Philia and *neikos* in Keats's "Song of four faeries"

A.C. Swanepoel
School of Languages
Vanderbijlpark Campus
North-West University
VANDERBIJLPARK
E-mail: Rilette.Swanepoel@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

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Despite the fact that Keats's "Song of four faeries" received very little critical attention, the poem raises interesting issues regarding the creative and destructive forces in nature. The poem presents a conversation between the four elemental faeries about union and separation. Using Empedocles' four-element theory of creation and change in nature as framework, this article explores through close reading how the form and content of the poem mirror creative and destructive natural processes. It concludes that both Empedocles' concepts "philia" (the creative force), and "neikos" (the destructive force), feature in both form and content, but that "philia" is more prevalent in the form, whereas "neikos" is expressed mostly in the content of the poem. Furthermore, the natural changes presented in the poem suggest themselves in the form of the poem before they become evident in its content.

Opsomming

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Ten spyte van die feit dat Keats se "Song of four faeries" min aandag geniet in die literatuur, bied die gedig interessante perspektiewe op die natuur se skeppende en verwoestende kragte. Die gedig bestaan uit 'n gesprek tussen vier feë ("faeries") wat die vier natuurelemente verteenwoordig. Aangesien die gesprek handel oor die bymekaarkom en uitmekaargaan van die elemente, gebruik die artikel Empedocles se vier-elementteorie as raamwerk vir interpretasie. Die artikel ondersoek deur middel

van teksanalise die mate waartoe die vorm en inhoud van die gedig die natuurlike kreatiewe en verwoestende kragte reflekteer. Empedocles noem dié twee kragte "philia" (die skeppende krag) en "neikos" (die verwoestende, ontbindende krag). Die artikel kom tot die slotsom dat sowel "philia" as "neikos" in vorm en inhoud aanwesig is, maar dat "philia" veral in die vorm en "neikos" in die inhoud figureer. Verder is die natuurlike veranderings wat in die gedig voorgestel word, sigbaar in die vorm van die gedig, voordat dit in die inhoud blyk.

1. Introduction

"Song of Four Faeries", by John Keats, appears in a journal-letter dated 21 April 1819 alongside the more famous "La belle dame sans merci" and "To sleep" (Allott, 1986:500, 506, 510). The unfinished "Song of four faeries" is frequently omitted from poetry volumes and critical material on it is rare. Yet, the poem touches upon interesting issues regarding Keats's treatment of intricate and mysterious processes in nature.

Subtle traces of creative and destructive natural processes proliferate in the poem. The manner in which the form and content of the poem reflect these processes, is the focus of this article. As the poem presents a conversation between the four elemental faeries, I will highlight processes of creation and destruction in the poem by analysing it with reference to Empedocles' four-element theory. I aim to show how *philia* (love) and *neikos* (strife), two opposing forces that Empedocles considered paramount to changes in nature, feature in both the form and the content of the poem, but that philia mainly guides the form of the poem, and neikos its content. Keats skilfully captures the tension between creation and destruction in nature in the tension that he creates between the form and the content of the poem.

2. The four-element theory

"Song of four faeries" presents an otherworldly, faery perspective of the realm in which we live. The poem consists of a conversation between the four elemental faeries, namely Salamander, the faery of fire, Zephyr, faery of air, Breama, faery of water and Dusketha, the faery of earth. They discuss where and with whom they will depart to their natural abodes. In the first few stanzas the elements draw away from one another, as can be deduced from the fact that the faeries express a yearning to depart from one another. From the sixth stanza onwards, two faeries, Breama and Zephyr, start to ex-

press a desire to depart to Zephyr's "fragrant palaces" (l. 49),[1] whereas the other two faeries, Dusketha and Salamander, relate that they prefer to seek "[c]ouches warm as theirs are cold" (l. 71). The poem, which focuses largely on the separation of the elements and to a lesser extent on their union, is very melodious and lyrical. The harmony suggested by the *sound* of the poem, seems, on an initial reading, to be in contrast to the main theme of separation expressed in the *content* of the poem. The elements that move either apart or towards one another remind one of the theories of the Greek natural philosophers. These theories, and specifically those of Empedocles (c. 492-432 BC), provide a framework for the interpretation of the poem and an explanation for the striking contrast between form and content.

