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Sensuous Embodiment in *The Eve of St. Agnes*

Keats takes a conventional story of young love triumphing against all odds and examines it through the prism of medieval tales and his own developing sense of irony and radicalized humanism, to create a hymn to moments of life-affirming beauty. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats uses a deeply embodied language to capture and describe all the human senses, and through this language he defines his dominant ethos: beauty is truth, beauty is life, beauty is all. Keats's mastery of the language draws readers into the lives of the characters in the story that we feel as embodied and real. By this very embodiment, their lives can have real meaning as sentient humans, capable of development and growth, contrary to Douglas Bush's judgment that their story is "no more than a romantic tapestry of unique richness and colour" (qtd. in Stillinger 67). The richly

embodied language and his innate ability to immerse himself in his characters enable Keats to convey his enormous empathy with all living beings, from the frozen hare and the poor old Beadsman, to his young lovers, both male and female. Walter Jackson Bate suggests in his biography of the poet that “what strikes us most is his capacity for sympathetic identification” (*John Keats* 252). This is especially apparent in his portrayal of the physical and emotional awakening of Madeline, an aspect which, until recently, scholars have underplayed or ignored. This sympathetic identification is also evident in his portrayal of Porphyro, the male protagonist and other imagined bodies such as the animals suffering in the cold, and even the frozen statues in the chapel. There are numerous interpretations of the meaning of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, but generally critics agree with Bate’s assessment that contrast “became a distinguishing quality once the poem began, that is, the ebb and flow of emerging contrasts and partial resolutions” (442). Keats uses contrast to heighten and intensify awareness of all the body’s senses, to highlight change of mood, and above all, to lead us to a deeper understanding of how art can, as he famously wrote in a letter, make “all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth” (Wu 1350).

The poem begins with an unequivocal depiction of what Keats does *not* want in life; he does not want Christianity or anything it stands for. He assaults our senses with his description of an icy cold chapel on a January night; indeed Keats’s embodied language is so forceful, that one could easily believe he is depicting a frozen ante-room to hell. Having already established the picture of gelid misery in the depths of winter outdoors, Keats moves swiftly to depict a scene of equal wretchedness inside the chapel:

Numb were the Beadsman’s fingers while he told

His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
 Like pious incense from a censer old,
 Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
 Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith. (5-9)

His language indicates that, within this Christian chapel, all the body's senses are dead or dying: the Beadsman's fingers are literally numb from the cold, but one can also read this figuratively as an embodiment of his spiritual numbness. It appears that the old man is not merely enduring the cold but is seeking to increase his self-abnegation and mortification of the flesh by kneeling, barefoot, on the icy stones of the chapel. He both transfers and embodies his sense of bone-cracking cold by expressing pity for stone statues: "To think how they may ache in icy hood and mails" (18).

Keats establishes the deathly sound of silence in the first three stanzas of the poem: the sheep are huddled and silent; although the Beadsman is praying, his physical act of speech lacks force or substance. His frosted breath floats upwards like the last wisps of smoke from an old censer. Keats's likening of the Beadsman's breath to incense is the only hint of smell—and that, by inference—in these stanzas. As he leaves the chapel, the old man passes by silent statues "praying in dumb orat'ries" (16); this is not so much a contrast with his own feeble prayers, as a juxtaposition that serves to emphasize the equal futility of both mimed and living gestures. There is little to attract the eye in this cold Christian world; the colours are those of death and winter: black, grey, and white. They are also the colours of a film negative—insubstantial, waiting to be developed and brought to life. Keats has no need to mention the whiteness of snow: the hare and owl in their winter camouflage and the huddled sheep are the living embodiment

of the colour “white” and the suspended animation of winter. The Beadsman’s breath is white or light grey in the frosty air, and he is “wan” (12), suggesting an image of a “pale, colourless, bloodless” body (*OED*). The final touch in this grim negative of life is the “black purgatorial rails” (15) that imprison the statues in the chapel. Presiding over it all is the “sweet Virgin’s picture” (9). Keats writes nothing by accident, so it is worth noting that in all the descriptive lines about the chapel, there is no mention of cross, crucifix, or pictures of Jesus: the only picture mentioned is that of Mary the Virgin. Keats lays out in specific, concrete language, that which offends and repels him—his anti-ideal—which includes the Christian Virgin Mary, whose presence in *The Eve of St. Agnes* is crucial in establishing one aspect of his contrasting view of women.

