

## Romance as Wish-Fulfillment: Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*

STUART M. SPERRY, JR.

**D**ESPITE the way it still enchants us, *The Eve of St. Agnes* has occasioned, especially in recent years, remarkably divergent critical reactions. For Keats's contemporaries and the Victorians, most of whom in one way or another came under its spell, there was no mistaking the poem's "meaning." It was for them the essence of romance, a gorgeous bit of tapestry, full of color, tenderness, passion, and high feeling.<sup>1</sup> Leigh Hunt, who was a better judge of Keats's verse than some recent critics are willing to admit, thought it "the most delightful and complete specimen of his genius" among the longer pieces, a poem standing midway between at times more sensitive but feebler efforts like *Isabella* and "the less generally characteristic majesty of the fragment of *Hyperion*."<sup>2</sup> For many admirers the poem has always remained close to the heart of Keats's particular vein of romanticism. Modern criticism, however, has been rarely willing to remain content with such banalities; and it was Earl Wasserman who, pre-eminently for our own time, gave the poem a deeper and more abstruse significance (one that certainly would have staggered the Rossettis) by reading it virtually as an exemplum or illustration of certain earlier semi-philosophical speculations in the letters—primarily Keats's comparison of life to a "Mansion of Many Apartments" and of the imagination to "Adam's dream."<sup>3</sup> For Wasserman the poem thus becomes a kind of metaphysical demonstration in fictional terms of "the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth" (I, 184).<sup>4</sup> His argument, while founded on the undeniable correspondence between certain metaphors central to the poem and those in earlier letters, was useful chiefly for its shock value and the stimulus it gave to criticism. As an interpretation it now seems something less than satisfying primarily because it neglects, in its preoccupation with the letters, the imaginative world the poem itself creates, a world that

1. Victorian reactions to the work are helpfully summarized by Earl R. Wasserman at the beginning of his discussion of the poem in *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1953), pp. 97-101.

2. Leigh Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy*, 2nd ed. (London, 1845), p. 314.

3. *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Harvard U. Press, 1958), I, 280-1, 185. References by volumes and page number of this edition are hereafter included within the text.

4. Wasserman, pp. 97-137.

gives its metaphors a significance more complex than and subtly different from any single context in the letters.

The influential essay by Jack Stillinger effectively raises major objections to Wasserman's reading, objections that have found acceptance and need not be reviewed here.<sup>5</sup> Yet Stillinger promptly rushes to the opposite extreme by reading the poem as anti-romance, an instance of Keats's later skepticism and disillusionment with the imagination. Thus with a little shift of emphasis Romeo becomes Lothario, romance, seduction, and the lovers' passion, little more than the culmination of a rake's sordid stratagem. The interpretation seems hardly less one-sided than the one it would correct.<sup>6</sup> Both readings betray our sense of the complexity of the work, its subtlety of tone and mastery of the imaginative processes, by seeking to reduce it to the value of a simple thesis, a representation of the imagination as either good or evil, truth or deception. We must, it seems, have it one way or the other.

Much of the problem we face in approaching *St. Agnes* lies in the fundamental question of its tone. The fact is that modern criticism has generally dealt with the poem sombrely and with a certain grim intellectual seriousness. Yet *St. Agnes* is above all dramatic (Keats himself saw it as a step toward a chief ambition, "the writing of a few fine Plays" [II, 234]); and while it tends to sacrifice depth of character for richness and suggestiveness of background, it skillfully achieves a rich interplay of dramatic emotions, a complex texture not lacking its own kind of playfulness, irony, and even humor. Of course we are seduced, along with Madeline, each time we return to the work as we submit to its suggestions of mystery, the rapture of young love, and the high, romantic spell the poem casts over us: that is all part of its deeper playfulness and part, too, of its deeper point. Yet at the same time we are hardly unmindful that the machinery by which we are taken in is conventional, not to say thin. The castle, for all its monumentality, is shadowy, insubstantial.

5. "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" *SP*, 58 (1961), 533-55; reprinted in abridged form in *Keats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. W. J. Bate (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 71-90. References hereafter are to the original essay. A major point to be emphasized is the gap in time between the letters Wasserman cites (especially "Adam's dream") and the poem.

6. Although somewhat sentimentally expressed, perhaps Norman Nathan's view seems closer to the reaction of the average reader when he writes: "The strange side of it all is that, despite the ruthlessness on the part of Porphyro and the lack of delicacy on the part of Madeline, the reader may feel that he has read a tale of the purest and most holy young love imaginable" ("Flesh Made Soul," *The Personalist*, 42 [1961], 198).

