

Neomyths about Endymion in the Victorian Poetry

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Abstract: The artistic peculiarities of the transformation of mythological plot about Endymion in the works by Hugh Donald Barclay, Oscar Wilde, Stephen Phillips are investigated. The author researches distinguished features of each literary version. Wilde's aestheticism is of peculiar interest. Both Barclay's and Wilde's versions create an alternative fate of Endymion in the Victorian society. Phillips's version is an attempt to revive the ancient Greek original myth in details to acquaint the Victorian readers with the ancient human values. An active creative reconsideration of a mythological material in the context of the national and historical conditions of the Victorian epoch and continuity of the Elizabethan love discourse are considered as basic tendencies of functioning of English poetic endmionada in the XIX-th century.

Key words: Myth • Neomyth • Endymion • The Goddess of the Moon • An aesthetic category of beauty • Interpretation • Aestheticism • Neomythologism • Neoclassicism • Endimionada

INTRODUCTION

Interest in a myth as an inexhaustible source of replenishment of themes and plots in literature constantly attracts the researchers' attention. The study of reinterpretation of myth is related to one of the priority tasks of modern comparative literature [1, p.5-6]. Despite systematic investigations in the field of the theory of traditional plots, devoted to the literary transformations caused by the most productive plots (based on folk, historical, mythological, literary, religious material) (A. Nyamtsu [2, 3]) there is little criticism on literary versions of the myth dedicated to Endymion. Mostly the bulk of works study poetics of interpretations by John Lyly (E.N.Chernozemova [4], David M. Bevington [5] etc.), Michael Drayton (O. V. Dmitrieva [6]), John Keats (S. Colvin [7], N. Berkovsky [8] etc.). The ancient sources of the myth and its reception in the Renaissance art are firstly investigated by Natalia Agapiou in her research "Endymion au carrefour. La fortune littéraire et artistique du mythe d'Endymion à l'aube de l'ère moderne. Ikonographische Repertorien zur Rezeption des antiken Mythos in Europa" [9]. Nevertheless poetical interpretations in the Victorian epoch represented by H. Barclay and O. Wilde have not become the object of special study yet. Therefore the topicality of present

article is out of the question. The novelty of our research is determined by lack of investigations devoted to the Victorian mythopoeics. Thus the purpose of present work is to study some obvious peculiarities of neomythological transformations of myth about Endymion in H. Barclay's, O. Wilde's and S. Phillips's versions.

As for the Methods of Investigation They Are Following: Comparative historical analysis of the myth sources to characterize the way of interaction of culture, aesthetics, literature and philosophy; analytical for comparison of "myth" and "neomyth" and mythopoetic analysis of literary interpretations.

H. Barclay's "Orpheus and Eurydice, Endymion and other poems" (1877) is a kind of continuation of Keats's poem "Endymion" (1817). If Keats's version of the Greek myth embodies the aesthetic and philosophical views of Romanticism, Barclay's interpretation indicates the exhaustion of romantic ideals in the new historical context of England of the second half of the nineteenth century. Barclay thereby refutes Keats's idealization of the eternal love and contrasts it to pragmatic relationship and perishability of feelings. Barclay transforms Keats's Goddess of the Moon into selfish and depraved, treacherous, hypocritical representative of Olympus, who is interested only in immediate sensual pleasures.

