

IMAGINING ADAM'S DREAM: KEATS'S CHAMBER OF MAIDEN THOUGHT IN *THE EVE OF ST. AGNES*

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From the time of its initial publication, *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1820) has engendered a number of different interpretations and is arguably one of Keats's most highly contested works. While many critics, following Jack Stillinger, argue that Porphyro rapes Madeline, others, in accord with Earl Wasserman's metaphysical view, assert that no sexual union occurs between the lovers. Because Keats leaves the relationship between Porphyro and Madeline ambiguous, readers have responded by regarding the lovers *either* as bound in physical desire *or* freed from constraint by their imaginative longings.¹ Though most agree that Keats creates a world where the lovers express either physical or metaphysical desire in the poem, but not both, I argue that Keats defies exclusivity by presenting the imagination as a bridge that allows the poem to offer two interconnected spaces: the actual world of the poem and the abstract realm of art. The lovers engage this imaginative world, which cannot offer them actual immortality. Nevertheless, it can offer them an artistic immortality Keats depicts through their union in the chamber of maiden thought.

Keats writes his poem during a revival of the medieval romance. The medieval romance provides a narrative frame for Romantic poets as well, and they rework romance conventions to create exotic landscapes that expand and reconfigure romance tropes. When Keats invokes the medieval romance in several works, including *Isabella; or The Pot of Basil* (1819), which he imaginatively recreates from Boccaccio's medieval work, *The Decameron*, and in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which he

bases at least structurally on Edmund Spenser's Early Modern text, *The Faerie Queene*, he manipulates the romance and its Spenserian derivation to give him a physical space on which he may craft a metaphysical world of infinite desire. Like earlier and contemporary Romantic poets, Keats invests *The Eve of St. Agnes*, his first successfully sustained narrative, with a complex interplay between physical, spiritual, and artistic desires. These desires participate in the world of innocence and experience, which are collapsed in the poem.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Madeline and Porphyro exercise the imagination, configured in the chamber of maiden thought, which allows them to enter an "elfin" world of "faery land" (l. 343)—an artistic world Keats frequently associates with the imagination and develops further in the Odes. Because the experience shared by the lovers does not exist solely in a metaphysical or physical realm, every physical reality experienced through the body holds a metaphysical duality given through the imagination. Thus, when Porphyro enters Madeline sexually, he also enters into her poetic identity imaginatively, for her chamber represents both.

These complex relationships, representative of characters' alternate states of being, implicate three of the ideas Keats presents in his letters: the "Mansions of Many Apartments" (274), "Adam's Dream" (258), and the poetical character (836). By examining Keats's descriptions of dreams, the poetic process, the character of the poet, and the imagination in his letters, we see that Porphyro not only represents both the lover desiring a sexual experience with Madeline, as critics have frequently asserted, but also the poet desiring an imaginative journey with his muse, who exerts more agency in the artistic and erotic experience than critics have acknowledged. As he progresses through the mansions of human life, represented by the castle's chambers, Porphyro seeks the maiden's, or Madeline's, chamber. In contrast to every other room of the castle, her chamber represents the transcendent power of the imagination and offers physical and imaginative beauty to the lovers.²

Without the presence of physical beauty, which Keats almost always links with femininity in his poetry, there can exist no means for the poet to enter the chamber of maiden thought. This chamber represents a feminized level of the imagination Porphyro reaches through consummation with Madeline. The power of the poem lies beyond the gratification of masculine sexual desire in which the lover rapes or, as Karen Swann suggests, "harasses" the feminine muse (90). It lies, rather, with the imagination, where Porphyro enters Madeline figuratively to participate in divine dreams. Sexuality in the poem serves as the physical manifestation of imaginative beauty Madeline offers, and the poetic experience between the lovers supercedes the carnal one. It is merely the shadow of a greater reality Keats describes in his letters. The lovers explore this "greater reality" through human experience, which, in the poem, reflects rather than opposes the spiritual world depicted through art.

Physical longing in fact remains an integral part of the imaginative process for Keats, whose poet-heroes almost always evince a heterosexual identity to authorize their poetic one. Porphyro projects this heterosexual identity as the male lover; he enters Madeline's bedchamber to watch her undress, following her "over the hushed carpet, silent, stepped, / And 'tween the curtains peeped" (ll. 250-251) at Madeline before entering her bed. Imaginatively, however, he enters the chamber of maiden thought without his masculine identity, which he surrenders for a feminine one, becoming an androgynous figure as poet. He appears to "mus[e] awhile, entailed in woofed fantasies" (l. 288) given by Madeline and remains under the "steadfast spell" cast from "his lady's eyes" (l. 287), a Petrarchan trope for the relationship between the poet and his muse.³ Keats suggests that Madeline captivates Porphyro imaginatively and sexually, and he depicts her not only as the Petrarchan ideal but also as the seductive mistress. More importantly, however, Keats presents her as the poetic imagination, her character representing the chamber of maiden thought.

