

where the poet is entirely at one with both his subject and the form his story takes. The matter of *Alastor* has at times rather little to do with flesh and blood, so that *Endymion* can better afford its confusions in its attempt to give the natural man some just treatment, even in the form of the pastoral romance. *Endymion* is primarily an erotic poem, and its Wordsworthian doctrines sometimes seem oddly uttered in that context. Keats's exquisite sense of the luxurious foreshadows the Wallace Stevens of *Harmonium*, and does not always suit his abstract theme of the identity of ideal beauty, love and truth. The implicit burden of *Endymion* is a humanistic hedonism, and the poem's only realized apocalypses are the naturalistic consummations of sexual love. In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats was to write an overt hymn to Eros which is a glowing unity of all his poetic impulses. *Endymion*, beautiful as it so frequently is, abandons too often the sensuous world it exists to celebrate.

## 2. Hymns of Eros:

### THE EVE OF ST. AGNES

It seems fairly certain that *The Eve of St. Agnes* had some impulse from Keats's falling in love, and possibly from his anticipation of marriage. The poem was created January-February 1819, and Keats seems to have declared his love to Fanny Brawne on December 25, 1818, a few months after meeting her.

Keats's subject may be taken from Boccaccio, or else from the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which suggested the material of *Lamia*, although Burton is not exactly in the Keatsian vein on women:

"Tis their only desire if it may be done by Art, to see their husbands' picture in a glass, they'll give anything to know when they shall be married, how many husbands they shall have, by Crommyomantia, a kind of divination with Onions laid on the Altar on Christmas Eve, or by fasting on St. Agnes' Eve or Night, to know who shall be their first husband.

The power of Keats as poet and humanist is in an apotheosis of the human senses. Until Wallace Stevens, no other poet was to

attain so immense a celebration of the risen body in the here and now, with the senses given their delighted primacy and playing the measures destined for the soul:

### The adventurer

In humanity has not conceived of a race  
Completely physical in a physical world.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats comes close to so prodigious a conception. His lovers are completely physical in a physical world, and their sensuous concreteness is emphasized by an ironic interplay with worlds that fail to be completely physical, whether by an extreme resort to spirituality or by a grossness that abolishes the individuality of the atoms of perception which make up Keats's human reality. The "spiritual" that seeks to establish itself by denying life and "life's high meed," death, is the more important of these juxtaposing realms in the poem. Indeed Keats begins with it:

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!  
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;  
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,  
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:  
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told  
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,  
Like pious incense from a censer old,  
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,  
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

The Beadsman is cold with nature's cold, but he converts his privation into a prayer for immediate entry into heaven, without any intermediate natural death. His own vision of purgatory (next stanza) sees it as an extension of winter. He goes off to his harsh St. Agnes' Eve penance, to sit all night amid rough ashes and wait for death. His icy faith frames the passionate center of the poem, where warmth and sexual passion glow more brightly against the Beadsman's death-in-life.

Between the icy bordering and the glowing center is "the argent revelry" of the ball that whirls on while the lovers meet for their first union. The other connecting link between frost and fire is Angela, the pious servant who reluctantly agrees to conceal Porphyro in his lady's chamber. Even the names have their roughly

symbolic function; Angela with her fumbling pieties is obvious enough. Porphyro is chosen for the purple-red color implied by the name:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,  
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart  
Made purple riot

It is the thought of appearing to Madeline, and of the likely consummation. The name Madeline, in its root form of Magdalen, appears in the canceled stanza that comes between stanzas VI and VII in one manuscript:

'Twas said her future Lord would there appear  
Offering as sacrifice—all in the dream—  
Delicious food even to her lips brought near:  
Viands and wine and fruit and sugar'd cream,  
To touch her palate with the fine extreme  
Of relish: then soft music heard; and then  
More pleasures followed in a dizzy stream  
Palpable almost: then to wake again  
Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen.

The morn remains virgin, and the Madeline who goes out into renewal at the poem's close is no weeping Magdalen but a transfigured epitome of love. For *The Eve of St. Agnes* is a hymn in honor of the senses, but particularly the sense of touch, and it celebrates at its climax the "solution sweet" when:

Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
Blendeth its odour with the violet

At the heart of the poem (stanzas XXIX–XXXVI) Keats strives to suggest a supreme intensity by particularizing a wealth of concrete sensuous details, which not only deliberately confuse and mix senses, but tend to carry the other senses over into the tactile. Salvation, according to *The Eve of St. Agnes*, is only through the intense manifestation of all phenomena as being truly themselves. The lovers are saved by surrendering themselves to a world of objects, and to one another.

The extraordinary profusion of sensuous apprehensions is certainly the characteristic that distinguishes *The Eve of St. Agnes*

from Keats's other poems in which 'minute particulars give themselves to the poet's delighted receptiveness. Porphyro conceals himself as Angela hurries away, tormented by her remorse. What he sees and does become subordinated to the strenuous exercise of the reader's sensory imagination as Keats allows his own imagination to be indulged by a luxurious object world.

A prevalent procedure of Romantic poetry, as we have seen, is the displacement of religious vocabulary into secular and literary, sometimes erotic contexts:

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
 And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,  
 As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;  
 Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
 And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
 And on her hair a glory, like a saint:  
 She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,  
 Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:  
 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

The moon of winter shines on the flowery casement (described in the previous stanza), and the light has the coloring of red fur as it shines on Madeline's white breast, even as she kneels to pray. A rose color falls on her hands, and a paler red on the silver cross she wears. The light makes an aureole about her head, and Porphyro grows faint, for complex reasons. He is reacting both to her beauty and to her apparent sacredness, "so free from mortal taint."

