



The Eve of St. Agnes

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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.

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