The transcendent capacity of physical beauty, personified by Madeline, grants Porphyro as poet the ability to intuit immortal dreams through "a life of sensations" (Keats 829) given by the poetic imagination. The muse traditionally offers the poet inspiration, but Madeline plays a more significant part in the artistic process, for Keats employs Madeline and her maidenly chamber in a way that overturns expectation. While she occupies the Petrarchan role as the indifferent and idealized lady, she likewise displays imaginative longings for divine inspiration — qualities typically associated with the poet, not his muse. Keats gives her, as he gives almost all women in his poetry, control over the male poet-knight figure, allowing her to control the artistic, if not the sexual experience.⁴ Keats deifies Madeline, even calling her "a god" (l. 56) with "maiden eyes divine" (l. l. 57) in Stanza 7 and attaches divine power to her presence.

Madeline's imaginative desire permits her to escape from the outside world and into the interior chamber of her mind, depicted literally as her chamber in the castle, where she prays and communes. To enact the ritual of the Eve of St. Agnes, Madeline must "nor look behind, nor sideways, but require / Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire" (ll. 53-54). Her posture and remote presence in the first half of the poem suggest that Madeline, like Porphyro, seeks transcendence through divine experience because she remains unsatisfied by the world around her. Though ultimately she desires the vision of her future husband, Keats attributes greater significance to her prayers because, unlike others in the castle, Madeline appears removed from "the argent revelry" (l. 37) around her, "the level chamber, ready with their pride" (l. 32). Likewise "she scarcely heard" (l. 57) the noise around her, which "she heeded not at all" (l. 59) by refusing to participate in the castle events, which, Keats implies, hold danger, even in the sound

of the “snarling trumpets” (l. 31). Rather, she retreats to perform the necessary rites of St. Agnes, deliberately oblivious to the outside world:

She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:
The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs
Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd resort
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,
Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort,
Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn. (ll. 64-73)

Because Keats ascribes “faery fancy” to Madeline’s presence, he links her desires and retreat from the physical world with the imagination. She remains “hoodwink’d with faery fancy” through a willingness to participate in rites that will remove her from a world beyond the one of “hate and scorn” around her—a desire for an imaginative retreat from an unsatisfying existence expressed by all the speakers of Keats’s major odes. He typically places the suffering poet rather than his muse, however, as blissfully “hoodwink’d” into an imaginative world.⁵

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Madeline’s association with “faery fancy” has implications for the poetic imagination, which Keats associates with her castle chamber later in the poem. Because “faery fancy” leads Madeline into a chamber where she engages St. Agnes, arguably another muse in the poem, to gain immortal visions, Keats compares her presence with the imaginative beauty in her bedroom. He describes the room’s architectural beauty as reflecting her, for just as the “casement” (l. 208) is “garlanded with carven imag’ries / Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass” (ll. 209-210), so too does the “wintry moon” shine through this same “casement” (ll. 217) onto Madeline, whose hair is garlanded with “wreathèd pearls” (l. 227). Likewise, the jewels of the room, “diamonded with panes” (l. 211), parallel Madeline’s physical “warmèd jewels” (l. 228). The comparison between Madeline’s beauty and “jewels” invokes another Petrarchan trope: the correspondence between the lady’s attributes, typically the eyes, which look like sapphires, and jewels. Whereas the lady assumes a singularly idealized position in the Petrarchan tradition, Madeline possesses a human identity, for her jewels are “warmèd”, of the body, rather than unearthly, suggesting she not only has an imaginative role but also a human one ultimately limited. Though her body inspires Porphyro with its bejeweled beauty and her eyes, like the idealized Laura, are blue, they are “blue affrayèd eyes” (l. 296), capable of human experience, including pain and fear.

Keats’s association of the chamber of maiden thought with Madeline demonstrates the spiritual power of the poetic imagination, which, like Madeline, captivates with

inexplicable beauty. Though powerful, it remains a human faculty that cannot eclipse the world of experience and its attendant pains. Even so, Keats extends the relationship between Madeline and the imagination by giving her a poetic affiliation in Stanza 23, where she appears as the melancholic nightingale, a bird symbolic of the poet's suffering state, and made famous, of course, in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819). Though silent, Madeline enters the room:

She closed the door, she panted, all akin
To spirits of the air, and visions wide—
No uttered syllable, or woe betide!
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
Paining with eloquence her balmy side;
As though a tongueless nightingale should swell
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell. (ll. 199-207)

Though an anguished symbol, the nightingale represents unutterable, "tongueless" beauty for Keats, beauty he associates with most of the women in his poetry, whose presence can inspire or provoke pain. Madeline, who inspires Porphyro, participates in this pain and in this beauty. Like the nightingale in Keats's ode, which provides the speaker with "viewless wings of Poesy" (l. 33) to leave the world through "a vision" (ll. 79) of "charmed magic casements" (l. 69) and "faery lands forlorn" (l. 70), Madeline provides Porphyro with physical and imaginative beauty "together pressed" (l. 220) in her presence. Though she remains silent for fear that "all the charm [will be] fled" (l. 234), she expresses her artistry through movements given by her heart, "paining with eloquence", only as a reflection of her imagination, for "in fancy" (l. 233) does she regard St. Agnes with a "pensive" (l. 232) mind. As she enters the chamber, she becomes part of it, literally in the description Keats offers of her body and imaginatively in the world he creates as her fancy. He likens the architectural features of the room with her physical appearance to forge a link between her character and the chamber of maiden thought, which acts as a doorway for the lovers to enter the castle chamber literally and figuratively.