Having enjoyed beauty and youth of poor shepherd goddess of Moon eventually exposes him. Social inequality of a couple (Cynthia-Endymion) is discussed by the guests invited to their wedding: "Cynthia, beloved queen, we wish you joy/ Began the leader of the starry choir,/ To you and to your gentle shepherd boy./ We think you might have looked a little higher./ We understand now why you were so coy,/ To those who to your bright hand did aspire;/ And yet we can excuse you, for we know/ That Cupid's shafts, spare neither high nor low./ May Jove, with favour on this pair look down,/ For has not he too, felt a lover's pain;/ He dare not on unequal matches frown,.../" [10, p. 45]. Ironically calling love relationship of Endymion and the goddess Moon "the tale of an immortal's love, / Unheard by great Olympus, far above" [10, p. 42] Barclay emphasizes its fragility determined by social inequality. Indeed, after a brief honeymoon Cynthia had surfeited amorous pleasures, she was tired of the oppressed poverty and neighborhood with "simple shepherd swains" [10, p. 47]. Cynthia accustomed to a luxurious life in Olympus, suffered from a miserable existence on the earth and at last she decided to return to Heaven, her familiar environment-a society of immortal Gods. Barclay's merit is showing of social inequalities of the Victorian society. The Olympus inhabitation is identified in the poem with the representatives of the English elite and called "a swarm of golden bees" [10, p.44], "the starry choir" [10, p. 45], who "...there dwell the ever juvenile immortals, / Wrapped in Elysian pleasures ever sweet") [10, p. 48]. The rights of Gods are strictly protected. No one dares to enjoy their privileges of eternal life in abundance. That's why having found Endymion on Mount Olympus Jupiter is angry and threatens to punish him severely for unauthorized entry the world of celestials: "Endymion ! miserable mortal;/ He soon shall rue the hour he crossed my portal,/ Yes, he shall share Ixion's whirling wheel,/ Or feel the thirsty pangs of Tantalus/ Or hang, until his dizzy brain shall reel,/On Caucasus, beside Prometheus"[10, p. 50]. The episode of "the expulsion from paradise" demonstrates Endymion's humiliation by all-powerful rulers of the world: " I was headlong sent/ To seek the groves where once I loved to stray" [10, p. 51]. Living on the earth the shepherds, Endymion and his sister Peona are called "miserable mortals" [10, p. 50]. They represent the lowest and poorest social layers of England in the nineteenth century. Sympathizing with them the author emphasizes their spiritual qualities: kindness, the ability to compassionate. For example, the shepherds looked after grieving Peona: "milk sheep ripe

grapes and wine velvet offered her, / But she refused all, / And like a statue sitting in divine compassion" [10, p.59]. They took care of dead Endymion: "buried him and built an altar high / (...) Visit on holy-days the cenotaph" [10, p.60]. Moreover Barclay uses the contrast. The image of devoted Peona is opposed to a selfish Cynthia. Their attitudes to Endymion's suffering differ. While his sister was almost "unconscious of his fate, / Trembled to think what dangers might befall, / And mourned for him and his distracted state" [10, p. 58] the goddess Moon "mocked her lover true" [10 p. 54]. Blaming Cynthia's selfishness and indifference, Barclay stresses and criticizes the moral inferiority of privileged ruling class of the Victorian society.

Unlike myth and Keats's version Endymion in the poem by Barclay is pitiable, poor in spirit, disappointed in love character committing suicide. The cause of his tragedy is determined by social circumstances. His beloved Cynthia preferred material prosperity, wealth to Endymion's sincere love. Only death allowed him to get rid of his mental anguish. His death symbolizes the collapse of romantic dreams in contact with reality. Thus, the ancient hymn of love in Barclay's interpretation turns into tragedy. The last words of Endymion are full of bitterness and disappointment: " Cold Goddess, thou hast led me to the grave,/ Thou mockes me, a loveless death I die,/ With these last words he sank beneath the wave./ The bubbling waters took his latest sigh" [10, p. 58]. Comparing suffering of Endymion with the state of "a wounded deer" [10, p.53], the author sympathizes sincerely with his grief: "His miserable, lonely cries were heard everywhere, / Oh, how unfortunate his love of a woman, / His fate is sit and sigh alone. / So loyal lovers like Endymion, / Oh! that you do not know this severe pain / When the sad lack of love and the amount of useless / But woe to conquer weary spirit / Endymion proving that, but for a long time he wept" [10, p. 54-55]. The poet focuses the readers' attention to the brutal reality and collapse of romantic illusions. In Barclay's version Endymion known as an antique symbol of immortal beauty perishes. It symbolizes the end of the Romantic era and the beginning of the pragmatic epoch. No wonder Mercury, the God of Trade, is an active character of the poem, who descends Endymion to the land literally and figuratively.

Barclay's poem interprets the myth of Endymion in the context of the Victorian era and shows the penetration of bourgeois views based on the dominating power of money in the society. A pragmatic perception of things and relationships leads to a reevaluation of spiritual values

including the category of beauty. Endymion's beauty becomes a commodity satisfying sexual entertainment of Goddess of the Moon personifying the representative of the ruling class. Exactly the class differentiation (the goddess shepherd) is a source of Endymion's tragic fate and unrequited love.