The dwarfish Hildebrand and old Lord Maurice (some of the "fine mother Radcliff" types Keats was himself particularly amused by [II, 62]) and their kinsmen, whose very dogs howl execrations, rage savagely within doors, only in the end to subside into a harmless, drunken stupor, benighted as if by fairies. There is the lovers' usual go-between, a tottering, cackling crone, and a solemn beadsman, both of whom seem to dissolve simultaneously into ashes, along with the rest of the castle, when the lovers depart. There are dusky galleries, arched ways, silken chambers, and, near the end, a drunken porter and a bloodhound. It is no wonder Keats found the poem "smokeable" (II, 174).<sup>7</sup> Yet it is not, at the same time, merely ingenious to suggest that our consciousness of artificiality, at times of deliberate contrivance, makes up a necessary part of our enjoyment of the work and constitutes a vital element of its effect. For if at first glance Keats's romance strikes us as thoroughly conventional in its melodrama, we are soon aware that the conventions it employs are hardly of a piece, indeed that they are used at times with beguiling inconsistency. Madeline is sober and demure, "St. Agnes' charmed maid" (192),<sup>8</sup> rising, beneath her solitary candle's gleam, to pious observances. Yet the rites she must observe ("supperless to bed . . . Nor look behind, nor sideways" [51, 53]), while rooted in folk superstition, suggest a little child put to bed early with visions of sugar plums. Porphyro is soft-voiced and trembling, yearning for his lady in the darkness while loath to interrupt her slumbers. Yet he is brought on at the outset, crowding stage like a big Italian tenor, with unabashed hyperbole:

He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:  
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords  
Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel. (82-84)

Even the element of mystery, or mystification, that pervades the poem is hardly of a piece. We begin with the somber, Christian devotions of the Beadsman, which lend at first a more serious color to the popular superstitions Madeline pursues. But it is not long before we are in a world of charms and dim enchantments, a world inhabited by elves, fairies, and even, toward the end, by dragons. Religious ritual, the stately mysteries of high romance, the self-conscious theatricality of opera, and the improbabilities of folk

7. Keats actually applied the adjective to *Isabella*, but the context of his letter makes it clear he thought the objection true also of *St. Agnes*, "only not so glaring."

8. References by line number are to *John Keats: Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), and are included within the text.

legend and a child's fairy tale all proceed to merge impenetrably. Yet if *St. Agnes* lacks the larger unity and cohesiveness that characterizes Spenser's world, if we are puzzled as to which species of "romance" it belongs, such doubts and questions make up an integral part of its effect and meaning.

All this is not to argue that in *St. Agnes* Keats was writing parody or burlesque. It is, however, to claim that in returning to pursue some of the serious interests of romance, to exploit anew its rewards and consolations, he was acting in full awareness of the tenuousness and frailty of its spell and with a new, at times almost ironic, consciousness of his role as poet-conjurer.<sup>9</sup> For although it is often taken as such, *St. Agnes* is not primarily a glorification of sensual passion or even, for all the condensed richness of its imagery, of the human senses.<sup>10</sup> It is, rather, an exceptionally subtle study of the psychology of the imagination and its processes, an inspired testing, pursued more seriously in some of the poet's later verse, of the quality of poetic belief. More than anything else, perhaps, the element most central to the poem is its concern with wish-fulfillment, a fundamental aspect of romance that had fascinated Keats from the time of his earliest verse, often, as he himself was well aware (and as Byron, for one, pointed out with vulgar contempt) at the cost of particular embarrassments.<sup>11</sup> To describe *The Eve of St. Agnes* as romance of wish-

9. See Marian H. Cusac's "Keats as Enchanter: An Organizing Principle of *The Eve of St. Agnes*," *K-SJ*, 17 (1968), 113-19, a brief, suggestive study of the role of the narrator.

10. For a contrary opinion, see Harold Bloom's discussion of the poem in *The Visionary Company* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), pp. 369-75. While essentially an independent one, my own view of the poem is most indebted to the essays of R. H. Fogle and Arthur Carr cited below as well as to C. F. Burgess' admirably rounded discussion of structure and technique in "The Eve of St. Agnes: One Way to the Poem," *EJ* (1965), 389-94. John Jones's argument, in his recent full discussion of the poetry, *John Keats's Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), that the "dream come true"/"just a dream" ambivalence is the major "axis" of Keats's verse (p. 170), is especially appropriate to the study of *St. Agnes*. Jones's later discussion of the poem (pp. 232-42), however, is curiously unsatisfactory, for he attempts to read the poem merely as a more intense redoing of *Isabella*, ignoring virtually all the elements of technique, convention, and narrative focus that separate the two works considerably in skill and maturity of control and consequently in their fundamental meaning.