Keats's description of Madeline's physical beauty as a literal representation of imaginative beauty recalls Joseph Addison's essays on the imagination, which Keats perhaps used as a model.⁶ In *The Spectator*, No. 412, on *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712), Addison describes physical beauty as a facilitator of imaginative liveliness and delight, for "the very first Discovery of it strikes the Mind with an Inward Joy, and spreads a Cheerfulness and Delight through all its Faculties" (336). The natural world acts as a catalyst for the mind, and the beauty of "Symmetry and Proportion of Parts, in the Arrangement and Disposition of Bodies", which Keats explores in Madeline's physical charms in the poem to "heighten the Pleasures of the Imagination". Furthermore, Addison notes that

both “senses”, or the imagination and physical beauty, “receive an additional Beauty” by working together from the eye to the intellect (337). He implies that the combination of the imagination and the physical beauty of the natural world generate a metaphysical beauty, which he elaborates further in *Spectator* No. 413 (1712) as a Final, or as Aristotle names it, a Fourth Cause, the “Supreme Author of our Being” —God. By giving humanity a soul, Addison explains that God created the universe beautiful for us to “discover imaginary Glories in the Heavens, and in the Earth, and see some of this Visionary Beauty poured out upon the whole Creation”. For Addison, the metaphysical beauty engendered by the imagination offers another world, like the chamber of maiden thought, where human souls retreat before returning to reality:

Our Souls are at present delightfully lost and bewildered in a pleasing Delusion, and we walk about like the Enchanted Hero of a Romance, who sees beautiful Castles, Woods and Meadows; and at the same time hears the warbling of Birds, and the purling of Streams; but upon the finishing of some secret Spell, the fantastick Scene breaks up, and the disconsolate Knight finds himself on a barren heath, or in a solitary Desart. (338)

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Keats conceives of beauty and the imagination similarly in the poem, and Madeline’s physical beauty parallels imaginative beauty, which she gives to Porphyro to translate since she, as “a tongueless nightingale” (l. 206), cannot. Moreover, though the lovers return from the metaphysical realm to a world of “disconsolate” physical actualities, they share “a pleasing Delusion” in the chamber of maiden thought. The lovers become suffused in imaginative pleasures, and both Porphyro and Madeline possess an imaginative intensity that begets immortality through “fancy” before returning from the “delusion” that confers brief immortal visions.

To participate in Madeline’s metaphysical vision, Porphyro enters into a “feminine” mindset, if only for the duration of his metaphysical union with Madeline, by imaginatively entering the chamber of maiden thought. Although the female acts as a vehicle of inspiration for the male artist, he nevertheless casts off his masculine identity to gain poetic vision. Because Keats conceives of the imagination as a “maiden”, he gives Porphyro a hermaphroditic position as poet, with the body of a man attracted to Madeline physically and a mind that becomes, like the body, seduced and overtaken by the imagination, another feminine muse. Keats describes the chamber of maiden thought in a letter written to John Hamilton Reynolds (3 May 1818):

Well—I compare human life to be a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The First we step

into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the ballance of good and evil. (835)

Porphyro immerses his physical senses in the erotic delights of Madeline's chamber, and his body and intellect, like the poet's mind, "become intoxicated" with the metaphysical "delight" of the chamber of maiden thought—the imagination. And though imagination possesses the power to remove the poet to a realm of immortal beauty, physical realities dissipate the dream. The chambers of the castle hold "misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness and oppression", which includes harsh physical consequences for the lovers, if caught.⁷

Keats appropriates the chambers of human life he describes in his letter for the poem's castle chambers and manifests them as physical and imaginative representations in the poem. Unlike the warmth, vitality, and "pleasant wonders" that emanate from Madeline's chamber, the surrounding castle chambers "held barbarian hordes / Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords" (ll. 85-86) and convey a portrait of oppression, violence, and danger. Porphyro's longing heart desires to "gaze and worship" (l. 50) Madeline and to "become intoxicated with the light and atmosphere" of divine revelation given through his muse, whose heavenly desires contrast with the earthly ones lying in the surrounding chambers. Though Stillinger argues that Madeline's chamber cannot represent the chamber of maiden thought due to the imminent penetration of immutable truths, Keats describes her bedroom similarly to the chamber of maiden thought depicted in his letters (52).