In a letter of 9 April 1818 to J.H. Reynolds (Houghton, 1951:87) Keats alludes to Empedocles' extraordinary death, confirming that he had some knowledge of the philosopher. Keats not only had knowledge of Empedocles, but, in this letter, he identifies with the philosopher, when he writes "I would jump down Ætna for any great public good"[2] (Houghton, 1951:87). Several critics, including Harrison (1990:16-43), point out that Keats was one of the major influences on Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*. This insight, however, does not seem to spur much interest in Empedocles' possible influence on Keats, and, even though such an influence cannot be proven, the philosopher's emphasis on the role of sensory perception is likely to have attracted Keats's attention. Allot (1986: 506) also postulates that Robert Burton's *Anatomy of melancholy* may have influenced Keats in his writing of "Song of four faeries". Burton's *Anatomy of melancholy* is built on, among others, the four-humour theory of Galen (Burton, 1948:129-199; cf. also Burton, 1948:147). Galen based his four-humour theory directly on the Greek natural philosophers' four-element theory (see e.g. Flew, 1999:125). Given this circumstantial evident, I will proceed from the assumption that Keats was familiar with Empedocles' work, and that this knowledge informed "Song of four faeries".

The Greek natural philosophers were interested in establishing what the basic constituent substance of all being is and they meditated on change in nature. Many of them looked for a single explanation of

1 All line references are to "Song of four faeries" as printed in Keats, J. (1986).

2 Empedocles died when he jumped down a volcano on Mount Etna to prove that the gasses would support his body weight.

the origin of the world. Thales (c. 625-547 BC), for example, thought that the source of all things was water, Anaximander (c. 610-546 BC) thought that the constituent element was the "eternal infinite" (or *apeiron*) and Anaximedes (c. 585-546 BC) believed that air was the basis of all things (see e.g. Delius, 2000:7-9).

Empedocles was the founder of the four-element theory of nature. He built a bridge between two opposing theories regarding how things come into being and how we perceive being, viz. the rationalist monistic ontology of Parmenides (c. 515-445 BC) and the more empirical views of Heraclitus (c. 550-480 BC). Parmenides refuted the idea of change, saying that being is an "unchanging unity which has not begun and will not cease" (Delius, 2000:8). The changes that we perceive around us, according to Parmenides, only prove that the senses are not to be trusted.

In contrast to Parmenides' views, Heraclitus maintained that "all things are in a state of flux" (Flew, 1999:145) and that sensory perception is paramount in how we perceive and come to know things.

Empedocles synthesised these two views. He agreed with Parmenides that certain things do not change, but he also agreed with Heraclitus that sensory perception is important in making sense of the world around us. He explained this paradox by stating that four elements, and not one, as his predecessors had claimed, constitute all things, and that these four elements do not change. He also observed that things around us do not stay the same, but this, he said, was not due to change, but due to union and separation of the four immutable elements.

In a nutshell, his theory can be summarised as follows: all matter is composed of the four elements: air, water, fire and earth. "All things consist of these elements, or irreducible forms of matter, in various proportions" (Kirk & Raven, 1983:324). These four elements combine and separate to compose and decompose all things. This means that a flower, for example, comes into being by the union of water, air, fire and earth in various proportions. If the flower dies, the four elements are set free again and are available once more to be joined in a creation process to form something new. Two cosmic forces *philia* (love) and *neikos* (strife) cause these elements to combine or separate, or as Graham (1999:160) puts it "Love and Strife interact to shape the world" and "[c]hange in fact is nothing but rearrangement" (Kirk & Raven, 1983:324).

Furthermore, all things participate in a never-ending "cosmic cycle" (Kirk & Raven, 1983:327). This cycle has four stages: two polar and two transitional stages. The two polar stages are represented by the rule of philia and the rule of neikos respectively, and the two transitional stages entail a phase where matter moves from rule by philia towards rule by neikos, and a phase where matter moves from neikos towards philia. Matter that moves from the rule of philia towards the rule of neikos participates in a decaying/decomposition process and matter involved in the opposite phase is in the process of coming into being; it is part of a creative process.

