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# The brain, new stuff'd...with triumphs gay / Of old romance: Re-Imagining Madeline and the Chamber of Maiden-Thought in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes"

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“The brain, new stuff’d...with triumphs gay / Of old romance”: Re-Imagining Madeline  
and the Chamber of Maiden-Thought in Keats’s *The Eve of St. Agnes*

by

Renee Buesking

A Thesis

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in Candidacy for the Degree of

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in

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores John Keats's 1820 poem *The Eve of St. Agnes* and the particular ways in which Keats uses the poem to investigate different avenues into the imagination. Using the chamber of maiden-thought as his standard definition, this paper diverges from traditional critical history in order to re-conceptualize the imaginative visions of the dreamer, Madeline, and the reader. For Keats, to achieve the perfect union of intellect and soul that is required for poetic production, the poet must enter the chamber of maiden-thought, experience her beautiful vision, and then realize that reality, unlike her vision, is chilly, dark, and ending in death. Madeline enters the chamber of maiden-thought, experiences a vision of St. Agnes, and, upon waking, discovers that reality is much harsher than her vision. Both of these steps are integral, in Keats's conceptualization of poetic transcendence.

Further, this paper argues that, mirroring Madeline, the reader of the poem, too, experiences this chamber of maiden-thought through Keats's construction of the chivalric romance genre. By calling on reader's investment in imagining a shared English chivalric past, this construction creates a chamber of maiden-thought that the reader enters, and once inside, experiences a vision. However, the poem's close wrenches the reader from the warmth of the chamber of maiden-thought, ending her vision and leaving her without direction. However, for Keats, this confusing space is actually a moment where the reader can realize negative capability, and her own potential to explore the other chambers inside the mansion of the mind.

## Introduction

On September 19, 1819 Richard Woodhouse sends the following letter to publisher John Taylor regarding the revisions John Keats made to his poem *The Eve of St. Agnes*: “This alteration is of about 3 stanzas; and tho’ there are no improper expressions but all is left to reader’s interference, and tho’ profanely speaking, the Interest of the reader’s imagination is greatly heightened, yet I do not apprehend that it will render the poem unfit for ladies, & indeed scarcely to be mentioned to them among the “things that are”” (Stillinger 455). Previously, Keats had submitted a version of the poem in which the sexual encounter between Madeline and Porphyro was explicitly clear, but at the request of his publisher, Keats revised, though he was not pleased about the change. Despite Woodhouse’s assurance that the poem’s content would “scarcely to be mentioned...” among ladies the poem has sustained a strong critical presence with modern debates ranging from the details of the very sexual encounter Keats edited to the ways in which the poem engages with Keats’s conception of the imagination and to the relationship between Keats himself and the figures in the poem.

While other critics have pointed out Porphyro’s role as a poet figure or even as a stand-in for Keats himself, few have engaged seriously with Madeline’s role as a visionary who has a legitimate experience with imagination.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will follow arguments made by Ann Mellor and Nancy Rosenfeld to take seriously Madeline’s role

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning as early as the 1970s and sustaining, critics like Warren Stevenson, Leon Waldoff, and others have seen Porphyro as the stand-in for Keats and his complicated relationship with sexual desire, the valued hero of the poem, the figure who has the best relationship with the imagination, and the idealized reader of any Keats poem. Though I do not want to ignore this important critical history, my argument is opposed to most of these arguments as I choose to follow Jack Stillinger and his claims.

as a visionary who accesses the imagination through a dream that ultimately leads to her confusion and disappointment with reality.<sup>2</sup> By extending the arguments of Mark Sandy, Jeffery Cox, and Lyndel Colglazier who have all seen the 1820 volume as an exploration of the same theme, I will explore the ways in which Keats manipulates the reader into imagining a past centered around the chivalric romance and to explore how the imagining of this past, on the part of the reader as well as the figures in the poem, serves to generate another avenue of access to the imagination. Ultimately, I will argue that Keats explores two additional kinds of imagination in the poem: Madeline's vision based on her devotion to a religious tradition, and the reader's experience of imagination which Keats constructs through his manipulation of the chivalric romance genre. In sum, I argue that both Madeline and the reader experience the imagination by accessing the chamber of maiden-thought, a space where the visionary allows the soul and intellect to merge and find poetic transcendence.