Fragrant with "candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd" (l. 265), Madeline's chamber permeates the senses with oriental delights "from silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon" (l. 270). Redolent with exotic smells and infused with warmth, this chamber permits the lovers to retreat from the physical pain that exists without. Porphyro endures the human realities threatening to overwhelm him and understands "that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression" because he escapes, with Madeline, through an imaginative experience that Keats represents physically through their sexual union. Mortality threatens the

imaginative beauty found in the lovers' metaphysical union; however, the inevitability of the dying body has also created the desire within the lovers to ameliorate pain, death, and loss. Porphyro and Madeline *both* journey to this literal and imaginative room in the first half of the poem to escape the physical world around them.⁸

Keats develops the lovers' imaginative desires in the poem by drawing a distinction between their ability to experience transcendence, and Angela and the Beadsman's inability to escape. Unlike "poor" Angela, who cannot free herself from the pain of "agues in her brain" (l. 189), Porphyro liberates himself from pain in "the maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste" (l. 187), where he sees Madeline performing her prayers. Because Keats describes Angela's physical ailments as "agues" that affect her "brain", he draws attention to the division between her and the lovers, who free themselves by their imaginative longings. As the allegorical embodiment of physical suffering Keats describes in his letters, Angela leads Porphyro to the chamber of maiden thought, but she cannot enter with him. Like the Beadsman, Angela remains in a cold world outside the one sought by the lovers.

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Keats draws several distinctions between Angela, the Beadsman, and the lovers to illustrate that Porphyro and Madeline display an imaginative desire to enter into a sanctuary away from pain and heartbreak. The dream into which Porphyro immerses himself defies the cold ritualistic forms of organized religion in the poem because the rituals Madeline performs engage the imagination, a vital force in opposition to the "the sculptured dead [...] / Emprisoned in black, purgatorial rails" (l. 14-15). Instead the chamber of maiden thought appears vibrant, warm, and exotic, and Keats associates the lovers with this room rather than the cold "sculptured" chapel in which the Beadsman prays with "frosted breath" (l. 6) in dead, "dumb orat'ries" (l. 16). Rather, Madeline's divine communion counters mortality:

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. (ll. 219-225)

By contrast, the Beadsman's rituals leave him spiritually and physically "numb" (l. 5). One cannot forget, however, that Madeline only "seem'd a splendid angel". She remains, like Porphyro, grounded in a world of pain and fear that frames the visionary experience metaphorically depicted as a physical union.

Though the lovers have metaphysical desires, they never lose their human propensity to doubt and suffer, and the poem ends with the veiled implication that

they have escaped the danger of the castle, not the danger of the “storm” (l. 371). Indeed, “the frost-wind blows / Like Love’s alarum pattering the sharp sleet / against the window-panes” (ll. 322-324) when the consummation has ended. Though Porphyro would remain in Madeline’s “dream [...] / A midnight charm” (ll. 281-282) to prolong “an ancient ditty, long since mute” (l. 291), the heartaches of the world return.⁹

While the imagination offers visionary transport, the dream vision fades as physical truths of death, loss and fear encroach on the lovers. Madeline, the vehicle for Porphyro’s ascent to the chamber of maiden thought, only alleviates suffering from these mortal truths; she cannot deify Porphyro as Diana does her mortal lover in Keats’s *Endymion* (1818) by removing him from the world. She remains, like Porphyro, limited by the dying body.

Though restricted in the physical world, Madeline grants poetic experience to Porphyro, thus controlling the imaginative encounter that liberates the lovers. As the metaphysical entity, or idealized muse, in the poem, Madeline assumes a more central position because she not only represents the physical and imaginative beauty that inspires the poet, but she *becomes* the poetic imagination. John A. Minahan (1992: 75) denies that Madeline possesses the ability to enter the “realm of the spirit: imagination, dreams, [and] visions” without a male as the necessary opposition that creates unity in the poem. However, as the material embodiment of the poetic imagination, Madeline needs no one to experience imaginative beauty. Porphyro steps into her dream as the poet-lover to translate the experience once the vision fades.

When Porphyro enters Madeline imaginatively, he allows her to overtake his poetical character, which must become feminine to reach “maiden thought”. Keats describes the poet’s identity in his “Letter to Richard Woodhouse” (27 October 1818) as one that “has no self—it is everything and nothing [...] it has no character”. The poet becomes a “chameleon [...] the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body” (836). Porphyro’s poetical identity in the poem, then, is Madeline, for he must be “filled” with her body and her dreams to create his poetic character.

Her power only extends as far as the imaginative realm, however. Madeline suffers from the dying body and another immutable truth: patriarchal oppression, reflected in her fears after discovering Porphyro in her bed. Keats confines Madeline’s agency to the imaginative world where Porphyro gives song to her, his “tongueless nightingale”. His role as the translator of imaginative beauty reflects Keats’s unwillingness to give Madeline artistic power as poet. Without her, however, there can exist no fulfilment of imaginative desire for him. As the sole possessor of access to divine power, she invests Porphyro with the immortal beauty he translates as the traditional Platonic poet-musician:

It seem'd he never, never could redeem
From such a steadfast spell his lady's eyes;
So mus'd awhile, entoild in woofed phantasies.