Keats’s rejection of the central tenets of Christianity and his “deep and abiding skepticism about the possibility of knowing with certainty any kind of transcendent or higher reality” (Sharp 5), gives a natural logic to his choice of Christian imagery for one aspect of his main contrasting theme. In his poetic world, Christianity stands for everything that is life-negating. Robert Ryan reminds us that, in the context of the times, Keats’s attitude was hardly surprising: during his lifetime, the Church of England was desperately in need of renewal, “spiritually, intellectually and structurally in its worst condition...and least deserving of the respect of an intelligent and sensitive man” (15). There was no intellectual, emotional, or aesthetic appeal for the young poet in this institution. Ronald Sharp argues that, despite what is implied by Keats’s instinctive rejection of the established Church, his religious language is central to his work. Furthermore, his choice of Christianity as his anti-ideal in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and other major works is not arbitrary, but rather he “sets up a traditional religious framework

which he then either contrasts with or appropriates to his own new and radically untraditional humanized religion” (4).

Keats gives a tantalizing glimpse of his life-affirming golden vision before the Beadsman quite leaves the stage to sit alone among “rough ashes” (26); he opens the wrong door and:

Music’s golden tongue

Flatter’d to tears this aged man and poor;

But no—already had his deathbell rung;

The joys of all his life were said and sung: (20-23)

The contrast of this fully embodied, shining image of music with the deathly silence and grey-black chill of the chapel is stunning. Keith D. White notes that Keats will “contrast these cold, bleak images with ‘native fire’ and Apollonian imagery” (153) throughout the poem. The Beadsman is both tempted and moved to tears by the musical summons to life, but makes a deliberate decision to turn aside and embrace, if not death, then “harsh penance” (24). Apart from the manner in which the Beadsman’s renunciation of life is intended to function as a contrasting element within the poem, one cannot help also contrasting it with Keats himself and “the intermingling of that looming death and of the intense ardor of his life (which) makes him an irresistibly sympathetic figure” (McFarland 170). Scholars generally agree that the way Keats frames his lushly described tale of young love at the beginning and end of the poem, with images of cold and death, indicates that he is not just living in, or depicting, a fairytale world; indeed, I would argue that his instinctive knowledge that he would not make old bones, gives added weight to this belief in the grounded reality of his work.

The poet draws his anti-vision with broad sweeping strokes using fully embodied language to create a definite, but not overly nuanced, picture; he takes the same approach in creating a vision of raucous, impassioned life, and breathless anticipation of earthly pleasures:

Soon, up aloft,
 The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:
 The level chambers, ready with their pride,
 Were glowing to receive a thousand guests: (30-33)

These lines stand in sharp contrast to the scene in the chapel. The musicians place their solid, corporeal selves up in the gallery; they elevate themselves and their instruments, not waiting meekly for their music to waft gently heavenward; their sparkling, silver trumpets pick up and redouble the light from the chambers below. Keats's choice of "snarling" for the trumpets, with its intimation of savage dogs, is startling compared to the silent tomb-like atmosphere of the chapel. The grinding sound of the "ar" in "snarling" picks up and repeats the same sound heard in the "harsh penance" (24) of the previous stanza: a world of difference in tone and meaning, but the sound links the thoughts.