11. Byron wrote Murray on November 9, 1820: "Mr. Keats, whose poetry you enquire after, appears to me what I have already said: such writing is a sort of mental \*\*\*\*\* his *Imagination*. I don't mean he is *indecent*, but viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state, which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium" (*The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero [London,

fulfillment is, of course, to expose oneself immediately to misunderstanding, for we are apt, even today, to regard that activity as artless, not to say simple-minded, whereas it is in actuality close to the root of creativity of all the arts and never more intense or satisfying than when acting through a consciousness of the kinds of reality it would alter or circumvent. A wish lies somewhere between a desire and an act of will, two manifestly different things, while the quality of any kind of human fulfillment is largely relative to the state of one's demands or expectations. It is, in fact, the imagination (in its broader Romantic sense) that serves to mediate between the infinitude of human longing and our awareness of actual limitation and which, by creating the grounds for an accommodation, defines the kinds of "beauty" or "truth" we find at any given moment acceptable and satisfying. What distinguishes *St. Agnes* at the point at which it occurs in Keats's career is the subtlety of its handling of these relationships, the fact that the perspective it provides upon the reality it creates is not simple but complex and continually shifting.

It is helpful, in approaching the poem, to keep in mind both the broad outline of Keats's career and the particular circumstances under which the poem was written in January and February, 1819. Fundamental to the work are two major events of the earlier winter: the death of Tom on December 1 and the dawning, almost simultaneously, of the poet's love for Fanny Brawne.<sup>12</sup> Certainly the powerful and oft-noted contrasts that dominate the poem, the play of light against darkness, warmth against cold, gratification against denial, the continuous juxtaposition of the instincts of life and death, take much of their intensity from strains and divisions Keats was actually experiencing. Following the temporary collapse of his ability to continue the cerebral and profoundly meditative *Hyperion*—the kind of poem on which he found it difficult to concentrate under any circumstances—he fell back for relief on a work of a totally different kind, and the contrast between the two poems could hardly be more complete. *St. Agnes* marks Keats's momentary abandonment of Milton for Spenser, of the spirit of heroic endeavor for imaginative escape, of epic for a return to romance. Yet having said this one must immediately add, with a glance back at *Isabella*, written the preceding

---

1901], V, 117; see also 109). The sense of the editor's ellipses is not difficult to supply. In all probability, Byron had not seen *St. Agnes* or the 1820 volume at this time but was basing his comments on Keats's earlier verse.

12. Unlike most of Keats's recent biographers, however, Robert Gittings is inclined to see the poem as the outgrowth of an affair with Isabella Jones, who in any case apparently suggested the story. See Gittings' *John Keats* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1968), pp. 273-4.

year, that *St. Agnes* is romance of a sort totally different from any he had yet attempted. It is not just that the poem reveals a breathtaking advance in technical mastery. More important, the apparent simplicity of Keats's fable conceals a new sophistication, an extraordinary awareness of the *devices* of romance, and a fascination with both their possibilities and limitations.

In considering the element of wish-fulfillment in *St. Agnes*, one can hardly overlook the poem's whole nocturnal character. The major action itself suggests the stratagems by which the prohibitions and defenses of ordinary consciousness are regularly circumvented and evaded, the way in which, as in dreams, awareness begins to take its shape from the promptings of latent desire. Consider merely the plot. An ardent young lover abducts a lovely maiden from a closely guarded castle filled with rivals and violent enemies. He enters furtively and by night and, with the help of a sole friend and intermediary, gains access to the maiden's inner chamber where he first conceals himself. He watches his beloved enter, undress, sink into reverie, prepare herself for bed, and fall asleep. It is only when he hears the steady breathing of her slumber that he dares leave his hiding place; and when the two escape across the moors to some legendary home in the south, they make their way through chained and bolted gates, by guards and watchmen overcome with slumber. Moreover, despite the arguments of Stillinger, the climax of the poem, the union of the two lovers, in no way resembles rape or even a seduction of any ordinary kind. For it is a part of Porphyro's task, as the overtones of stealth and anxiety make us feel, that he must not break the spell in which Madeline lies bound, that he cannot interrupt the current of her dreams, that merely to awaken her would be disastrous. He must, rather, through the use of various suggestions—the feast of fruits and spices with its teeming odors, the music he plays on her lute, the sound of his voice, the touch, even, of his arm—*create himself* within her dream. How and where the two first met, how long they have known each other, the state of Madeline's affections, or even the degree of her awareness of Porphyro as a lover are all questions for which we are never given answers, although we are made to feel, somehow, that he has been, almost from the start of the poem, implicitly in her thoughts. But when she awakes, or half-awakes, from her dream (for the point is left deliberately ambiguous), she recognizes Porphyro, after a moment of painful confusion, not just as a mortal wooer in all his human limitations, but also as a part of her dream, a part of her vision and her desire, and she accepts him as her lover. There is an accommodation, one that is neither easy nor untroubled, between imagination and reality.