Subsequent Greek natural philosophers went on to say that union between the elements is possible because each element possesses qualities that can connect with the same qualities in other elements. Air for example is both hot and wet, earth is cold and dry, water is cold and wet and fire is hot and dry. Elements with the same qualities can connect to and even change into one another. The dryness in air can for example connect to the dryness in earth, but fire and water cannot connect unless one of them first connects with another element.

3. Philia and neikos in "Song of four faeries"

The elemental faeries in "Song of four faeries" are intimately connected to and representative of nature. Allot (1986:506) writes that Keats made up two of the faeries' names: Dusketha's name has its root in the word "dusk" and Breama's name comes from the word "bream" which is a fresh-water fish. The names Salamander and Zephyr also have obvious connections to nature: a salamander is a lizard-like reptile which can, according to mythology, live in fire, and a zephyr (from the Latin z*ephyrus*, which means "the west wind") is a soft, gentle breeze. One could argue that the faeries *concentrate* – to use Bate's term (1976:50) – all aspects of nature.

Evidence of the workings of both philia and neikos exists in both form and content of "Song of four faeries". An analysis of the poem reveals that the elements represented by the faeries are in a transitional phase, moving from being ruled by neikos to being ruled by philia in both form and content. The elements are thus in the initial stages of a creative process. On the content level, the poem starts in a neikos-ruled state, where the four faeries are divided and yearn to be apart. Towards the end of the poem, philia connects the two faeries associated with wetness as well as the two faeries associated with dryness. Despite the union of the faeries in two pairs, neikos is the more prevalent force in the content of the poem,

as the two pairs of faeries throughout express a yearning to go in different directions. Neikos is thus the dominant force in the faeries' conversation.

The form of the poem, like its content, emphasises the tension between creation and destruction, but here philia features more prominently, connecting – by means of rhyme, metre, syntax, typography, et cetera – faeries that would rather be apart. Even though both forces are present in both form and content, the creation process occurs in the form, before it occurs in the content, i.e. it frequently happens that the form of the poem anticipates changes that are only later introduced in the content of the poem. "Song of four faeries", that explores creation and decay thematically, emphasises the tension between the creative and destructive forces through similar dynamics between form and content.

In the first four lines of the poem, the fairies are introduced as four separate entities:

> SALAMANDER[3]
> Happy, happy glowing fire!
>
> ZEPHYR
> Fragrant air! Delicious light!
>
> DUSKETHA
> Let me to my glooms retire!
>
> BREAMA
> I to green-weed rivers bright!
> (l. 1-4.)

The elements, as represented here by the faeries, are distinct and irreducible things. This is the state of affairs that ensues when neikos, the separating force, is at work. One can thus assume that the faeries' conversation takes place during or very shortly after a phase ruled by neikos. The faeries are thus in a transitional phase and as such there are already, in this neikos-directed opening of the poem, traces of philia in the form of the poem. Salamander and Dusketha on the one hand and Zephyr and Breama on the other are connected by the rhyme.

3 All stanzas start with the name of the faery speaking the lines that follow.

It is necessary to note that the nature of rhyme contains both an element of union and an element of separation; it usually comprises an element of sameness and an element of difference. In "br**ight**" and "l**ight**", in the example above, the sound of the second part of the words account for a sameness, whereas the "br" and "l" sounds point to the difference between the two words. The sameness between the two rhyming words could be seen as evidence of the presence of philia, and the difference of the presence of neikos. Moreover, while the rhyme connects "light" and "bright" phonically, it separates "bright" and "retire". Both philia and neikos are thus intricately involved in rhyme. Still, rhyme usually functions as a binding element as it is normally associated with closure and, in this poem, helps to portray the elements as self-contained entities. The game of love and hate, sameness and difference captured in the rhyme throughout the poem is illustrative of the intricacy of the processes of creation and decay in nature, and expresses the tension between the two forces.

Furthermore, the first four lines of the poem connect Salamander and Zephyr, the two faeries associated with warmth, by the fact that the faeries introduce themselves metonymically with reference only to the elements they represent. In the same way, these lines link Dusketha and Breama by connecting their essences to particular spaces. The faeries are thus, despite their explicit yearning to be separate, connected by *the way* they express that yearning: they are connected by the formal contiguity of their utterances. The manner in which the faeries introduce themselves testifies to the workings of philia, even though neikos rules the content of their speeches.