The rhyming of "chide" and "pride" calls attention to the earth-bound, non-Christian connotations of these words. One definition of "chide" when applied to wind or hounds is to "cry as if impatient" (OED); this denotes the opposite of Christian resignation, in that it demands immediate attention. Pride, of course, is the deadliest of the seven deadly sins in the Christian lexicon, yet here it denotes life, pleasure, and anticipation of earthly delights. This sense of embodied, glittering pride is picked up and

emphasized a few lines later when a thousand guests burst into the chambers all adorned “with plume, tiara and all rich array” (38), the very symbols of aristocratic vanity. The reader may spare a passing thought for the solitary Beadsman in his penitential ashes, but the revelers certainly will not: they want to enjoy themselves here and now, on earth. Keats uses the first forty-one lines of the poem to establish the boundaries of his contrasting vision; they are, to a certain extent, a rough but effective framework in which to develop his themes of cold and hot, ice and fire, death and life. He spends the rest of the poem filling in the middle space with ever more nuanced versions of his opening lines.

The first four and a half stanzas are both prelude and buildup to the dramatic moment of Madeline’s arrival on the scene. The way Keats sets up the story invokes the language of stage drama, and in today’s world, film or television. The stage fades to black, all the extras disappear, and the spotlight finds the star: “These let us wish away / And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there” (41-42). Perhaps, with Madeline now on stage, it is time to mention one of the most obvious, yet unspoken contrasts of all: Mary and Magdalen form the dominant and inescapable binary that defines women in western Christianized culture. The first stanza introduces the reader to the worship of Mary, the “sweet Virgin” (9); the other woman in Christ’s life was Magdalen, the harlot, or, at least, the non-virgin of Christian orthodoxy. Keats deliberately creates confusion by the implied contrast between the young heroine, whom one sees first as *a* virgin, if not *the* Virgin, and her actual name, which sounds remarkably close to Magdalen; this is a clear indication that he intends to subvert both images in his ultimate portrayal of young Madeline. If one keeps in mind Sharp’s contention that Keats seeks to create a “radically

untraditional humanized” (4) way of viewing the world, one can look for the way Keats works towards a more nuanced version of the Magdalen persona, rather than remaining trapped in the sterile discourse of virgin and whore.

Once Madeline is on stage, Keats returns immediately to his major contrasting themes of heat and cold, life and death: “Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day / On love, and wing’d St. Agnes’ saintly care” (43-44). Keats intensifies the contrast in these two lines, pairing the heart, that seat of life and fire, with winter; and earthly love with the Christian icon of sainted Agnes: these are the conflicting images roiling around in Madeline’s thoughts. There is another key contrast introduced here, which concerns the knowledge of old women, and the ignorance of young girls. The “old dames full many times” (45) tell Madeline the fanciful tale that young virgins will dream of their intended husband on the Eve of St. Agnes if they follow certain rituals. One critic thus describes Madeline as “a victim of deception, to be sure, but deception not so much by Porphyro as by herself and the superstition she trusts in” and describes the superstition as “clearly an old wives’ tale” (Stillinger 84, 85). Perhaps we should pay closer attention to the phrase “old wives’” and compare it with its natural opposite, “young virgins’” (47). The one critical difference, apart from age, is sexual knowledge, and this holds true both for the time about which Keats is ostensibly writing (a vaguely defined medieval period), and for when he actually writes the poem, in the early nineteenth century. These old wives know perfectly well the reality of sexual relationships between men and women, yet their way of passing on knowledge to young Madeline is to stuff her head full of tales about dreaming of her intended, under the aegis of a saint, who is believed to have been

martyred to save her virginity. There's a fine broth of conflicting ideas to put in a young girl's head.