There is no need for elaborate Freudian analysis to see that the whole major action of the poem is essentially a drama of wish-fulfillment, a testimony to the power of human desire to realize itself, to transform awareness, and to gain a measure of recognition and acceptance despite the thousand restraints—fear, disbelief, denial, propriety—excluding it. Only in the dream—by extension the domain of romance, poetry, art—and the shelter it affords from waking consciousness is there any hope for the realization and appeasement that human longing, in all its turbulent impatience, insistently demands; for the dream is conditioned and informed by the same human desire it embraces and fulfills.

Such a paradigm enables us to see the poem plainly for what it is, and yet paradoxically could cause us to miss its real artistry. For if within the literature of English Romanticism the *Eve of St. Agnes* is a supreme example of art as wish-fulfillment, it is, nevertheless, as we have partly seen, a wish-fulfillment of an exceptionally practiced and self-conscious kind that gives the work its essential character. The poem, that is, achieves its magic but only in such a way as to dramatize the particular strains and tensions that oppose it and the kinds of device it must employ in overcoming them—repression, anxiety, disguise, censorship, sublimation. The very artistry that brings the dream swelling into reality draws our attention to itself in such a way as subtly to qualify, even to unsettle, its own effects. Once we go beneath the surface melodrama we discover a mixture of the naive and sophisticated, the sentimental and the disenchanting, fantasy and psychological realism. It is, then, to the technique of the poem and the way it alters and controls our sense of Keats's narrative and its meaning that this discussion must now turn in somewhat closer detail.

---

“It shall be as thou *wishest*” (172, italics added) Angela tells Porphyro, and her words suggest the principle of causality within the lovers' universe the poem invites us to accept. Yet we are not introduced to Madeline or Porphyro directly; nor, as we discover at the beginning, are all forms of wishing equally efficacious. The inductions to the narrative poems and fragments of Keats's last great year are without exception masterpieces of technique; however, the particular genius of the opening of *St. Agnes* has never been sufficiently perceived. The description of the Beadsman and his slow progression down the freezing chapel aisles prepares a series of contrasts the poem is steadily to develop and expand. Yet it has never been observed how effectively the force of contrast culminates in the single moment when the Beadsman passes through the little door

—the indication of another range of experience—to be suddenly “Flatter’d to tears” by “Music’s golden tongue” (20–21) and the splendor of the coming festivities. The image of tears, which drew Hunt’s admiration and moved him to observe that “A true poet is by nature a metaphysician,”<sup>13</sup> defines a particular moment central to the poem’s harmony. The image recurs twice at important turning points in the poem—once when Porphyro first learns of Madeline’s hopes for St. Agnes’ night and again when Madeline weeps on awakening from her dream to observe her lover kneeling by her bedside—and thus perpetuates and extends, almost like a theme in music, the power of a single mood. In the Beadsman’s sudden weeping we recognize an act of self-love, or more exactly perhaps, self-pity, an instant in which the restraints upon feeling are momentarily dissolved and the repressed desires and longings of the soul achieve an unexpected outlet to expression. More important, the image defines, in a moment of sudden contrast, a particular sense of the gap that forever exists between desire and fulfillment, between potential and realization, a gap that, as the poem is slowly to suggest, can be bridged only by a leap of the imagination. Thus from the very beginning Keats creates, almost as a kind of leitmotif, that specific quality of human yearning basic to the theme and structure of his poem. Nor is it insignificant that the Beadsman is moved to tears by *music*, for it is the image that throughout the poem expresses, as in the “silver, snarling trumpets” (31) that chide and beckon the guests, the importunate cravings of desire. Yet more often than not the image suggests, as Keats proceeds to develop it, desire that is held back and unnaturally restrained, as in the great image of the ballroom, filled with “music, yearning like a God in pain” (56). Whether it be the raucous music briefly heard from the revellers below before the hall door closes, the far gentler strains the trembling Porphyro plays so quietly on Madeline’s lute, or, most notable of all, the suggestions of unheard melody that surround Madeline entering her chamber like “a tongueless nightingale,” unable to express the tide of feeling that “pains” her breast with longing for deliverance (205–206), music is throughout the poem hushed, stifled, or repressed, a symbol of emotion held uneasily in restraint.