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—
Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,
He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,
In Provence call'd, 'La belle dame sans mercy' :
Close to her ear touching the melody;—(ll. 286-293)

20 Anne Mellor (2001), among others, argues that the power Keats associates with the poetic imagination in the poem only proceeds through Madeline and progression to a feminine chamber —maiden thought.¹⁰ Though I would agree with Mellor that the masculine poetic faculties collapse as the male poet enters a feminine body and chamber of thought, this lasts only as long as the vision. While Porphyro embraces the feminine imagination to enjoy the metaphysical dream world, he nevertheless returns to a masculine world where he alone has an active role as poet. Keats gives Madeline access to the divine, but he specifically assigns Porphyro to the poet's "masculine" role: translator of the divine, Pythagorean "music of the spheres", given in the poem through Madeline. The "hollow lute" he plays, a metaphor of Madeline's womb, suggests that physical consummation and Porphyro's transcription of divine experience is now made "hollow" due to the absence of imaginative beauty. Porphyro's song extends the metaphor; the song he sings to Madeline, "La belle dame sans mercy" (l. 292), recalls Keats's other poem by that title, where a beautiful woman, presumably the muse, has left the knight/poet to die.¹¹ Because Madeline awakens beside Porphyro, remaining with him, Keats specifically assigns la belle dame to another fleeting feminine presence, the imagination, and also, by extension, associates himself with Porphyro. After the immortal dream fades, Porphyro leaves the chamber of maiden thought imaginatively to render his "ancient ditty" (l. 291) —like Keats, who renders the poem. Madeline, however, does not vanish as the elusive belle dame in the poem but enters the mortal world with Porphyro, divested of any power she previously held. Though the imagination proceeds through the maiden, the artistic translation nevertheless emerges from a masculine mind and body that Philip Cox (1995: 40) labels Porphyro's "masculine energy", signaling the return of the physical worlds and its "Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression". Language, even music, which exists as the only available means for human expression of their shared imaginative escape, fails to capture immortality, and Madeline realizes that she and Porphyro possess mortal bodies with limited expression:

"Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
Thy voice was a sweet tremble in mine ear,

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Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go. (ll. 307-315)

Unlike Lycius's beloved in *Lamia* (1819), Madeline does not disappear, leaving Porphyro to die, but participates with him in "this eternal woe".

Likewise, her beauty, the physical signifier of imaginative beauty, ultimately remains bound to death, which holds another imaginative beauty Keats begins to develop in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and will continue to explore in the subsequent Odes and in *Lamia*. Imaginative dreaming serves a "Shadow of reality to come" generated by the "Life of Sensations", which Keats describes as a state of desire for intellectual and divine sensation in his letter to Benjamin Bailey on "the authenticity of the imagination" (22 November 1817). Physical beauty, which Keats defines as "essential beauty", allows the poet to access imaginative beauty, and Keats unifies both conceptions through the poet's artistry:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love: they are all in their Sublime, creative of essential Beauty [...] The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth [...] O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! It is "a Vision in the form of Youth" a Shadow of reality to come [...] we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated—And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth—Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. (257-258)

The "holiness of the Heart's affections", like the holiness depicted in Madeline's attributes, attracts the poet just as it lures Porphyro; the "Passions of Love" in the poem reach a "Sublime" profundity through momentary illusions. Diane Hoeveler (1990: 159) views Madeline's role as "an ideal [...] a secularized Virgin Mary" and "an object of exchange [...] [with] value [...] predicated on her use as a sexual commodity", but Madeline stands at the center of the poem's vitality, its warmth and regenerative power to awaken Porphyro's poetic imagination. Madeline gives the male poet an artistic consciousness that redeems immutable physical truths threatening to dispel the sacred splendor her dream offers. Indeed, what the "imagination seizes as Beauty" is the lovers' desire for immortality, and they heighten

the pleasures of the body with the pleasures of the imagination. As with Adam and Eve, the lovers enjoy an Eden of the mind along with the body that Keats develops in his letter on “Adam’s dream” in the unity found between a pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve.¹²

In the poem, immortal dreaming falls into mortal pain, and the imaginative plane the lovers reach collides with the concrete reality to which they return. Though Porphyro desires Madeline even after the divine vision fades, each realizes that Madeline, as a woman, faces harsh penalties if Porphyro, a potential “rude infidel” (l. 342), is found in her chamber.¹³ Though a divine intermediary, Madeline ultimately remains bound to a human world and fears the results of premarital sex:

She panted quick—and suddenly
Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone [...]
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 (ll. 298-301)

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The imaginative world Madeline imparts through her dream fades, and doubts plague her conscience. Unlike Porphyro, Madeline has more to lose as an unmarried woman bound not only to a dying body but also to a strict moral code that objectifies women and imposes celibacy on maidens. If before she held the keys to divine power, Madeline now holds no power, and whereas Keats likens her to the poetic nightingale before her union with Porphyro, she now appears as a wounded dove. She moves from “so pure a thing” (l. 225) to an understanding of herself as “a deceived thing;— / ‘A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing” (ll. 332-333). Porphyro seeks to reassure her of his honorable intentions by regarding her not only as his “sweet dreamer!” but also, and more importantly considering her lost virginity, his “lovely bride!” (l. 334).