Thus Barclay's neomyth is characterized by following peculiarities: Transformation of Keats's version of an antique myth about Endymion and its adding; a mixture of traditional genre varieties (myth, poem, drama) modified by the author as a form of "synthesizing in neomythological art" [11]; psychological and social motivation of characters' actions; depth of depiction of Endymion's psychological state, changes in his minds (from happiness to spiritual emptiness, the collapse of illusions, loneliness as a state of lost hopes and suicide; the relationship of the main characters are shown in dynamics; symbolism (Endymion's death demonstrates the destruction of antique and romantic ideals determined by changed historical conditions); artistic reflection of social processes in English society of the late 19-th century: animadversion of the Victorian morality and social injustice in the Victorian society, rethinking of romantic ideals, revaluation of the categories of BEAUTY and LOVE in the Victorian epoch.

As for Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), his neomyth "Endymion" (1881) expresses his own comprehension of an aesthetic ideal. In the author's opinion reality must be transformed according to the laws of beauty. Applying well-known image of Endymion as an embodiment of PERFECT-an ideal form that means the proportionality of the outer and inner beauty Wilde denies the existence of an ideal in the Victorian reality. The author gives Endymion a new destiny, taking him to the Victorian England, he implements him the features of his contemporaries. Wilde's Endymion is immoral, sexually licentious bisexual. His outer beauty is opposed to his inner one.

The action of the poem takes place in Arcadia that is identified with a poetic personification of Xanadu in Greek mythology: "THE apple trees are hung with gold, / And birds are loud in Arcady, / The sheep lie bleating in the fold, / The wild goat runs across the wold" [12, p. 99]. These picturesque painting is the background of love tragedy. Endymion leaves his male lover for the Goddess of the Moon. Wilde shows the intensity of emotions, dynamics of romantic relationships of the main characters: waiting, longing, sadness, pain, jealousy, despair. Endymion's former male lover traverses a path from hope

to disappointment. His trust to the Goddess of the Moon, transforming from a girlfriend to a rival in love is replaced by the charge of betrayal and temptation of Endymion. Three appeals to the Goddess of the Moon: "O rising moon! O Lady moon!" "O risen moon! O holy moon!" "False moon! O waning moon!" [12, p. 99] illustrate the former male lover's emotional changes. Thus, the triad rising → "risen" → «waning moon» performs an evaluative function when a positive image of the Goddess becomes a negative one.

Unlike an antique myth Wilde's Endymion is a negative character, whose beauty loses its moral principle and immorality becomes the basis of disharmony of his inner world. Thus, Wilde shows that carnal excess, licentiousness, moral turpitude, which are typical for Endymion as the representative of the Victorian society can be related to the aesthetic category called GROTTINESS opposed to BEAUTY.

The author's hostility to Victorian morality is expressed in following Wilde's paradoxes that "turn inside" the common values having been accepted since an ancient time: an ideal in art ↔ reality; an eternal love ↔ perishability of the feelings; a traditional love (man-woman) ↔ bisexuality (a former male lover-Endymion, Endymion-Goddess of the Moon); the harmony of external and internal worlds ↔ an inconsistency of an external beauty and immoral behavior; Endymion as a symbol of an aesthetic category of BEAUTY in myth ↔ category of GROTTINESS in Wilde's poem.

Paradoxicalness mentioned above; a decorative style (a meticulous detailed depiction of Endymion's portrait ("brown and curly is his hair", "the lips vermilion"), material of his clothes ("purple shoon", "the goat-skin wrapped about his arm") and a key detail of the shepherd's image ("the hazel crook"); the semantic colour change ("gold" "silver" that means the true reality) are peculiar features of Wilde's aestheticism.

Both Barclay's and Wilde's versions have distinguished peculiarities characterizing neomythologism. These are: transformation of the ancient myth about Endymion to create an alternative fate of the character in the Victorian society; "game at the junction between illusion and reality, cyclical time"; "essentially disharmonious" vision of reality in the poems; animadversion of the Victorian morality; redefining of the "eternal values" (the categories of love and beauty). Neoclassical transformation of myth about Endymion was offered by another Victorian author- Stephen Phillips (1864-1915). His poem

“Endymion” (1898) is an attempt to revive the original beauty of the ancient Greek myth to attract the Victorian readers’ attention to “eternal” problems of human existence: beauty, happiness and love. Phillips strives to restore carefully and diligently the original version of the ancient mythological material. First of all, unlike his predecessors (Lily, Drayton, Keats, Barclay, Wilde) English writer returned the Goddess of the Moon her first name “Selena”.