But "his heart revives," and her body is revealed to him. When she falls asleep, she goes to an abode beyond the world of the oxymoron, to where she is "blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain." As she sleeps, her lover begins his ritual of supplication:

Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon  
 Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set  
 A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon  
 A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—  
 O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!  
 The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,  
 The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarinet,  
 Affray his ears, though but in dying tone:—  
 The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.

The stanza is a triumph. Porphyro is "half anguish'd" because his desire is to involve her in joy and pain, in the oxymoronic world of "mortal taint." He begins to set the reality of rich objects against the world of dream, for his is a sure lover's instinct, underlying the psychology of the lover's gift. Physical love is the wealth of the world, and the "cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet" is the proper cloth for a lover's communion table. Bordering the altar of passion is the now "dim, silver twilight" of the faded winter moon of body-denying spirituality and, on the other side of the stanza, the mere grossness of the revel that goes on below in the castle. When the hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone, we are in the enchantment of the sexual world of the next seven stanzas until the marvelous re-entry of an outer world in stanza XXXVI:

Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,—  
 Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows  
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet  
 Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

The cold of nature and of spirituality has re-entered the poem. Indeed, as the sleet comes down, Keats calls it "flaw-blown," and the flaw is in nature and in the spirituality that merely repudiates that flaw. But before we describe the orders of reality striving again in the poem, we can enjoy the seven stanzas of tender luxury that ensue in the "Solution sweet" of sexual love.

As Madeline sleeps, Porphyro heaps high the table with a profusion of spiced foods thrown upon sumptuous vessels. His impulse is of course not merely that which contributes to the art of the seducer. It is the same that drives the lover of *The Song of Solomon* into the imagery of gold and silver, myrrh and frankincense, into saying that "thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks" and "thy lips drop as the honey-comb: honey and milk are under thy tongue." *The Eve of St. Agnes* is Keats's Song of Solomon, and to allegorize either poem prematurely is to abandon a value.

From *Sleep and Poetry* onward, Keats had played with the reality of dream and the illusions of reality. In the beautiful alternation of Madeline's dreaming and waking he now experiments further with this visionary device. Donne, in *A Dreame*, had explored the

same paradoxes, but in a spirit alien to the naturalistic rapture of Keats's lovers.

Porphyro summons Madeline to an awakening, vowing that she is his heaven and he her hermit, in contrast to the heaven sought by and the suppliance represented in the Beadsman. But she does not awake until he sings to her the song most appropriate to the occasion, the "La belle dame sans mercy" that Keats is meditating and is soon to compose. In that poem, the knight at arms awakens to disenchantment on the cold hill's side. To forestall such a fate for Porphyro, Madeline awakens out of a dream centered upon her lover. For a moment she is caught, painfully and finely, between contending realities:

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,  
 Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:  
 There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd  
 The blisses of her dream so pure and deep  
 At which fair Madeline began to weep,  
 And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;  
 While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;  
 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,  
 Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

The real lover before her, with his sad eyes, his "pallid, chill, and drear" countenance, compares unfavorably with the dream lover whose eyes were spiritual and clear and whose looks were immortal. This is the crisis of their love, and she triumphs in it. Rather than reject physical reality for a dream of heaven, she invites reality to become that dream.

The remainder of the poem is a movement of exodus. Love flees the castle with the lovers, and nightmare descends upon the revelers, death upon the pious. The lovers leave behind an inferno, and carry their heaven with them. The wakeful bloodhound they elude is a kind of Cerberus, and the besieging wind that conceals the sound of their departure blows up an "elfin-storm from faery land" for them, but a storm of woe and death for the other inmates of the castle:

And they are gone: aye, ages long ago  
 These lovers fled away into the storm.

That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form  
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,  
 Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
 Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;  
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

Nothing comes to seek the heaven-aspiring Beadsman among his now cold, rough ashes, and Angela dies the death her pious and sinful fears make inevitable. The lovers are gone away into their storm, out of the castle's purgatorial and finally infernal reality to the naturalistic fruition of their love and the ultimate high meed of their death.

### LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

The poet who writes incessantly of the Gardens of Adonis owes his vision a rendering also of a Bower of Bliss. The song of Beulah land requires its contrary in a song of Ulro. Heaven's lower counterpart is Earth, the hell we are never out of, but the lower paradise finds its diabolic double in the false garden of desire simulated; provoked, but never gratified; the bower of Acrasia, the world of Blake's Vala. Against his perpetual epipsyche visions of Beulah, Shelley set at last the deceiving "Shape all light" of the cold hell of *The Triumph of Life*. Keats's vision of Ulro is more ambiguous and more modest: the terse and haunting ballad of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

For Robert Graves, himself a great poet of the Orc cycle, a Worshiper of Vala under her name of the White Goddess, Keats's poem is a *celebration* of the poet's destruction by his muse. But Keats had a muse of his own making, Moneta, and she did not destroy her poets, nor is she involved in this ballad. For Graves, La Belle Dame is consumption, poetry, Fanny Brawne, love, death, and finally the Triple Goddess herself, the blue-white hag who mothers, marries, and buries poets. This is an undeniable and terrible vision, akin to Blake's Shadowy Female, though it takes toward her an attitude opposed to Blake's. Graves has made a separate career as the most persuasive of modern misreaders of texts, and assuredly