Both the manner in which the faeries introduce themselves and the rhyme suggest that the elemental faeries are entering into a new transitional phase between neikos and philia. The workings of philia are, however, so subtle that the faeries themselves do not discuss or seem to notice it. There is thus a dichotomy between what happens within the faeries' dialogue and the way in which that dialogue is moulded. This dichotomy between creation and destruction, expressed in form and content respectively, becomes more and more pronounced as the poem progresses.

The change from a destruction (neikos-ruled) phase to a creation (philia-ruled) phase is introduced several times in the form of the poem, before any of the faeries hint at it in the content. Put differently, the form of the poem anticipates changes in the elemental faeries' formation, before such changes feature in the content of the

poem. Salamander's next speech, for instance, ends with the yearning to be

> [f]ree from cold, and every care
> Of chilly rain and shivering air.

In the following speech Zephyr retorts by saying:

> ZEPHYR
> Spirit of Fire, Away! Away!
> (l. 21-23.)

The battle between the two cosmic forces (philia operating largely within the form and neikos mainly in the content of the poem) is evident in these lines. Not only is Salamander defining herself in terms of what the others are *not* and thereby emphasising the working of neikos, she also ends her speech with the word "air". The word immediately precedes the faery of *air's* (Zephyr's) second speech. This is another subtle indication that philia is at work below the surface in the form of the poem, in this case, in the syntax of the line. It seems as though philia forces the elements that were just set free during a decaying process (ruled by neikos) to connect once again. It signals a transitional phase between neikos and philia and thus a slow and gradual creation process. This process is, however, very subtle; from the faeries' conversation it still seems as though they are in the process of separating. The subtle change from neikos towards philia is evident here in the form, the syntactical structure, of the line, before it is evident in the content.

The connection between Salamander and Zephyr, two faeries associated with warmth, in the example above is significant, because in the following speeches a binary opposition is formed *in the dialogue*, i.e. the content of the poem, between the two faeries associated with wetness, Breama and Zephyr, and the two faeries associated with dryness, Salamander and Dusketha. The association of wet and dry elements has been evident in the form of the poem from the first four lines where the rhyme *already* connected the two faeries associated with wetness and the two faeries associated with dryness. The opening lines, their rhyme and formal contiguity, subliminally negate what the faeries say, and connect faeries that would rather be apart. In the example above, where Salamander's last word anticipates Zephyr's retort, the two faeries associated with warmth, are connected – through the working of philia – in the form of the poem, through word order and the syntax

of the line, before any such connection is hinted at in the content of the poem.

On the *content* level it thus seems as though the creation process cannot proceed; Dusketha (earth) and Salamander (fire) seem completely incompatible with Breama (water) and Zephyr (air). Neikos is at work and keeps the hot and the cold elements apart. Because all four elements cannot combine, creation cannot – according to Empedocles' theory – commence. As far as the *form* of the poem, specifically the rhyme, contiguity of formulation and syntax, is concerned, however, the creation process is already in progress.

The first suggestion of philia in the content of the poem occurs in stanza 6 and 7. Here Breama repeats Zephyr's words.

> ZEPHYR
> […]
> Spirit of Fire! Away! Away!
>
> BREAMA
> Spirit of Fire! Away! Away!
> (l. 29 & 30.)

Breama's speech ends with and Zephyr's speech begins with the words "Spirit of Fire! Away! Away!" (l. 29 and 30). The repetition and the fact that they both dissociate themselves from Salamander bind these two faeries – in form and content – even before they start to speak explicitly about combining and departing to the same spaces. This connection between the two faeries on the content level occurs ultimately in lines 29-30 and only after several indications of their connection within the form of the poem.