As I mentioned previously, critical production about *The Eve of St. Agnes* has been multiple and contentious – usually focused on the exact nature of the relationship between Madeline and Porphyro. While some critics like Earl Wasserman argue for the idealized, romantic, and chaste relationship between the two figures, Jack Stillinger's pivotal essay "The Hoodwinking of Madeline" challenged long-held critical views about both Porphyro's intentions and the consummation scene in the poem. Though modern critics have found inspiration somewhere between Stillinger and Wasserman, many critics still find Porphyro to be the hero of the poem, or represent some kind of ideal that,

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading, see Rosenfeld "Eve's Dream Will Do Here" and Mellor "Keats and the complexities of gender".

they argue, Keats was trying to imagine. Critics like Andrew Bennett and Leon Waldoff read Porphyro as the ideal reader, a figure through which Keats was attempting to tease out the best way to read his texts. Bennett poses Madeline's blindness against Porphyro who is "intent on seeing" (103) in order to demonstrate that Porphyro's sight, and what he achieves because of it, represents an ideal relationship between Keatsian vision and desire. Likewise, Leon Waldoff goes to great lengths to argue for a reading of Porphyro as the hero of the poem, both because he can accurately read the situation and because he represents the ideal relationship with the imagination because "He employs his imagination to solve the problem of his separation from Madeline in a bold and innovative way" (178). What marks Porphyro the hero of the poem, then, is not only his ability to imagine a vision of a desired future but to make that future happen. Lyndel Colglazier also identifies Porphyro's relationship with the imagination as the ideal: "Porphyro is the most complex and thus the most interesting" (5) and "Keats places the ugly before us and, with the imaginative vision of his talent, transforms a peeping-Tom perversion into art" (9).

Reading Porphyro as the hero or the ideal figure in the poem, as well as Keats's own admitted struggles with sexual desire, have led some critics to legitimize Porphyro's actions by linking him both to the narrative voice and then to Keats beyond. Steven Warrenson has identified "...a sense of the narrator's excited identification with Porphyro. Porphyro's desire is the speaker's desire" (217) and claims that Keats is "...unquestionably on the side of the lovers" (216). Laura Wells Betz argues that Porphyro's anguish is "...Keats's own uneasiness about the honor of his own

hoodwinking of the reader through poetic charm” (312).<sup>3</sup> Even Jack Stillinger reads Keats in the narrative voice, though his identification is negative: “Certainly he partially identified with Porphyro” though he later qualifies “But sexual passion worried him” (546). A notable exception to this strain of criticism is Robert Kern, who does not engage with Porphyro as a stand-in for Keats, rather focusing on the narrator’s voice and Keats: “*The Eve of St. Agnes*...is ultimately controlled by a narrator who fully indulges his character’s romantic desires while withholding his own commitment from them...an expression [of desire] that proceeds from the poem’s characters rather than from the poet himself” (173).

Related to the above history of critical disagreement about the poem’s content is the role of the imagination in the poem. Here, critics generally agree that the poem explores different avenues of access to the imagination. Mark Sandy goes so far to claim that *The Eve of St. Agnes* is a retelling of the romance of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and rewrites the ending of *Lamia* in which the lovers “...apparently elude a tragic encounter with social pressures by...escaping undetected from a castle’s hostile society” (13). Similarly, Lyndel Colglazier and Jeffrey Cox both encourage reading the 1820 volume in order to establish the relationship between each of the texts.<sup>4</sup> Gary Farnell also identifies *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a poem about repetition and transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> Though Betz does important work to recuperate Madeline from a fooled girl, Betz still wants to read her role in the poem, even as the personification of poetry, as an object that Porphyro searches and conquers. While Betz’s argument is well-put, I want to try to read Madeline not as an object that allows Porphyro to achieve success but as a legitimate visionary in her own right.

<sup>4</sup> Cox, while encouraging a reading of the poems in order, also posits the idea that in these poems, the lovers eschew the idea of courtly love to embrace eroticism. For further reading on the topic, see Daniela Garofalo and Laura Linker.

Most of the critical readings which identify Keats as an active participant in the poem, either as the narrator or as Porphyro want to tease out the anxieties that fueled the content of the poem. Most of these anxieties are created by Keats's complicated relationship with sexual desire and the masculinity of the poet. Nigel Wood, Margaret Homans, Anne Mellor, and Susan Wolfson all individually address both Keats's representation of masculinity in his poetry and in his personal life via his correspondence with his sister-in-law, his editors, and Fanny Brawne. Susan Wolfson puts it best when she argues that, for Keats the masculine figure of the knight/poet "...cuts a figure for manhood as a potentially smokeable performance" (12).