Despite the show of feeling that momentarily masters him and sets the keynote for the poem, the Beadsman turns his back upon the setting he has opened. He turns “Another way” (25), which is not the way the lovers take within the poem. Long practiced in the forms

13. Hunt, p. 332.

of self-discipline, he represses the emotion so briefly released and turns back to his penitential ashes "for sinners' sake to grieve" (27). He thus creates a contrast with much that is to follow—primarily the way of desire, of the wish that creates its own fulfillment, the way of the poem. The contrast is, moreover, ironical when we realize that his primary function requires a kind of wishing, that is, prayer. Indeed the images that first surround him suggest a certain ardor and devotion, just as his breath, rising like incense, and the lamp he carries convey a kind of perfume, light, and warmth. Nevertheless the passion he expresses, channeled or sublimated into the unyielding forms of religious worship, seems powerless to animate a host of images that are stark and lifeless. The virgin, however sweet, remains a mere picture. The sculptured knights and ladies praying in their oratories are frozen and sepulchral, as opposed to the carved angels of the ballroom who, eager-eyed and expectant as if enraptured by the festive preparations and their promise, seem bursting into almost human life. Throughout the poem we find movement and expression frozen or arrested as if by a constraint of feeling, only to be liberated and fulfilled in a tide of new emotion. At the most critical moment of the poem, the moment of Madeline's apparent withdrawal from her dream and her awakening, Porphyro kneels as if frozen by her bedside, "pale as smooth-sculptured stone" (297), only to derive a new and almost preternatural vitality by his acceptance as the consummation of her vision, as he melts "into her dream" (320). The rites and endless prayers of the Beadsman are forms we come in time to recognize as a mere sublimation of the lovers' passion. "There may be a sort of love," Keats wrote in one of the earliest of his surviving letters to Fanny Brawne, "for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect, and can admire it in others: but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart" (II, 127). As in the "Bright Star" sonnet, Keats moves toward the world of mortal rapture from an image of devout but cold and inhuman sublimity.

The Beadsman affords an effective transition to our first glimpse of Keats's heroine. Both are bent on rites and meditation, for we find Madeline already engrossed by the ceremonies she intends to observe. Both shun the castle's glittering entertainment for prayer, fasting, seclusion, and the hope of their own visionary fulfillment. The same questions of truth and substantiality, moreover, surround the world each is drawn to. Self-absorbed, Madeline does not seem to hear the music, yearning in desire; nor does she heed the ardent cavaliers who approach her only to withdraw. She is oblivious to the looks of

“love, defiance, hate, and scorn” (69) by which she is surrounded. While she dances her eyes are “vague, regardless” (64); she is already engrossed by her imagination—

Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amorn,  
Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,  
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn. (70-72)

Yet, paradoxically, the courtly festivities Madeline turns away from do not seem any more real than the world of her fancies. The revellers burst in like “shadows haunting fairily/The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay” (39-40). They seem ghostly, insubstantial, part of the trappings, merely, of “old romance,” an outworn spell. As R. H. Fogle has justly observed, such effects are “complex and even self-contradictory,” certainly “not the poetry of a simple romancer.”<sup>14</sup> If we are tempted to view Madeline as the prey of her illusions, we are at the same time reminded that the framework of the entire poem, the conventions of romance themselves, are hardly above suspicion. We are in a world of make-believe from start to finish where our habitual distinctions between reality and illusion no longer apply. Indeed the reader is himself invited at Keats's own request not only to accept but to take part within a world where wishing has the force of willing:

These [the revellers] *let us wish away,*  
And turn, *sole-thoughted,* to one Lady there. (41-42, italics added)

Thus, as by the magic of a wish, the argent revelry is resolved back into shadows, and we give ourselves up to the charm of Madeline's endeavor, a bit of harmless conjuring that can take on a more sober cast simply through a willingness to take it seriously:

Full of this *whim was thoughtful* Madeline. (55, italics added)

It is as if the poem were subtly arguing the power of the characters, the poet, and even the reader, to shape a kind of reality from the stuff of illusion by an act of will.

The same kind of sophistication underlies the histrionics of Porphyro's arrival on the scene. Filled with “barbarian hordes,/Hyena foemen” (85-86), the castle holds, beyond Madeline herself, no one from whom he can hope mercy, “Save one old beldame, weak in body and in soul” (90). And then immediately, as if in answer to his prayers—

Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,  
Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand. (91-92)

14. “A Reading of Keats's ‘Eve of St. Agnes,’” *CE*, 6 (1945), 326.

Here again Keats is both using and spoofing the conventions of romance—the suspension of all normal standards of probability—as the bumbling crone gropes for Porphyro's hand to greet him as well as to reassure herself of his identity. Indeed it is the variable identity of the characters that now proves so fascinating; for, beyond its obvious melodrama, the deeper interest of the narrative lies in the changing psychological relationships it develops—the way the characters react upon and modify each other. Badly frightened by Porphyro's impulsive threat to reveal himself to his enemies, Angela protests herself “A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing” (155), virtually a ghost already. Yet only a little while earlier, in her amazement at seeing him, she has bid him “flit!/Flit like a ghost away” (104–105) and gone on to liken his appearance to some supernatural visitation:

Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,  
And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,  
To venture so. (120–122)

Creatures though they all are of the romance world of the poem, the characters nevertheless lay claim at various times to different levels of existence or reality that continually play off against, challenge, or modify each other.

