival which so enchanted Keats. His sensitivity to the spectacular late-medieval aesthetics<sup>11</sup> was in tune with his own aesthetic sensibility and the aestheticism of his epoch – the way of evoking light and handling decorative details in *The Floure and the Leafe* arguably foreshadows the style of the Pre-Raphaelites (Sampson 103). Yet ultimately it is not any single aspect of the medieval poem but rather an interdependence of them all, as in a healthy ecosystem, that explains Keats's fondness for this "gentle" story.

It has been said that Romanticism "challenges the modern separation of culture and nature" (Bate, "John Keats" 257), but Keats's response to the Middle Ages calls attention to an even earlier, pre-modern wholeness. At the centre of both is the power to heal and sustain, in accordance with Keats's view of the poet as "physician to all men" that "pours out a balm upon the World" (*The Fall of Hyperion* I. ll. 190, 201).<sup>12</sup>

10 This observation is also made by Kathleen Forni: "Keats transposes the poetic narrative into spatial terms; reading the poem is like sitting in the bower. Its interlaced 'honed lines', like the branches and tendrils of the herber, protect and soothe the narrator" (387).

11 A similar aesthetics is visible in Malory's descriptions of the feasts of Sankgreal. Compare, for instance, the following passage: "And than rode sir Melyas into an olde foreyste And than he cam into a fayre medow, and there was a fayre lodge of bowys. And than he aspyed in that lodge a chayre wherein was a crowne of golde, ryche and subtyly wrought. Also there was clothys coverde uppon the erthe, and many delycious metis sette thereon" (Malory 529).

12 For a discussion of Keats as a pastoral poet see Gifford (91–94).

## Works Cited

- Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Bate, Jonathan. "John Keats's *To Autumn* as an Ecosystem." *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Ed. Laurence Coupe. London: Routledge, 2000. 256–61.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Former Age: The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. 650–51.
- The Assembly of Gods*. Ed. Jane Chance. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS, 1999.
- Eco, Umberto. "Dreaming of the Middle Ages." *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*. Trans. William Weaver. London: Vintage, 1998 [1986]. 61–72.
- Evans, Timothy H. "Folklore as Utopia: English Medievalists and the Ideology of Revivalism." *Western Folklore* 47.4 (1988): 245–68.
- Ferris, Paul. *Z apteki świętej Hildegardy z Bingen*. Trans. Magdalena Foss-Kita. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Esprit, 2007.
- The Floure and the Leafe; The Assembly of Ladies; The Isle of Ladies*. Ed. Derek Pearsall. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS, 1990.
- Forni, Kathleen. "The Swindling of Chaucerians and the Critical Fate of *The Floure and the Leafe*." *The Chaucer Review* 31.4 (1997): 379–400.
- Gifford, Terry. *Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Gittings, Robert. *John Keats*. London: Penguin Books, 1971 [1968].
- Keats, John. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Barnard. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979 [1972].
- Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Lau, Beth. "Keats's Markings in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 43 (1994): 39–55.
- Lussier, Mark S. "Blake's Deep Ecology." *Green Romanticism*. Spec. issue of *Studies in Romanticism* 35.3 (1996): 393–408.
- Malory, Thomas. *Works*. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Mitchell, Thomas R. "Keats's 'Outlawry' in 'Robin Hood.'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 34.4 (1994): 753–69.
- Ortenberg, Veronica. *In Search of the Holy Grail: The Quest for the Middle Ages*. London: humbledon continuum, 2006.
- Pearsall, Derek. Introduction. *The Floure and the Leafe; The Assembly of Ladies; The Isle of Ladies*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS, 1990. 1–3.
- Pugh, Tison, and Angela Jane Weisl. *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Sampson, George. *Historia literatury angielskiej w zarysie*. Trans. Piotr Graff. Warszawa: PWN, 1967.

- Tagore, Proma. "Keats in an Age of Consumption: the 'Ode to a Nightingale.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 49 (2000): 67–84.
- Trilling, Lionel. "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters." *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*. New York: Harcourt, 1955.

## Abstract

John Keats often describes poetic creation through an ingestion metaphor and figures the poet and the act of poetic creation within the framework of a healthy ecosystem. The motif of wholesome nourishment appears, in particular, in Keats's poems of nostalgic retreat into the Middle Ages, where the poet's present-day concerns are couched in medieval-like literary idiom and imagery. This paper discusses the motif of the wholesome feast in some of these poems to illustrate what I call Keats's green medievalism.

## Streszczenie

### Niegdysiejsze zdrowe ucztowanie, czyli o zielonym medievalizmie Johna Keatsa

Artykuł analizuje medievalizm Johna Keatsa, angielskiego poety okresu Romantyzmu, z perspektywy ekokrytyki. Przedmiotem analizy są w głównej mierze krótkie wiersze poety, takie jak sonet, ballada, czy oda, nawiązujące do tekstów i legend średniowiecznych. Niektóre z tych utworów powstały, jak sygnalizują ich tytuły, na kanwie konkretnych lektur Keatsa, zwłaszcza Chaucera czy tekstów mylnie jemu przypisywanych w XIX wieku. Analiza skupia się na prześledzeniu motywu uczyty, bądź celebracji, w bliskości i ścisłym powiązaniu ze światem przyrody. Medievalizm Keatsa jawi się jako odmiana nurtu sielankowego i realizacja toposu złotego wieku w obliczu niekorzystnych skutków industrializmu, a także jako przejaw ekologicznej wrażliwości poety. Artykuł zwraca uwagę m. in. na leczniczą moc roślin, obrazy miodu, pszczoł, wina, działanie snu, nawiązania do legend o Robin Hoodzie, jak również próbuje zgłębić fascynację Keatsa średniowiecznym poematem alegorycznym „Kwiat i liść”.