Phillips’ work is not a pale copy but a full-fledged art creation, featuring with vivid, plethoric artistic images. The poet appends separate episodes rendering thoughts and feelings of Selena and Endymion coming out of the logic of their characters and the circumstances. For example, the dialogues thought up by Phillips are important to create in the poem an emotional atmosphere of love and passion: “She murmured: “Suffer me to touch thy lips” [14, p. 4]. Tender appeals of the characters (“O mystic Brilliance” [39, p. 5], “My Beloved” [39, p. 8], “my Sweet” [14, p.15]) demonstrate passion in the development, adoration and sincerity of their feelings.

Unlike an antique myth the poem is rich in philosophical arguments about the sense of life reflecting the ancient system of eternal values. Phillips shows that neither power nor immortality can not make the Goddess of Olympus be happy. She suffered from loneliness: “Alone, alone for ever, Endymion !/ Unwedded, barren and yet brilliant young./ Cold is my life” [14, p. 4]; “Sweet arms, nor touches, no, nor any home/ But brilliant wanderings and bright exile” [14, p. 13]. Selena “had so yearned for joy ; and to be loved/ A little, if only such a simple love / As hath a gleaner’s wife in evening hour/ Kind hands, a still and sweet anxiety,/ Brave prudent talk about the coming day” [14, p. 13]. According to the poet, the human happiness means love, family and mutual understanding of loved ones (“the cottage-fire; / By perfect-sleeping children; / (...) lovers clasped together after years” [14, p. 7].

As for Endymion Phillips creates the image of strong-willed nature who is ready to self-sacrifice for love. Endymion agrees to the isolation from the natural world, never to part with his beloved Goddess of the Moon: “He, faint already with that endless dream, / Where such as he must live far-off from men” [39, p. 16]. To emphasize the character’s power of spirit, the author compares Endymion’s eternal sleep with death: “Though deaf thine ear, thunder shall be in it, / Trumpets and sound of snow and note of birds, / Lashed caverns and the earliest lisp of babes ;/ Thou shalt with all rejoice and weep and die / For ever; though the dream hold on its course” [39, p. 16-17].

As for the image of Selena Phillips depicts the ideal of a beautiful (She swimming full in the dark vault, / The darker for her beauty [39, p. 3]), loving, faithful woman for whom the life is identified with love. She admits: “For though I rule the night, yet still am I / A woman: without love I cannot live” [39, p 4]. The author can’t help admiring her touching tenderness and sincerity of feelings: “Kiss me but once, that I may feel thy joy / Spring through my veins and tingle in my soul” [39, p. 5].

Demonstrating the harmony of physical and spiritual beauty of Endymion and Selena, Phillips absolutizes the main characters’ moral values and true feelings and considers them as embodied ideal of BEAUTY. The poem by Phillips is correlated to be a hymn to beauty that is reflected in the harmony of human relations. English poet of the late XIX-th century focuses on the eternal theme of love, whose relevance has not been dimming since the ancient time.

As for distinguishing features of the poem, which constitute its uniqueness they include: embodiment of eternal beauty ideal image represented by Endymion and Selena; actualization of eternal theme of love in the context of immortality; praising harmony of life and spiritual values (honesty, loyalty), personal heroism, willpower, courage (Endymion willingness to sacrifice); concept of beauty in the work is associated with deep sincere feelings, affinity; absolutisation of antique ideals that opposed to pragmatic values of the Victorian era; saturated lyricism; sense of natural beauty.

Phillips’s poem may be regarded to neo-classical work that is characterized by following peculiarities: a scrupulous revival of the ancient Greek story about Endymion to comply with the formal proximity to the original myth; cult of ancient ideals and values; domination of moral and psychological problems; absence of the concrete historical content; glorification of earthly delights.

Unlike the previous interpretations Phillips’s version is the restoration to revive the ancient Greek original myth in details to acquaint the Victorian readers with ancient human values.

Thus, the English literature of the nineteenth century shows a strong interest in the interpretation of the ancient myth about Endymion. The major distinguished peculiarities of these versions are: active creative transformations of mythological material in the context of national and historical conditions of the Victorian England; continuity of the Elizabethan love discourse; an artistic uniqueness of each literary version of the myth; transformation of an antique material is used to show the rejection of the Victorian morality, animadversion of

hypocrisy, pragmatism, an emotional callousness and social inequality (Barclay, Wilde), the superiority of the ancient ideals (Phillips). The conclusion arises the interpretation of the mythological material allows to actualize the urgent problems of the author's contemporary society.

The present research is the first step in studying of the transformations of the ancient myth about Endymion in the Victorian poetry and opens new prospects and trends for further investigation of literary endimionada (the term is ours [13]) in general.

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