There is, for example, the enchanting scene in which Porphyro is led through many a winding corridor into Angela's little chamber, “Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb” (113), where the garrulous dame, as if through a sudden start of recollection, first reveals her mistress's intention:

St. Agnes' Eve!  
God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays  
This very night: good angels her deceive! (123–125)

There follows one of the brilliant “camera stills” the poem makes such effective use of:

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,  
While Porphyro upon her face doth look,  
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone  
Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,  
As spectacled she sits in chimney nook. (127–131)

Dominated by the pallor of the chamber and the old dame's mocking laughter, the plan appears as enigmatic and uncertain as a riddling story, while Porphyro is momentarily transformed, as if before our eyes, into a child held spellbound by a nanny's bedtime puzzle told round the fireside, the pastime of a winter evening. Yet it is at this moment that he is moved to tears by the recognition of the story's unfulfilled potential, the solution to its mystery which lies in his own

power to supply. His enterprise begins suddenly to form itself and flower in the reality of his imagination, while, in one of those movements of alternate contraction and expansion with which the poem abounds, he now rises up, brilliant-eyed, to assume his full role as lover. It is at such moments, when Keats takes daring freedoms with the whole *decorum* of romance, that we sense within the shifts of character and background the maturity of his control over the focus of his narrative and the intimate connection it establishes between technique and meaning.

The impulse toward contraction immediately resumes with Angela's expressions of pious horror on first construing his intent. His enterprise is now a "stratagem" (139) and the adoring lover "cruel" and "wicked" (140, 143)—"Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem" (144). Her words, for all their commonplaceness, have a further point, a partly ironical one; for within the shifting flow of color, mood, and atmosphere, the poem continually creates new contexts for visualizing character and action among which we find it difficult to decide which are the most enduring, lifelike, "real." Angela's objections have the effect, at least, of forcing Porphyro to modify, in part to disguise, his vision. He must swear "by all saints" (145), disavow all "ruffian passion" (149), and hope for grace "When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer" (147), even threatening to reveal himself to his foes and so call down upon himself a kind of martyrdom. He must, in short, propose his enterprise in terms acceptable to the forms and language of conventional or religious thinking, even as Keats himself, ironically, was later compelled to revise his final manuscript version of the poem to satisfy the moral scruples of his publishers.<sup>15</sup> The point in the case of both Keats and his hero is oversimplified if we see it in terms of mere prurience, deception, hypocrisy, or cynicism. The devices of disguise and censorship perform an integral and even aesthetic function throughout the whole formation of the work, for they relate to Keats's larger grasp of human psychology, his mastery of the interplay between the various levels of human intuition—both unconscious and conscious—and the means by which they achieve accommodation.

It is in the portrayal of Madeline and her dream that Keats's treatment of such deeper concerns becomes more difficult and subtle. His famous declaration to Bailey, over a year earlier in November, 1817, that "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth" (I,185) has an undeniable yet inconclu-

15. See *Letters*, II, 162-4, 182-3 for the reactions of Woodhouse and Taylor. The relation of Keats's revisions to earlier versions of the poem is discussed in Stillinger's "The Text of 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" *SB*, 16 (1963), 207-12.

sive bearing on the meaning of *St. Agnes*. For the relationships within the poem are too complicated to be resolved into the simple terms of the earlier equation. For one thing Madeline never fully awakens from her dream; and if she partly wakes as her "blue affrayed eyes" (296) open, that awakening is not an altogether happy one. Like the knight-at-arms of Keats's famous ballad written later in the spring, Porphyro is "pallid, chill, and drear" (311), momentarily isolated from the sustaining warmth and vitality of her dream which, in the fullness of its imagined blisses, has outrun the vision of her human lover. Marked by her tears, there is the same recognition of a gap between desire and appearance, a moment of painful contraction followed immediately by a more intense reintegration of imagination and experience as, unlike the cruel lady of the ballad he has just so plaintively sung to her, she takes her lover into her dream. Porphyro's success comes not through any shattering of the dream or diminution of its spell, but through his power, sensed almost from the moment of his first appearance, to suggest and to inform its content, to bring it slowly to the point of consciousness and recognition where, while still a dream, he can become a part of it and find acceptance. In his infinite persistence and resourcefulness, he expresses the power of human desire to create the conditions of its own realization and fulfillment, to create, relative to other things, its own kind of "truth."