Except for the first four lines (where the a-b-a-b rhyme pattern binds the hot and cold faeries respectively), the rhyme throughout the poem follows a neat a-a-b-b pattern that contributes to the idea that the four faeries are separate and self-contained beings (thereby reinforcing the idea that neikos is at work). There is, however, one marked exception: in the middle of the third speech of the faery of air, Zephyr, the word "sun" (l. 47) is emphasised by the fact that it does not rhyme with anything; the word is thus emphasised by the fact that it does not fit into the rhyme scheme:

ZEPHYR

Gentle Breama! By the first	(a)
Violet young nature nursed,	(a)
I will bathe myself in thee,	(b)
So you sometimes follow me	(b)
To my home, far, far in west,	(c)
Beyond the nimble-wheelèd quest	(c)
Of the golden presenced *sun*.	(d)
Come with me, o'er tops of trees,	(e)
To my fragrant palaces,	(e)
Where they ever floating are	(f)
Beneath the cherish of a star	(f)
Called Vesper, who with silver veil	(g)
Ever hides his brilliance pale,	(g)
Ever gently-drowsed doth keep	(h)
Twilight for the fays to sleep.	(h)
Fear not that your watery hair	(i)
Will thirst in drougthy ringlets there;	(i)
Clouds of storèd summer rains	(j)
Thou shall taste, before the stains	(j)
Of the mountain soil they take,	(k)
And too unlucent for thee make.	(k)
I love thee, crystal faery true!	(l)
Sooth I am as sick for you!	(l)

(l. 41-63; *emphasis* – ACS.)

The sun is a fire symbol associated with Salamander, faery of fire. The interjection of the word "sun" in the faery of air's speak conjures both philia and neikos, but again points to the dominance of philia. The deviation from the set rhyme is suggestive of neikos and serves to remind one of the tension between creation and destruction. At the same time, however, the interjection of the word "sun" at the end of line 47 breaks the sense of "wholeness" or self-containment that the rhyme brought about. More importantly the syntax together with the rhyme break draw attention to this word and thereby emphasise the mixing of the elements through the working of philia. Simultaneously, philia becomes evident in the content of the poem; the presence of the word "sun" in the speech of the faery of air shows that philia becomes more dominant. It is almost as though philia interjects a fire symbol within the speech of the faery of air with its neat rhyme scheme. In the words of the Greek natural philosophers, one could argue that the warm aspects of sun and air are combining, pointing to the fact that the elements are moving closer to a philia-ruled phase. Keats captures the complexity of creation and destruction in the form and content of the poem, here

specifically in the word "sun". Not only is a fire symbol brought into the speech of the faery of air, but it is also emphasised by the form of the poem, in that it distorts the rhyme scheme. The workings of philia are thus evident in both form and content.

From the tenth speech onwards the connection necessary for the creative process guided by philia becomes more and more evident in the form of the poem: the rhyme binds Salamander's third and Dusketha's second speeches:

> SALAMANDER
> […]
> Oh, for a fiery gloom and thee,
> Dusketha, so enchantingly
> Freckle-winged and lizard-*sided*!
>
> DUSKETHA
> By thee, sprite, will I be *guided*!
> (l. 72-75; *emphasis* – ACS.)

The rhyming "sided" and "guided", even though it testifies to the workings of both philia and neikos, underlines the fact that the two faeries associated with dryness are connecting. Here the connection features in both the form (specifically the rhyme) and content (the semantics of the line) of the poem. The same thing happens at the end of this speech:

> DUSKETHA
> […] at thy supreme desire
> touch the very pulse of fire
> with my bare unlidded *eyes*
>
> SALAMANDER
> Sweet Dusketha! *Paradise*!
> (l. 84-87; *emphasis* – ACS.)

The rhyme ("eyes" / "paradise") once again connects Dusketha and Salamander. In this instance the rhyme, a formal aspect, emphasises what happens in the content of the poem. The suggestion is that all four elements move closer to a philia-directed process. Philia has already, firstly in the form and later in the content of the poem, connected Salamander and Dusketha, the two faeries associated with dryness, and Zephyr and Breama, the two faeries associated with wetness, but neikos still rules the relationship between the two faeries associated with dryness on the one hand and the two faeries associated with wetness, on the other, as far as the content

of the poem is concerned. The tension between form and content mirrors the tension between creation and destruction.