One must ask: where is Madeline supposed to obtain her sexual knowledge? Who is supposed to instruct this young woman, presumably in her early teens and on the verge of womanhood? Or, indeed, is she supposed to be instructed at all? There is no mention of a mother or female relatives; it appears to be a male-dominated household, with "old Lord Maurice, not a whit / More tame for his gray hairs" (103-4) and "dwarfish Hildebrand" (101) specifically named. Apart from the generic "old dames" (45), the only older female available to teach or instruct Madeline is Angela, "one old beldame, weak in body and soul" (91). Madeline is a young girl, on the verge of womanhood and sexual maturity, who is trying to steer her way through the growing instincts of her body, and the incomplete, largely erroneous information in her mind. Given this, I would argue that Keats introduces another major contrast in the developing picture of Madeline: that which occurs between her mind and her body. This is implied by the conflict between the actions the ritual requires, and what the young girl hopes to accomplish, having faithfully performed them:

Young virgins might have visions of delight,
 And soft adorings from their loves receive
 Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
 If ceremonies due they did aright;
 As supperless to bed they must retire,
 And couch supine their beauties lily white (47-52)

Young virgins they may be, but what they hope to dream about is a fully embodied sensuality that engages sight, touch, and taste. Fasting has a definite anaphrodisiac purpose, as Burton points out in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: “chast thoughts are ingendered ...concupiscence is restrained, vicious...lusts and humours are expelled” (qtd. in Stillinger 79). Stillinger notes that in Keats’s own copy of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, he writes “good” in the margins beside the line on fasting (79). He must have found it a useful example of the mortification of the flesh. The lines which follow the implied promise of sensual delight return to the rigid, colourless world of Christian self-denial first encountered with the Beadsman; however, unlike the old penitent, who shows a singularity of thought and action, there is a looming divergence between what Madeline’s body is supposed to be doing, and where her mind is heading. Whereas in the lines previously quoted, Madeline’s mind contemplates visions of sensual delight while her body endures self-denial, in these next lines, Keats accomplishes a complete reversal in that her body takes over: “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” (64-66).

This is an accurate description of a teenage girl with first-date nerves: the difficulty in breathing; the clock-watching anticipation; the complete obliviousness to external stimuli, however powerful, such as the “looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn” (69) that surround her. One thinks back to the trumpets in the first stanzas of the poem, which begin “to chide” (31) as an indication of impatience; it seems as though Madeline’s entire body is beginning to chide. In this stanza, Keats describes the physical reaction of her body first, and then follows it with two lines indicating the cause of those

reactions: “Hoodwink’d with faery fancy; all amorn / Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn” (70-71). The mention of lambs is an embodied image of the perfect sacrificial offering, that of *Agnus Dei*, the lamb of God—Christ himself; it could also be seen as an ironic look at virgin maidens who are expected to “sacrifice” their maidenhood. Finally, as a symbol of virginity, an unshorn lamb is undoubtedly warm and protected, just as a shorn lamb is chilly and exposed, but the shearing is an inevitable part of a lamb’s life. The final line of this stanza is ambiguous; despite an ostensibly religious intent, Madeline fully expects to dream about, and through her dreams, experience “bliss to be before to-morrow morn” (72). The word “bliss” is also ambiguous in that it can mean either spiritual joy, or simply great joy or happiness. Since there is no evidence in the text that Madeline is a budding mystic like St. Teresa of Avila, I would opt for the more earthly interpretation.

Keats’s ability to inhabit and successfully depict the mind and body of a young girl comes as no surprise to anyone who reads his letter on the nature of a poet to his friend Richard Woodhouse:

A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other body. The sun, the moon, the sea and men and women who are creatures of impulse are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute; the poet has none, no identity. (Wu 1375)

There are countless examples in *The Eve of St. Agnes* of Keats’s ability to inhabit the bodies and souls of his creations, both animal and human; he uses such deeply embodied language that one is almost able participate in all their senses, to feel what they feel; that