Prior to the sexual union, Madeline remained unaware of the physical realities around her, but after her “fall”, she gains new worldly eyes that perceive Porphyro in her bed as a potential heartache, for with prophetic pessimism she grieves: “Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine” (l. 329). Before the realization of her heart’s passion, she existed as “a thoughtful Madeline” (l. 55) in the poem:

She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,
Fix’d on the floor, saw many a sweeping train
Pass-by—she heeded not at all: in vain
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,
And back retir’d; not cool’d by high disdain,
But she saw not: her heart was elsewhere:
She sigh’d for Agnes’ dreams, the sweetest of the year. (ll. 57-63)

Her thoughts, however, look towards heaven rather than earth, for she looks as though “blissfully haven’d both from joy and pain [...] Binded alike from sunshine and from rain” (ll. 240, 242) as she dreams beneath Porphyro’s watchful gaze. She transforms from one “yearning like a God in pain” (l. 56) to a suffering woman, powerless against what Michael Ragussis (1975: 387) has called the “world of natural process”. This world incites Madeline’s “painful change” (l. 300) from the sacred muse to the secular mistress.¹⁴

The poetic imagination, then, poses a complex problem for the poem’s ending. While it offers a vision of immortality, the imagination cannot prevent the “sleeping dragons all around” (l. 354) from penetrating the lovers’ “paradise” (l. 244). Neither can the imagination efface the “fears” with which Madeline is “beset” (l. 352) after she awakens with human eyes to a changed world. In effect, she realizes that the poetic vision has vanished, leaving her with the ultimate fate of the mistress with “peerless eyes” (l. 20) in Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy”: “She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die” (l. 21). Nevertheless, Keats links the poetic imagination with Madeline for a specific reason. Like Madeline, the poetic imagination has the ability to lift one from physical realities even if it cannot defeat mortality.

The lovers awaken from their imaginative and sexual union to a “life of sensation”, able to transcend reality through imaginative longings and dreams. Though they possess physical bodies, like the Beasman and Angela, Keats marks off their position by allowing them to escape the cruel death suffered by the castle’s inhabitants in the last lines of the poem. The lovers enjoy an imaginative world that liberates them spiritually and physically, and Keats ameliorates the effects of death for them. They appear as ghostly, spiritual beings that vanish into an imaginative realm at the end of the poem.

The “visions of delight” (l. 47) Keats grants them engender mystical vitality that counters death by offering an imaginative life where the lovers escape, even through death, as “by one, and one, the bolts full easy slide;— / The chains lie silent on the stones;—/ The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans” (ll. 367-369). Though the characters, now ghostly “phantoms” (l. 361), flee into a “storm” (l. 371), it is “an elfin-storm from faery land” (l. 343), imbued with an imaginative quality that *seems* to give one alternative, that the lovers endure hardship, but really offers another, for they escape in a storm that is “haggard seeming, but a boon indeed” (l. 344).¹⁵

Keats diminishes the physical reality that the lovers die by allowing them to “glide, like phantoms, in the wide hall” (l. 361) and into a mystical storm rather than into the “coffin-worm” (l. 374) that awaits Angela and the Beasman, the knights, and the castle guests. He moves them from the physical world to the imaginative one,

for they appear not to suffer but to travel as imaginative characters leaving for a new “home” (l. 351). Keats goes to some lengths to create a division between the lovers’ fate and the fate of those in the castle, contrasting the nightmares in the last stanza, comparable to Angela’s “agues in her brain” (l. 189), with the imaginative dreams experienced by the lovers:

And they are gone —ay, 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-nightmared. Angela the old
Died palsy-twitched, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold. (ll. 372-378)

Keats ends the poem with images of death and pain to differentiate them from the images of the chamber of maiden thought, which grant “a life of sensation” rather than of pain to the lovers. He embraces imaginative beauty as a recognition that the dying body cannot contain the undying spirit or the transcendent powers of the imagination, a theme he implicitly defines as a passage from this life to a “nobler” (l.123) one in *Sleep and Poetry* (1817), one that gives “wings to find out an immortality” (l. 84) through “an eternal book” (l. 64) read in this life. Perhaps more importantly, however, Keats obscures the line between death and life, giving the lovers a death that promises another imaginative world, one that he addresses in “To Autumn” (1820) as beautiful and seductive, equal to the “songs of Spring” (l. 23) that have passed, for he apostrophizes death: “thou hast thy music too” (l. 24).