An interesting change occurs in line 90. Here the form of the poem connects the two opposites: the two faeries associated with wetness, Zephyr and Breama, combined (by philia) and speaking simultaneously as one entity, are connected with Dusketha, a faery associated with cold, again through rhyme.

> DUSKETHA
> Breathe upon them, fiery *sprite*!
>
> ZEPHYR AND BREAMA
> Away, Away to our *delight*!
> (l. 90-91; *emphasis* – ACS.)

The faeries' direct words ("Away, Away") still point to a resistance in terms of combining, but the rhyme ties them together. This points to the presence of a creation process so subtle that it is not yet reflected in the faeries' speech, i.e. in the content of the poem. The creative, connecting energy becomes stronger in Dusketha's third and final speech and Breama's answer. This time the connection occurs in the metre and the typography of the poem: Dusketha says

> Lead me to those feverous glooms,
> Sprite of Fire!
> (l. 94-95.)

and her last line is completed by Breama saying

> Me to the blooms,
> (l. 95.)

The poem is lyrical and as such draws attention to its own metre. Here Breama and Dusketha – two "opposing" faeries – take part in the same overtly trochaic tetrameter (only the last foot is an iamb). Keats thus employs the metre to connect two opposing elements. Breama completes the four-footed line that Dusketha begins. What is more, the trochaic structure of the line is not disrupted by the transition from Dusketha's to Breama's speeches. The fact that the harmony of the line is largely maintained, suggests a philia-guided harmony between the opposing elements. Not only the metre but also the rhyme ("glooms" and "blooms") and the typography connect the two faeries. Metre, rhyme and typography thus point to a philia-guided creative process, even though the content of the faeries' utterances make it very clear that they want to go in different directions – a yearning guided by neikos. This is another indication

that the natural changes feature in the form of the poem, before they feature in its content.

In the example above, the workings of philia become more evident and the connection of the elements more complex as it is simultaneously expressed in three formal elements. At the end of this stanza, the poem breaks off, and Keats's intentions regarding the connection and separation of the faeries remain a matter of speculation.

4. Conclusion

Even in this fragment of the poem, published 27 years after Keats's death in 1848, one sees Keats's engagement with the subtle creative and destructive forces in nature. The subtlety of the creative and destructive forces in nature is brought to the fore by the fact that Keats presents seemingly opposing information in the poem's content, on the one hand and its form (specifically rhyme, but also in the metre, syntax, formal contiguity, repetitions and typography) on the other. Tension is created between the content and the form of the poem. The musicality of the poem seems at odds with the content of the arguing faeries' speeches.

The poem is written in such a way that the information given in the content and the information contained in the form seem to communicate different things. The faeries personify the natural elements which Empedocles asserted combine and separate to create and decompose all matter. The article showed that both elements are present in both form and content. The faeries' utterances, however, point more strongly to the working of neikos in nature, while the formal elements of the poem point mostly to the force and workings of philia. The natural changes presented in the poem manifest in the form of the poem, before they manifest in its content. Philia initially only combines the two faeries associated with wetness and two faeries associated with dryness, in the content of the poem, but towards the end of the unfinished poem, philia also combines, through the form, the faeries associated with warmth and the faeries associated with coldness. The elemental faeries thus find themselves in a process that Empedocles termed a transitional phase between neikos and philia.

The poem cultivates in the reader an appreciation of the subtle and immanent mysteries of the realm we live in. This appreciation is intensified by the fact that Keats described all aspects of nature in highly sensuous language. Given the tension between form and

content and the consistent progression of philia firstly within the form but also in the content of "Song of four faeries", I would suggest that this poem, that is frequently merely glossed over and incurs very little critical attention, may have been an experiment in utilising Greek natural philosophy to express the complexity of creative and destructive natural forces through similar tension in form and content.

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I noted in the introduction that "Song of four faeries" appeared in a journal letter with "To sleep" and "La belle dame sans merci". "To sleep" is a highly personal poem and several critics (cf. Allot, 1986:500 and Gittings, 1970:303-304) suggest that "La belle dame sans merci" should be read autobiographically. Given its close temporal link with these two poems, it would be interesting to consider and explore whether creation and decay, as expressed in "Song of four faeries", perhaps reflect autobiographically on Keats's own life and ars poetica.

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