Yet the inherent relativity of the poem, the shifting use it makes of subtly different conventions and attitudes which continually puzzles us and makes the work impossible to summarize in terms of any single statement, is never clearer than when we look more closely at its treatment of Madeline's dream. Overcome by the "poppied warmth" (237) of sleep, she fades away into obliviousness, protected from joy and pain and the thoughts that carry over to the following day—the state of benign unconsciousness celebrated in the sonnet "To Sleep" written only a few months later. Porphyro is free to emerge from his concealment, to proceed to his "complaining dear" (313), the expressions of his desire muted by the tide of unconsciousness. Yet he emerges, in Keats's marvelously suggestive phrase, "Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness" (250); and the note of anxiety relates not merely to his fear of interrupting her slumber but also to the awe we sense, on peering with him through the bed-curtains, at the profundity of her repose, "where, lo!—how *fast* she slept" (252; italics added). For her sleep, and the dream already begun to form within it, which before had seemed so warm and protective, now, by a slight variation in imagery, is made to appear aloof, cold, almost inhuman. There is indeed something frenetic in

the way Porphyro, "half anguish'd" (255), proceeds to heap up in abandon the fruits and syrups, and something somber in the way they stand, forlorn and apart, "Filling the chilly room with perfume light" (275). For the charm that holds Madeline, for all Porphyro's attempts to soften it, is now "Impossible to melt as iced stream" (283), seemingly impervious even to the touch of his "warm, unnerved arm" (280) as it sinks into her pillow. She lies "entail'd in woofed phantasies" (288). Confronted by a situation calling for Prince Charming to awake his sleeping princess with a kiss, we have instead a heroine who appears to have gone over the line where sleep turns into coma and dreaming, endless fantasy.

The continual modulation between such different sets of contexts and conventions keeps us perpetually off balance and prevents our settling into any simple attitude in reading *St. Agnes*. True it is that the brief terror of Madeline's awakening and its moment of schizophrenic anguish is rapidly dissolved within the lovers' rapturous union and flight. Yet in another way the sense of Madeline's dilemma, the momentary rift the poem opens between the Porphyro of her dream and the mortal lover isolated by her human vision, retains its haunting power, so that the sexual culmination the poem proposes, however "sweet," remains a "Solution" (322), a resolving of difficulties that does not so much command as entreat our willing suspension of disbelief. We accept the romance of the poem—in a sense we *will* it—in its triumph over the oppositions that confront it, even while we recognize the way in which the adequacy of such means are called in question. Nor is it possible to ignore the way the poem lets us down from its heights of magic quite deliberately and in a fashion that to some degree anticipates Keats's other great poem of sleep and awakening, the "Ode to a Nightingale." The beating of the flaw-blown sleet upon the panes rouses the lovers; Porphyro exclaims "This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!" (326). His words have a triumphant ring, as though they heralded an emergence from dream into reality. Their immediate effect, however, is an unhappy one, for they momentarily place Madeline in another role familiar to us, although now from popular romance—that of the damsel robbed of her maidenhead by a faithless lover who departs at dawn, the type of the forsaken Gretchen. Porphyro, nevertheless, is "no rude *infidel*" (342, italics added). He has already twice called Madeline his "bride" (326, 334) and has a home awaiting her across the southern moors. The poem, in fact, seems virtually on the point of ending on a note of domesticity, with the storm, for all its icy gusts, marking a return to the world of the natural elements and breathing humanity. Such homely expectations, however, are quickly lost amid the onset of

some final magic. "Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land" (343), Porphyro exclaims. The lovers are not destined for a return into the mortal world but for some nebulous transcendence of their own. And while they steal away through the familiar stage-props of the castle, they flee as "phantoms" (361, 362), unfelt, unheard, unseen by all but the wakeful bloodhound, a descendant of Sir Leoline's supernaturally sensitive old mastiff. "And they are gone: ay, ages long ago" (370). While Angela, the Beadsman, the Baron and his guests are carried off by death or nightmare, the lovers may, as Arthur Carr has argued, take flight into "a happier and warmer reality."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless there is something sad about the way they flee away, almost like ghosts, into the storm, just as the immemorial realm they gain is strangely vague, remote, and insubstantial. Nor, as Carr himself has pointed out (p. 241), are they permitted to escape without the poet's reminder "that we have been listening to a fairy-tale, with its formula of happiness after danger." Thus we remain charmed but also perplexed by the poem and its blend of domesticity, elvishness, gothicism, realism, courtly romance, riddle, fairy tale, and legend, a combination that remains to the last deliberately anachronistic and which refuses to relate itself to what we commonly mean by "reality" in any way that can be readily defined. If the poem continually suggests the transforming power of the aroused imagination, the logic of "Adam's dream," it simultaneously exposes, through the heterogeneous devices and conventions it employs, the kinds of stratagem to which poetic magic must resort.