Mark Sandy (2000) argues that, while there remains no actual, permanent escape for the lovers, Madeline and Porphyro are “absorbed into legend’s ideal and immutable realm”, where they possess a timeless existence through art. I argue, however, that only their spirit is absorbed into this world. Like the “marble men and maidens overwrought” depicted in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1820) the lovers “glide, like phantoms” (l. 361) into an imaginative world despite their mortal “chains” (l. 368), and it is a “life of sensations” that releases them. As representatives of a realm Keats defines more explicitly in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as “For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d, / For ever panting, and for ever young: / All breathing human passion far above [...]” (ll. 26-28), the “pant[ing]” (l. 295) Madeline and Porphyro, who “breath’d himself” (l. 250) into her, breathe “beyond a mortal man impassion’d far” (l. 316), for both lovers exceed mortal limits imaginatively.

Unlike the urn figures, however, the lovers participate as living characters with imaginations that allow them to bridge the physical and imaginative worlds through dreams, and by extension, through death. If Keats apotheosizes them as poetical characters by allowing them to escape into faery land, this escape is effected through their imaginative longings, which distinguish them from their counterparts in the poem and on the urn. These immobile figures serve more as an ekphrastic representation of poetic language than as poetical characters because they remain incapable of experiencing imaginative longings. They rather signify than perceive imaginative beauty:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.'—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (ll. 46-50)

The figures on the Grecian urn capture the idea of imaginative beauty, the world of art to which the poet aspires, by appearing physically beautiful as artistic figures, but unlike Madeline and Porphyro, they are only “a friend to man”, a signifier of another world beyond the “earth” that they “know”. Stuart Peterfreund (1986: 69) believes that, for Keats, imaginative beauty exists free of temporal limitation and in the “realm of being—the realm of the *is*”. What humans possess is “the means for the partial apprehension” of imaginative beauty. As mediating figures between the physical world and the imaginative one, and Peterfreund specifically refers to the artistic figures in Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, humans search for beauty as a fixed locality and find, rather than eternity, a dead reality that only *points* to eternity. The urn's figures remain symbols, whereas the lovers participate as active beings because of their imaginative capacity.

Porphyro and Madeline perpetually exercise imaginative longings, and these imaginative desires allow them to transcend pain and loss as spiritual beings, even in death. Their escape into the elfin-storm, then, reconciles death and the imagination because it allows them to engage with imaginative experience. They resist the “ache in icy hoods and mails” (l. 18) by invoking an imaginative world that offers immortal dreaming and death as a passage to an unknown but imagined world of beauty. What the imagination offers in a fatalistic universe where pain and oppression seem to triumph over imaginative beauty is the artistic world offered by the chamber of maiden thought. Receptivity to the imaginative world liberates the lovers, giving them a negotiated position between the physical world and the imaginative one. Though they die, an inescapable truth, their deaths, like their dreams, allow them to enter into an imaginative realm that never dies.

Notes

1. Stillinger (1999) documents the wide range of readers' views. Among more than fifty-nine interpretations of the poem offered in his study, Stillinger gives primacy to three readings, which he employs as a critical structure for examining the diverse directions taken by readers of the poem. He takes these readings from a prior essay he wrote on the poem, from Earl Wasserman's earlier reading of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and from an interpretation developed by Stuart M. Sperry. Each of these critics provides a spectrum from one extreme to another that offers a useful framework for understanding most of the interpretations of the poem given. While Wasserman argues for a metaphysical reading of Porphyro's progression towards Madeline and a transcendent spiritual experience, Stillinger posits a much bleaker view of the sexual union between Madeline and Porphyro. In Stillinger's analysis, Porphyro acts as a voyeur who creeps and peeps around the castle, giving the "hoodwink'd" Madeline unwanted sexual attention and a consummation she neither invites nor desires. Sperry's argument lies somewhere between the spiritual ascent Wasserman argues for and the physical aggression of Stillinger's reading. His view occupies a space between these extremes where imagination and reality create a world in which wish fulfillment drives desire. For a complete analysis of Wasserman's, Sperry's, and Stillinger's readings and Stillinger's summary of the critical corpus of scholarship on the poem, see *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes*.

2. Erik Gray (1999: 127-147) offers a provocative analysis of the poem's contradictory nature, which he argues Keats employs to overturn the readers' expectations of the traditional romance genre and Keats's typical poetic lovers. He posits that the poem reflects Madeline and Porphyro's divided personas in opposition. Because of the divided nature of the characters, I believe that the lovers express the inherent tension driving the

poem, for they, like the imagination, exist between two dimensions, the mortal and the immortal realm. They exist both as sexually charged human lovers and as artistic creations reflective of medieval romance and poetry, the two forms Keats invokes to create their world and their poetic characters.