poetic empathy extends to the thoughts and feelings of his young heroine. Many critics focus on the “hoodwink’d” description, portraying Madeline as a silly little girl, led astray by fairy tales and ripe for the plucking—one way or another, a victim. I would argue that overlooking, or simply not seeing, that Keats depicts Madeline as incipiently sexual, alters the balance of the poem. If one accepts the reading of Madeline as a developing sexual being, and therefore potentially an equal partner in any sexual congress, then there is no need to tie oneself in knots interpreting the central love-making scene. The source of the disquiet is a perceived conflict between the intoxicating lushness of the poet’s language and a lingering sense that what he is describing is somehow wrong. At best, critics depict the crucial scene in the poem as a seduction, which implies an active agent and a passive one; at worst, Porphyro is an unprincipled cad, a quasi-rapist who in another age would be portrayed as whispering “have some Madeira M’ dear / You really have nothing to fear” (Flanders and Swann), in Madeline’s ear. Jack Stillinger flatly asserts that “regardless of the extent to which Keats identified with his hero, he introduced enough overtones of evil to make Porphyro’s actions wrong within the structure of the poem” (83). The discourse of sacrosanct innocent female virginity, so deeply ingrained in western Christianized culture for the past two thousand years is hard to dislodge. The implied binary, which holds women within the iron grip of its boundaries, continues to influence creative and critical writing about them—especially about young women. This is the great unspoken in much of the critical response to Keats’s poem. Author L.M. Montgomery, who wrote about and for young girls on the cusp of womanhood, ruefully confirms the obdurate nature of this discourse in a letter to a friend, over one hundred years after Keats wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes*:

The public and publisher won't allow me to write of a young girl as she really is. One can write of children as they are...but when you come to write of the 'miss' you have to depict a sweet insipid young thing—really a child grown older—to whom the basic realities of life and reactions to them are quite unknown. *Love* must scarcely be hinted at—yet young girls often have some very vivid love affairs. (238)

Mary Arsenault contends, based on the evidence of Keats's letters, that he fully realizes both his own tendency, and society's, to divide women into virgins and whores. He faces a constant struggle between his fear of "being absorbed and dissolved in the presence of a beautiful woman" (Arsenault 4), and his own deeply felt poetic aesthetic about the importance of disappearing into the characters he creates. Yet Keats does manage to overcome his own fears and reach beyond that entrenched schematic image in his intuitive portrayal of Madeline. By virtue of his own extraordinary poetic imagination, he is "able to throw his own soul into any object he sees or imagines" (Bate 261).

With Madeline waiting for "the hallow'd hour" (66) before she can perform her ritual, Keats moves the spotlight to Porphyro, the young protagonist. Unlike Madeline, Porphyro has no ambiguity about his feelings or intentions: he arrives at the castle "with heart on fire / For Madeline" (75-76). It is not unreasonable to suggest that the sexual mores of the time give Porphyro a far clearer idea of what he wants, and how to get it, than Madeline has learned or heard. Keats plays a bit in the next few lines, telling us that Porphyro "implores / All saints to give him sight of Madeline" (77-78); it is unlikely that an ardent young man would come "across the moors" (73) in the dead of winter merely to catch a glimpse of his intended, and it is even less likely that, having completed the

arduous journey, he would rely solely on the uncertain good will of the saints to accomplish his goal. The final line of this stanza reveals, at least partially, his true intention towards Madeline to: “perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss” (81).

As Porphyro enters the hostile environs of the castle, Keats wraps up his sense of danger and his excited lover’s heart with embodied metaphors of silence, secrecy, and attack: “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). Porphyro’s dealings with Angela, his one ally in the castle, show an ambivalent mixture of dream and reality. Keats seems deliberately to introduce a fairy-tale element when he describes Angela as carrying an “ivory-headed wand” (92); the fantasy image is reinforced by Angela’s knowing reaction to seeing Porphyro: “my lady fair the conjuror plays” (124), as though he appears by a magic spell invoked by Madeline. Despite the fairy-tale atmosphere, Porphyro is a very real, physical presence in the castle. This is a shock to old Angela who is scared witless when the young lover’s passionate determination to see Madeline develops before her eyes:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
Made purple riot: then he doth propose
A stratagem that makes the beldame start. (136-39)