---

Largely in reaction to the apparent sentimentalism of earlier readings, modern criticism of *The Eve of St. Agnes* has been sharply pointed, topical, and dogmatic. It has felt compelled to elaborate, even at the expense of some confessed distortion, a tightly thematic framework for the poem rather than to conclude with what must at all costs be avoided—a view of the work as "a mere fairy-tale romance, unhappily short on meaning."<sup>17</sup> Yet if *St. Agnes* has any "meaning" at all, it lies precisely in its quality as romance. As in the case of the later odes, it is the way we are taken into the world of the poem, what happens to us there, and the way we are let out again that matters most. Semi-philosophical rationalizations, whether based on the letters or on schematic views of Keats's intellectual develop-

16. Arthur Carr, "John Keats' Other 'Urn,'" *The University of Kansas City Review*, 20 (1954), 241. A directly opposite view is expressed by Herbert G. Wright in "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending?," *MLR*, 40 (1945), 90-4.

17. Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline," pp. 533, 534.

ment, may be significant but cannot substitute for our fundamental experience of reading the work itself or the kind of primary knowledge it, like all great poetry, builds upon, what Keats, near the end of his life, was to call "the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem" (II, 360).

Among his mature works *St. Agnes* is above all a poem of contrast, of light and shade, a poem informed from the opening of its initial stanza by "primitive sense." Moreover its real concern is equally primitive and fundamental to the nature of romance, as well as to "Romanticism," in all its various forms: the power of wishing, willing, and the kind of fulfillment it can bring in fiction, love, and art. Yet while *St. Agnes* is remarkable for the power of the desires and expectations it arouses, the satisfactions it offers are consistently qualified or restrained. For Keats's narrative, even while enrapturing us, progressively reveals the kinds of dislocation and excess towards which romance, by its very nature, tends. The real triumph of the poem lies in the self-conscious mastery and artifice of its technique which grants both poet and reader a vital measure of detachment from the very spell it casts, which tests the limits and the dangers of its own devices even while employing them, and which marks the beginning of that ironical perspective on imaginative experience Keats was steadily to develop in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the great odes of the spring, and *Lamia*. True it is that the temporary dissonances that develop at each stage are resolved in larger harmonies within the rising movement of the poem, after the manner of so much romantic music later in the century. Yet the particular kind of "intensity" *St. Agnes* achieves is less the result of any pure or final commitment to imagination than a complex awareness of the strains and tensions that are bound to develop within any romantic attempt to satisfy the sum of human expectations once aroused. In this sense the poem lies somewhere between the self-indulgent pathos of *Isabella* and the cynicism and self-mockery of *Lamia*, a poem that begins with a parody of a number of the imaginative processes of poetic creation the poet had earlier affirmed.<sup>18</sup>

In reconsidering his earlier poetry for inclusion in the 1820 volume, Keats wrote disparagingly of *Isabella* to Woodhouse that "If I may so say, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in *Propria Persona* I should be apt to quiz it myself—There is no objection of this kind," he went on, "to *Lamia*—A good deal to *St. Agnes* *Eve*—only not so glaring" (II, 174). The comment, one must remem-

18. See my discussion of *Lamia* in "Keats and the Chemistry of Poetic Creation," *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 275-7.

ber, was written in September, 1819; and, as W. J. Bate has observed, nothing better illustrates the bitter mood of disillusionment in which the poet later returned to *St. Agnes* than his revisions for its final stanza,<sup>19</sup> changes that go far toward destroying the delicate balance between sentiment and detachment the work progressively maintains. For the sense of ambivalence Keats noted in his comment to Woodhouse and which he took as an "objection" to the work is one the poem by its very technique largely anticipates and turns to positive account, one that explains in no small measure the immense advance it marks over *Isabella*. *St. Agnes* blends the spontaneous and timeless allure of traditional romance with a modern and sophisticated self-consciousness as regards convention and technique, one that enraptures us and at the same time exposes to examination and analysis the very devices it employs. Like the great odes, the poem has no meaning that can be reduced to a simple theme or statement (witness our perennial difficulty over "Beauty is truth"), but lies rather in a state of mature realization. One might say that realization concerns, more than anything, the infiniteness of human desire, the wish-fulfilling power of the imagination, and the beauty as well as the tenuousness and insecurity of the spell that power casts.

Indiana University  
Bloomington

19. See Bate's *John Keats* (Harvard U. Press, 1963), p. 443n., and *Letters*, II, 162-3. Keats revised the ending of the poem to read:

Angela went off  
Twitch'd with the palsy—and with face deform  
The Beadsman stiffen'd—twixt a sigh and laugh  
Ta'en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough,

a change to which Woodhouse objected as an affectation of "the 'Don Juan' style." The revision was not adopted in the 1820 volume.