3. See, for example, the relationship Keats establishes between Petrarch and his muse in *Sleep and Poetry*: "Petrarch, outstepping from the shady green, / Starts at the sight of Laura; nor can wean / His eyes from her sweet face. Most happy they! / For over them was seen a *free display* of out-spread wings, and from between them shone / The face of Poesy..." (ll. 389-394), italics mine. Whereas the poet typically continues to occupy a masculine identity as poet, Porphyro sheds his masculinity while under his muse's "spell".

4. Compare to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and *Lamia*, where Keats allows the apotheosized female divine agency to emasculate and/or kill her adoring male suitor.

5. Consider, for example, the speaker in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale", who laments his return to an unsatisfactory physical world after the transcendent experience given by his feminine imagination: "Forlorn! The very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self! / Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf" (ll. 71-74).

6. Though there is no direct evidence Keats read Addison, the popularity of Addison's writings on the imagination and his influences on writers prior to and contemporary with Keats suggests that he was most likely familiar with Addison. Since Keats had access to the large library at John Clarke School, it seems highly probable that Keats would have had access to Addison while a student there. For a more extensive study of Keats and his influences, see Andrew Motion's *Keats* (1997: 37).

7. If Madeline possesses a divine presence prior to the lovers' union, she awakens to mortal fears: the loss of her virginity, a world where she will age, and the possibility that Porphyro will not love her. And moreover, she awakens to a mortal body that ultimately dies. Having once experienced transcendence, which Keats constructs as the poem's metaphysical world, Madeline finds herself surrounded by physical truths: fear and mortal decay.

8. Michael E. Holstein (1987: 32-49) has noted that poetry provided a healing agency for Keats and that the imagination allowed the poet, nursing his dying brother Tom and facing his own mortality and consequent failed love affair with Fanny, an escape. For Keats, "Poetry contributes to the world through its intense experience and its commanding claims on a reader's attention, which deflect consciousness from pain".

9. The return to reality from the imaginative realm given by art remains a persistent theme in Keats poetry.

10. Mellor (2001: 214-229) asserts that Keats's poetic fluidity created by the effacement of self through negative capability, his choice for "feminine" poetic forms, like the medieval romance, and his attachment to beauty as a feminized manifestation of the imagination in his poetry and letters provoke interesting questions about Keats's view of gender. Mellor argues that what Keats develops in his poetry is a collapse of all poetic faculties into femininity: "He repeatedly assigns the possession of beauty, power and knowledge—everything the male poet desires—to the feminine gender".

11. In the ballad, Keats creates an abstract world in which he explores how physical reality overtakes imaginative beauty because the imagination remains confined to the mortal world. The poet, through human language, attempts to capture this beauty through art, which provides brief transcendence though it cannot penetrate death. The knight, like the lovers in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, ultimately faces death, though he offers the memory of la belle dame's beauty to

communicate the power of the imagination through art. Even though death remains an eventuality, art offers metaphysical truth in the poem, which the knight views as a deceiving aphrodisiac for the body and mind, because it allows brief interludes of metaphysical beauty in a mortal world.

12. Nancy Rosenfeld (2000: 56) examines the relationship between Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Keats's exploration of the imaginative process as a progression from reality to an Edenic state to a less transcendent, idyllic phase. She remains ambivalent, however, about whether "Adam's dream" provides an authentic source for Keats since Adam "awakens to a reality of perfect beauty" and Keats's "reality is never perfect as the dream". Rosenfeld's analysis follows Keats's outline for the progression of the poet's imagination in his letter on maiden thought almost exactly; however, Keats turns this idea on its head for the poet-knight Porphyro in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. If Madeline awakens to a world less divine it is only because Keats never clearly defines her human agency until the moment *she* realizes she is human. Porphyro, who only reached divinity through an imaginative participation of the body and mind with Madeline, awakens from the dream to a beautiful reality that never fades for him. He is perpetually driven by the desire for communion with Madeline and escape.

13. Keats perhaps alludes to social prejudice in this line, which adds to the lovers' physical pains and oppression. If Porphyro is a "rude infidel", both face the consequences bred from an un-accepting world if found together.

14. Keats perhaps gives social commentary through Madeline's loss of power in the poem. In the imaginative world of art, Keats links the feminine with divinity and with agency to grant the poet vision, imaginative beauty, and life. In the physical world, however, women remain powerless, subject to sexual restriction and rejection if they lose their virginity prior to marriage. Keats allows Madeline complete autonomy in the first half of the poem when she appears divine, but after her union with Porphyro, Madeline must face

the oppressive masculine hierarchy that would condemn her as an unmarried woman if discovered in bed with a lover.

¹⁵. See Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1820) where he conceives of an

imaginative, undying realm where the nightingale has flown "in faery lands forlorn" (l. 70)—an escape from the physical world he seeks through the "vision, or a waking dream" (l. 79) given by the imagination, the feminine "deceiving elf" (l. 74).

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