This is embodied passion to be sure, with its image of the rose, symbol of love and its implied heady scent, and with the sense of blood racing around his body, causing his skin to redden and his heart to pound. The reference to his heart making “purple riot” is a reflection and reminder of Madeline’s “breathing quick and short” (65). Angela protests

when she realizes how serious Porphyro's intentions are, although there is a touch of *pro forma* role-playing in her performance. He promises, "I will not harm her" (145), but it is arguable that Angela and Porphyro have different interpretations of what "harm" means when it comes to Madeline. His promise that he will not look upon Madeline "with ruffian passion" (149) is perhaps more credible. Once Angela agrees to lead him to Madeline's boudoir, she acts with the dispatch of Chaucerian Pandarus who facilitates the affair, and a helpful Jeeves who will provide "all cates and dainties" (173).

Their trip to Madeline's bed chamber, done as it is in the greatest secrecy and fear, calls to mind images from a Hollywood movie, of unauthorized entry into a Sultan's harem. It is also reminiscent of the feminine bower from the days of chivalry; but as Stuart Curran reminds us, "the bower is fragile, a sanctuary dependent on the masculine economy" (143). Porphyro is ever conscious of being surrounded by Madeline's bloodthirsty kinsmen, "more fang'd than wolves and bears" (153). Her room, "silken, hush'd and chaste" (187) is indeed a refuge, but only remains so on the unspoken understanding that no unauthorized man shall enter; it will only be an "illusory stronghold" (Sandy) for the lovers. Madeline's father may well intend this room for a virgin maiden, but Keats's rich, evocative description indicates something else entirely:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
 All garlanded with carven imag'ries
 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
 As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;

And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,

And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,

A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of kings and queens. (208-217)

This airy, spacious room is full of concrete images of fertility and fruitfulness in the carvings, which make the dead images in the chapel, and even the carved angels of the great hall seem another world away. The wings of the tiger moth remind us of both the lustrous, silken weave of damask cloth, and the heady scent of the damask rose; one also thinks of the complete metamorphosis nature requires to create a mature tiger moth. By using the image of the moth in describing Madeline's chamber, Keats implies this is a place where change can, and will, happen. Finally, there are the combined, embodied images of shifting red-tinged light and pulsing royal blood. This is not the sexually innocuous nursery of a school girl.

This is the background Porphyro sees as Madeline closes the door and enters her sanctuary to complete the last stages of a ritual, which by now has an unambiguously erotic purpose. As dictated by the ritual, she is completely silent, and although she maintains the virtual immobility of a statue, her body is in a state of almost unbearable anticipation:

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. (204-7)

Keats once again uses the image of a pounding heart, especially with the thudding effect created by the repetition in the phrase, "her heart, her heart"; this is a reminder both of

Madeline's shortness of breath when she first appears in the poem, and of Porphyro's "heart on fire" (75). What is truly striking is Keats's use of the embodied image of stifled sound, both in Madeline's heart and in a mute nightingale, to depict growing, as yet unsatisfied, sexual desire. Many critics focus on the often-cited lines about Porphyro as a marvelous depiction of male sexual vibrancy: "he arose / Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star" (317-18); I would argue that the lines, "As though a tongueless nightingale should swell / Her throat in vain" are an equally powerful evocation of female sexual arousal. Once again, we see Keats shading and moving the image of a lily-white statue, the untouchable female virgin of Christian mythology, towards a fully embodied, fully human young woman. She will not, however, become the reductive alternative of the Magdalen.

The theme of embodied female sexuality is developed fully in stanzas XXV and XXVI, in which Madeline completes the final act of the ritual, and then disrobes. Jeffrey Baker, who reads Porphyro as a duplicitous and "besotted spy" (105), contends that the young protagonist himself has "two visions of Madeline" (104), essentially a variation on the virgin/whore schematic; he argues further that Porphyro's swooning fit is caused by the disjuncture of the two images of Madeline he sees when spying on her. That may indeed be the case from Porphyro's point of view; however, Keats may have a deeper purpose here than just invoking a pure and saintly image to be contrasted in the following stanza with a more sensual one. Consider the embodied language of sensuality in these lines:

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,

As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
 Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
 And on her silver cross, soft amethyst,
 And on her hair a glory, like a saint (217-222)

Referring specifically to the Christian icon of St. Agnes, Gary Farnell says that Keats “hollow[s] out the significance of this figure and in its place (or space) insert[s] a new meaning” (406). Keats also appears to perform a similar hollowing out, in his depiction of Madeline at her devotions. Keats uses the imagery of refracted light to subvert the conventional idea of a virginal young woman at prayer and turns it to his own purposes. The light from the “wintry moon” is transformed: far from evoking Diana, goddess of chastity, the prismatic moonlight throws “warm gules” on Madeline’s breast. Keats emphasizes the contrast in the changed light by focusing it directly on her body. The pale moonlight also appears on her hand as a “rose-bloom,” another variation of Keats’s recurring symbol of earthly love and intoxicating scent; even the appearance of her silver cross, that austere symbol of Christian suffering, becomes softened in the refracted amethyst light. His description of Madeline’s hair as “a glory,” lit up by coloured moonbeams, is ironic and subversive; it is a direct reference to St. Paul’s description of a woman’s long hair “as a glory to her” (1 Cor. 11.15). Madeline is about to uncover and let down her hair—in effect, to let her glory shine—which contrasts sharply with St. Paul’s specific instructions for women to cover their hair. In the same chapter of Corinthians, St. Paul also lays out a rigid hierarchical order: God over man, man over woman. *The Eve of St. Agnes* is a poem of many contrasts; it would be difficult to imagine a more dramatic one than the Pauline and Keatsian views of women and their place in the world.

Keats may well be toying with conventional pious imagery in stanza XXV, however the following stanza is a fully sensual, even erotic, description of a woman disrobing before she joins her lover in bed; it is a clarion call to all the senses:

her vespers done,
 Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
 Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
 Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
 Half-hidden like a mermaid in sea-weed (226-30)

First, she liberates her hair—from decorative, not Pauline—constraint, and slowly takes off her “warmed jewels,” heated from contact with her “balmy side” (205); the fragrance of her bodice recalls the roses, a leitmotif in the poem; finally, with a slow “rustling” drift, her clothes slide to her knees, leaving her partially exposed. This recalls Botticelli’s painting, *Birth of Venus*, which shows the classical goddess of love emerging from the water on a shell, blown toward shore by the Zephyrs, conventionally portrayed as “balmy” (205) winds. With this stanza, Keats comes close to achieving his ideal of beauty, by eradicating what Walter Jackson Bate describes as the “irrelevant and discordant (the ‘disagreeables’)” (243). Bate goes on to say that, with the decks thus cleared, the reader can focus on:

the vital unity that is the object itself. One result is that the attributes or qualities we glean through our different senses of sight, hearing, touch, and the rest are not presented separately or piecemeal, but ‘the impression made on one sense excites by affinity, those of another.’ (244)

Both Porphyro and Madeline experience various stages of reality and fantasy, waking and dreaming; they react differently to the jarring, and at times, “painful change” (300) of moving from one state to another, especially when their separate realities collide: she weeps and moans “witless words with many a sigh” (303); he kneels with “joined hands and piteous eye” (305). Both young lovers intensely wish for their union to become reality; that it does so is “testimony to the power of human desire to realize itself, to transform awareness” (Sperry 205). Keats uses his deeply embodied language in the poem to heighten and emphasize all life’s contrasts: youth and age, heat and cold, life and death. His constant use of contrast as a poetic device is a clear indication that he knows there is always a cost to be borne; he knows that change and transformation required by life are painful and inevitable: from pupa to tiger moth, from girl to woman, and from youth to old age. He knows death comes to all living things. Yet, knowing and accepting all life’s negatives, and despite his self doubt, conflicts, and weakness, Keats is still able to create a moment of—a monument to—life-affirming beauty in *The Eve of St. Agnes*.

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