Finally, more recent readings of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, like mine, put more pressure on the critical tradition of reading Madeline as, at best, a fooled female, and at worst, an object without agency or a thought of her own. Laura Alexander Linker, Nancy Rosenfeld, and Beth Lau all closely ponder the ways in which Madeline's gender functions in the poem, whether it is to make her the personification of poetry, the Eve figure who encounters a disappointing reality after a vision, or the fooled Gothic heroine who has put too much store into book reading.<sup>5</sup>

My own argument has foundations in all of the different arguments I have outlined here but attempts to push further by reading Madeline as a legitimate visionary who experiences the chamber of Maiden-Thought as outlined by Keats. Further, accepting Sandy's reading that *The Eve of St. Agnes* is a retelling, I am curious to uncover

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<sup>5</sup> Another grouping of critical readings comes from a genre-based critical approach: Beth Lau's Gothic reading, to Elizabeth Fay's reading of historical lack in the poem, to the reading of the particular genre of poetry in Linker, and finally a reading of the religious language in the poem by Gail McMurray Gibson.

what Keats achieves through his construction of the chivalric romance that dominates the content of the poem. Most of the critics I've outlined above agree that the reader's presence in the poem is central - I hope to interrogate what exactly the reader experiences both by viewing Madeline as a legitimate visionary, while, as Betz outlined, being intoxicated and entranced by the language of the poem.

### **I. "Shaded was her dream": Madeline's legitimate experience of imagination**

In order to take seriously Madeline's process of imagination, we should first understand exactly why Madeline's experience of imagination is legitimate, and not simply a daydream concocted by a teenage girl. I will establish the legitimacy of Madeline's vision by outlining the ways in which the process and ends of Madeline's vision align with arguments made by other critics about Porphyro's experience with the imagination, not as it is outlined in Keats's famous letter to Benjamin Bailey, but instead in his letter to J.H. Reynolds regarding the chamber of maiden-thought. Critics who argue for Porphyro's supremacy in visionary access in the poem often outline Porphyro's belief in achieving a vision, his devotion to his lady (which, because Keats often feminizes Poetry, could represent the Poet's devotion to Poetry writ large), and his actions towards his object of desire. These three qualities, which define Porphyro's status as both ideal poet and ideal human, are what legitimize his quest. However, as I will point out, Madeline also believes in her ability to receive a vision through her devotion to the ceremonies that allow a vision. Further, Madeline's visionary experience confuses her, she is unaware if she wakes or sleeps, and finds that reality is much harsher than her imaginative view. Both of these experiences are articulations of ideas Keats explores in

previous poems, a connection that establishes the legitimacy of Madeline's visionary experience. Rather than writing Madeline off as simply being hoodwinked by her own fancy, I argue that we should investigate her experience as legitimate and examine the consequences of her imaginative vision with the same attention as has previously been focused on Porphyro.

Primarily, Madeline's access to her vision is predicated on her devotion to achieving her vision. After the frame narrative of the Beadsman and the statues he haunts, which I will discuss later, the poem focuses on Madeline, and the revelry that surrounds her despite her lack of desire to participate in the party. Her family and friends are celebrating St. Agnes' Eve by drinking and dancing, and after a brief peek into the party, the narrative voice turns to Madeline, "These let us wish away, / And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there" (41-42). The narrative voice describes Madeline as having spent the day brooding on the stories told to her by old dames. Madeline has heard the story many times before:

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
And soft adorings from their lovers receive  
Upon the honey'd middle of the night, (46-49)

These stories describe the delicious possibility of a vision granted to faithful ladies by St. Agnes: she will come to them with a vision of their future husbands on the eve of her feast day during the "honey'd middle of the night" (49). But, as with most religious visions, a process must be followed in order to allow for the possibility of such a vision:

If ceremonies due they did aright;  
As, supperless to bed they must retire,  
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;  
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require  
Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire (50-54)

So, as her family and friends are enjoying rich food and drink, Madeline must fast, and train her eyes forward or downward, focusing on the vision she will receive of the future. Through her fast, and her focus on her vision, Madeline removes herself from the material world of her relatives and allows imagination to take hold of her while she still wakes and waits for the vision.

