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Characters: Characters Discussed

Madeline

Madeline (mahd-LEHN), a young virgin, first shown preoccupied at a ball given in the castle of her noble father. Eager to carry out the ritual of St. Agnes' Eve and thereby see her future husband in a dream, she leaves the revelry and retires to her room where, falling asleep, she dreams of Porphyro, the son of an enemy house. Waking to find him beside her bed, she is at first frightened. After he tells her, "This is no dream, my bride," she steals with him out of the castle, past the sleeping, drunken wassailers, and away into the stormy night.

Porphyro

Porphyro (POHR-fih-roh), her gallant young knight, who comes from his home across the moors, slips into the castle full of his enemies, and with the aid of Angela, an understanding old nurse, goes to Madeline's chamber before she prepares for bed. After she is asleep, he emerges from the closet where he has hidden himself, sets a table loaded with exotic foods, and wakes his beloved with a song, "La belle dame sans mercy," to the accompaniment of Madeline's lute. He persuades his beloved to leave her home of hate and flee with him.

Angela

Angela, an old woman, Madeline's nurse and Porphyro's friend. Convinced, after Porphyro has revealed his plan, that the young lover's intentions are honorable, she hides him in Madeline's bedchamber and provides the dainties for a feast. She dies "palsy-twitched."

The Beadsman

The Beadsman, an aged supplicant who at the beginning of the poem is telling his rosary with cold-numbered fingers in the castle chapel. He closes the story by sleeping, forever unsought, "among his ashes cold."

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

John Keats wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes" in January and February of 1819, the first of an astonishing spate of masterpieces that came one after another, despite his failing health and emotional turmoil. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Lamia," and six great odes were all written before October of that year. The circumstance of his death shortly afterward seems to throw into a kind of relief the luscious descriptions of physical beauty in this and other poems. More striking still is the poet's refusal to take comfort in the simplistic assurances of

any religious or philosophical system that denied either the complexity of mind or the reality and importance of sense. "The Eve of St. Agnes" manifests Keats's characteristic concern with the opposition and subtle connection of the sensual world to the interior life. He shared this preoccupation with other Romantic poets, notably Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, taking as his subject the web of an antithesis at the heart of human experience; like them, he cloaked his meditations in sensuous imagery.

In this and other ways, Keats and all the Romantics abandoned the poetic theory of the century before. Eighteenth century poetry was formal, didactic, and objective in stance. Its chief aim was to show to humanity a picture of itself for its own improvement and edification. Its chief ornament was wit: puns, wordplay, satiric description, and so forth. In short, what eighteenth century poets saw as virtue in poetry was logic and rigid metrics. Nineteenth century poets wrote from a radically different philosophical base, due in part to the cataclysmic political changes surrounding the American and French Revolutions. Before these upheavals occurred, a belief in order and in measure extended into all facets of life, from social relations to literature; extremes were shunned in all things as unnatural, dangerous, and perhaps blasphemous.

After 1789, when the social order in France turned upside down, an expectation of the millennium arose in England, especially in liberal intellectual circles; the old rules of poetry were thrown off with the outworn social strictures, and a new aesthetic bloomed in their place. Its ruling faculty was imagination. The world seemed made new, and poetry released from bondage. Romantic poets frequently stated that poems ought to be composed on the inspiration of the moment, thereby faithfully to record the purity of the emotion. In fact, Keats and his contemporaries labored hard over their creations; they exerted themselves not to smoothness of meter but to preserving the grace of spontaneity while achieving precision in observation of natural and psychological phenomena. Poets saw themselves as charting hitherto unexplored reaches of human experience, extremes of joy and dejection, guilt and redemption, pride and degradation. They wrote meditations, confessions, and conversations, in which natural things were seen to abet internal states, and they wrote ballads and narratives, such as "The Eve of St. Agnes," set in the past or in distant parts of the world and using archaic language and rhythms to make the events related seem even more strange and wonderful. Over and over they described epiphanous moments when the human consciousness becomes one with nature, when all is made new, when divinity animates the inanimate, and the lowest creature seems wondrous. This way of seeing was thought to be a return to an earlier consciousness lost in early childhood and is the theme of Wordsworth's seminal *Ode*.

In "The Eve of St. Agnes," Keats attempts, among other things, to maintain this elevated state of mind throughout the narrative. He sets the story in medieval times, so that the familiar fairytale characters take on charm from their quaint surroundings and from the archaic language in which they speak and are described. Its verse form is the smooth, supremely difficult-to-write Spenserian stanza, with its slightly asymmetric rhyme scheme that avoids the monotony of couplet or quatrain, and the piquant extension of the ninth line that gives to the whole an irregularity echoing ordinary speech. The first five stanzas contrast the Beadsman, coldly at his prayers, with the "argent revelry" of the great hall. This imagery of cold and warmth, of silver and scarlet, of chastity and sensuality continues throughout the poem, a comment on the plot.

That the poem is named for a virgin martyr yet tells the story of an elopement is likewise significant; the point of the poem, on the one hand, is that piety and passion are opposing but inseparable drives. Each without the other has no point of reference. Porphyro without Madeline becomes the gross Lord Maurice, the savage Hildebrand; Madeline without Porphyro becomes the Beadsman with his deathlike abrogation of sense. Instead, Porphyro is made to faint at the celestial beauty of Madeline at her prayers, Madeline to be wooed by songs and colors and delicacies. The passage describing the array of food that Porphyro set out is understandably famous; these are not mere groceries but rather the glowing essence of fruitfulness, tribute to a love match of the meditative and emotional faculties that, when accomplished in one individual, fulfills the whole human potential.

The other theme, or perhaps the other face of the same theme, is the relentless press of quotidian misery on the poetic personality, another favorite arena of reflection among the Romantics, and one that was poignantly near Keats's heart, menaced by tuberculosis as he was, and his younger brother dying of the disease the previous winter. The lovers are shown, unearthly fair, escaping from a house where wrath and drunkenness hold sway, bound for a dream-vision of happiness. Significantly, the poet does not follow them to their southern sanctuary. Instead he relates the wretched end of Angela, who dies "palsy-twitched" in her sleep; the cold sleep of the Beadsman among the ashes; the drunken nightmares of the Baron and his guests. The ending, in short, is not unreservedly happy but partakes of that bittersweet emotion which in the midst of joy acknowledges wretchedness, the mark of a mind that strives for aesthetic detachment while believing in its duty to the rest of humankind.

Critical Essays: The Eve of St. Agnes

Echoing Spenser's legendary romances of spiritual quest in verse form, diction, and plotting, Keats has Porphyro, Madeline's lover, sneak into the castle and, with the aid of her old nurse, spy on his beloved from the darkness of a closet. The blending of the spiritual and the erotic in Porphyro's awestruck voyeurism is the energizing principle of the entire poem. Keats works up a rich mixture of sense-impressions to render the sensual sublime.

After watching Madeline pray, Porphyro grows faint at the sight of her beauty when she disrobes. After she falls asleep, he leaves his hiding place and brings out dainty foods, exotic fruits, and candies that warm and perfume the winter chill of the virgin's chamber. As he softly plays his lute, she awakens. His erotic intentions fade into religious devotion as he falls to his knees; she in turn, begs him never to leave her.

The lovers, strengthened by the warmth of their passion and feelings, flee into the unpredictable future symbolized by the dark winter outside the castle walls, but they leave behind them the tensions and hatred of their warring families.

Bibliography:

Danzig, Allan, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Eve of St. Agnes."* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971. Excellent source for beginning discussion of Keats's poem. Contains seven essays exploring such topics as narrative structure, contrary states of imagination, musical and pictorial settings, techniques of composition, literary influences and the darker side of seduction.

Gibson, Gail McMurray. "Ave Madeline: Ironic Annunciation in Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 26 (1977): 39-50. Examines how the religious details of the poem function as a parody of the Christian Annunciation and thus a measure of the inadequacies of the lover's spiritualized romance.

Stillinger, Jack. Introduction to "The Eve of St. Agnes," by John Keats. In *John Keats: Complete Poems*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982. The best edition of the poem to date. Includes commentary on the chronology of composition, Keats's subsequent revisions, textual sources, and an extensive bibliography.