...her maiden eyes divine,  
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train  
Pass by – she heeded not at all:  
.....  
But she saw not: her heart was elsewhere:  
She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year (57-59,62-63)

Madeline gives no attention to the sweeping trains of the beautiful gowns of her guests, rather her “divine” (57) eyes are focused on St. Agnes; here, divine could function adjectively as meaning either “devoted to God” or “pre-eminently gifted” – both definitions were in use during Keats’s time and the second used by Wordsworth in 1814’s *Excursion* to describe Milton.<sup>6</sup> Though the first definition fits based on Madeline’s

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<sup>6</sup> See Stillinger for more information regarding Keats’s relationship with Wordsworth and Milton.

saintly devotion, the second definition provides insight into the reason why Madeline is able to experience a vision. Her eyes, though blinded to the material world around her, are gifted instead with insight. By ignoring the material world, Madeline is already initiating her future imaginative vision.

Madeline desires a vision of her future husband more than anything else, including food, the diversion of the party, and the attentions of her other suitors:

She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes

.....

'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 tomorrow morn (64, 69-72)

Madeline removes herself from the material world of her relatives and her suitors, which renders her blinded (Hoodwink'd) to anything but the potential of her future vision. As a young girl, who obviously desires a husband, Madeline pointedly ignores the attentions of her suitors because she truly believes in the ceremonies that will allow her to have a vision. Madeline prefers the visionary experience to one of a physical experience; she is dead to anything but the potential for a vision granted by St. Agnes, "...all amort, / Save to St. Agnes, and her lambs unshorn, / And all the bliss to be before tomorrow morn" (70-72). Madeline hides her eyes from the material around her and also restricts her physical space to the space of her room. By removing herself both mentally and physically,

Madeline is able to access a specialized visionary space, identified by Porphyro as one that he cannot enter.

While begging Angela to grant him access to Madeline's chambers, Porphyro says:

“Now tell me where is Madeline,” said he,  
“O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom  
Which none but secret sisterhood may see,  
When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously” (114-117)

Porphyro knows he cannot gain access to Madeline's rooms without the betrayal of Angela, but what he calls on to convince Angela of his loving intentions is the “holy loom / Which none but secret sisterhood may see, / When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously”. Anne Mellor argues: “Keats consciously identified his concept of the poet and the poetic process with the feminine gender” (215). As Mellor points out, Keats likens the process of creating poetry to weaving, a feminine task: “Keats underscores this identification of both poetic creation and the acquisition of knowledge with feminine work...he compares the gaining of wisdom to the spinning of a spider's web...Gendering this spider female, Keats aligns himself...with the traditionally feminine occupation of spinning, weaving, and tale-telling” (217).<sup>7</sup>

By considering Mellor's argument about Keats's understanding of weaving as a favored metaphor for writing poetry in the context of this moment, I think we can begin

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<sup>7</sup> Mellor, however, identifies that Keats was not comfortable with his own conception of the gendering of poetry: “Identifying the creative process, the character of the poet, and the acquisition of knowledge with women's work and women's ways of knowing was, however, a source of anxiety as well as affirmation for Keats” (219).

to understand Madeline's relationship with her vision as an interpretation of her relationship with Poetry. Due to her devotion to the saint, and the ceremonies by which a vision will be granted, we can read Madeline as being a part of this "secret sisterhood" who are employed by St. Agnes in weaving. Not only does Keats imagine the work of poetic creation as like the feminine task of weaving, Keats also identifies the process of gaining wisdom through tale-telling, which is how Madeline learned about the St. Agnes ritual in the first place. Through her visionary access predicated on her devotion to the ceremonies of faith, Madeline is able to participate in this employment, and participate in the production of poetry, here associated both with the feminine task of weaving, and with the virgin martyr St. Agnes. Madeline's vision is inaccessible to Porphyro because he cannot be part of this sisterhood. Just like the reader, Porphyro, too, is excluded from Madeline's vision because it is personal, it exists inside her subjective dream, and represents a reflection of her personal desire to attain her vision.