Talbot, Norman. "Porphyro's Enemies." *Essays in Criticism* 38 (1988): 215-231. Argues that Madeline, Angela, and the Beadsman offer only minor resistance to the exploits of Porphyro. Dramatic tension centers on the male protagonist, who fluctuates between romantic hero, hot-blooded opportunist, and religious devotee.

Wasserman, Earl. *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953. A classic introduction to the poem. Discusses the central romance of Porphyro and Madeline in the context of the poem's sensual richness and imaginative intensity.

Analysis: The Poem

It is a cold St. Agnes's Eve—so cold that the owl with all its feathers shivers, so cold that the old Beadsman's fingers are numb as he tells his rosary and says his prayers. Passing by the sculptured figures of the dead, he feels sorry for them in their icy graves. As he walks through the chapel door, he can hear the sound of music coming from the castle hall. He sadly turns again to his prayers. The great hall of the castle is a scene of feasting and revelry, but one among the merry throng is scarcely aware of her surroundings. The lovely Madeline's thoughts are on the legend of St. Agnes's Eve, which tells that a maiden, if she follows the ceremonies carefully and goes supperless to bed, might there meet her lover in a dream.

Meanwhile, across the moonlit moors comes Porphyro. He enters the castle and hides behind a pillar, aware that his presence means danger, because his family is an enemy of Madeline's house. Soon the aged crone, Angela, comes by and offers to hide him, lest his enemies find him there and kill him. He follows her along dark arched passageways, out of sight of the revelers. When they stop, Porphyro begs Angela to let him have one glimpse of Madeline. He promises on oath that if he so much as disturbs a lock of her hair, he will give himself up to the foes who wait below. He seems in such sorrow that the poor woman gives in to him. She takes Porphyro to the maiden's chamber and there hides him in a closet, where is stored a variety of sweetmeats and confections brought from the feast downstairs. Angela then hobbles away, and soon the breathless Madeline appears.

She comes in with her candle, which blows out, and kneeling before her high arched casement window, she begins to pray. Watching her kneel there, her head a halo of moonlight, Porphyro grows faint at the sight of her beauty. Soon she disrobes and creeps into bed, where she lies entranced until sleep comes over her.

Porphyro steals from the closet and gazes at her in awe as she sleeps. For an instant a door opens far away, and the noises of another world, boisterous and festive, break in; but soon the sounds fade away again. In the silence he brings dainty foods from the closet—quinces, plums, jellies, candies, syrups, and spices that perfume the chilly room. Madeline sleeps on, and Porphyro begins to play a soft melody on a lute. Madeline opens her eyes and thinks her lover a vision of St. Agnes's Eve. Porphyro, not daring to speak, sinks upon his knees until she speaks, begging him never to leave her or she will die.

St. Agnes's moon goes down. Outside the casements, sleet and ice begin to dash against the windowpanes. Porphyro tells her that they must flee before the house awakens. Madeline, afraid and trembling, follows her lover down the cold, gloomy corridors, through the wide deserted hall and past the porter, asleep on his watch. They flee—into the wintry dawn.

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Quotes: "A Poor, Weak, Palsy-stricken, Churchyard Thing"

Context: This poem reveals Keats's interest in medieval legends, and it contains many romantic elements—the love of the remote and the old, the interest in far-away lands and supernatural events. As he prays, an "ancient Beadsman" hears the noise of revelry in the castle. But a pure maiden named Madeline is oblivious of the celebration, for she dreams of the legend of St. Agnes's Eve: on that night (January 20) a virgin could have a vision of her future lover. Young Porphyro, who loves Madeline but is hated by her relatives, steals into the castle, where his only friend is "one old beldame" named Angela. Old Angela warns him to leave, but he wants her to help him enter Madeline's bedroom so that he can appear to the maiden as her lover. The old lady berates Porphyro, who vows to reveal himself to his foes if she does not aid him. Old Angela answers him, and her speech foreshadows the approaching deaths of her and the "ancient Beadsman":

"Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard
thing, Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll;
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and
evening, Were never missed." Thus plaining, doth she bring
A gentler speech from burning
Porphyro; So woeful, and of such deep sorrowing,
That Angela gives promise she will
do Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.