Madeline is so dedicated to her vision that she imagines St. Agnes herself visiting her once Madeline has completed her ceremonies and retired to bed: "...her vespers done, / Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees / In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed, / But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled (226, 232-234). Though the narrative voice describes Madeline's vision while awake as coming from fancy, Madeline is also described as pensive, thoughtful. Madeline believes that her ceremonies will generate a vision from St. Agnes, and goes to bed imagining what her vision will look like. Nancy Rosenfeld argues: "Wolf Z. Hirst pints out that the "wakeful swoon" which precedes Madeline's entrance into the dream-world of St. Agnes's Eve is "characteristic of the

Keatsian trance that precedes vision. Therefore, it may not be farfetched to view Madeline's state before she lies down on her bed...as representing a necessary precondition of creativity" (51). It is important to note that Madeline understands the difference between her fancy of St. Agnes and the actual vision she later desires. Madeline still knows that she cannot look behind her or else she will break one of the rules of the ceremony – Madeline is not fooled by her own fancy of imagining St. Agnes; she is aware of the difference of a dream concocted by her fancy and a vision granted to her because of her devotion to the saint.

Due to her devotion to achieving her vision, and her successful participation in the fasting and other ceremonies intended to evoke her experience with imagination, Madeline's vision powerful. Porphyro's noise generated by his movements while compiling a rich feast, and his continued play of music finally pull Madeline out of her vision, but still it clings to her, confusing her vision with reality: "Her eyes were open, but she still beheld / Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep" (298-299). Aware that she no longer sleeps and can no longer access her vision, Madeline's regret upon waking is palpable:

There was a painful change, that night expell'd  
The blisses of her dream so pure and and deep:  
At which fair Madeline began to weep,  
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh; (300-303)

No easy waking from her dream to be found here; the change between dream-vision and reality is sharp and painful. Madeline recognizes almost immediately that her vision is

not the same as reality – the sudden removal of her mind from her vision enhances the “blisses of her dream so pure and deep” (301) that her waking is such “a painful change” (300) that “fair Madeline began to weep, / And moan forth witless words with many a sigh” (302-303). Nancy Rosenfeld has compellingly discussed the parallels between Madeline’s dream and Eve’s dream in *Paradise Lost*: “Dreams, again, may well be prophetic of future reality; yet this reality, as we will see in the case of Eve’s dream, is sometimes disappointing, possibly wild, even dangerous” (60). I would like to expand her argument by positing that Madeline’s deep disappointment and confusion lend her vision the strength to be more than simply a girl’s dream of her husband because of the ways in which Keats outlines the experience of the chamber of maiden-thought.

Most critics, when engaging specifically with Keats’s interpretation of the imagination in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, cite his letter to Benjamin Bailey. However, I believe that Keats’s letter to J.H. Reynolds from 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1818 might prove to be a more applicable access point into Madeline’s participation in the imaginative process.

Commenting on his opinion of Wordsworth as a genius with a divine knowledge of human life, Keats explains his own conception of life as a “large Mansion of many Apartments” (95). Wordsworth, Keats argues, understands best how Keats’s own conception of life functions:

...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 one's nerves that the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness, and oppression; whereby this Chamber of Maiden thought becomes gradually darkened, 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 balance of good and evil; we are in a mist. *We* are in that state, we feel the "Burden of the Mystery" (95)

The Chamber of Maiden-Thought is the site of poetic inspiration. Any poet who would ascribe to be like Wordsworth, must first enter the chamber of Maiden-Thought in order to understand vital aspects of life. The vision granted while in the chamber, that of the reality of the world, is what leads down the many dark passageways – passageways where a poet can find inspiration through a visionary encounter with the imagination. If we apply Keats's comments about his own conception of life and thought, the relationship between the ideas outlined by Keats in the above letter and in the plot of *The Eve of St. Agnes* are clear and specifically point first to Porphyro's location, then to the descriptive language of Madeline's chamber, and finally to Madeline's expressions after being awoken from her dream.

When Porphyro has invaded Madeline's home, he finds Angela, who leads him into "...a little moonlight room, / Pale, lattic'd. chill, and silent as a tomb" (112-113). There, in this first chamber, he convinces Angela of his good intentions towards Madeline, and once he has gained her trust, Angela hides him in a closet in Madeline's room, "...Safe at last, / Through many a dusky gallery, they gain / The maiden's

chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;" (185-187). Porphyro and Madeline enter the "maiden's chamber", this "Chamber of Maiden-Thought" where Madeline has her vision, and Porphyro watches Madeline as she undresses and falls asleep. Like Keats outlined in his letter, Madeline's maiden chamber has an intoxicating light from the slants of moonlight that fall through the windows that are "...diamonded with panes of quaint device, / Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes, / As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;" (211-213). These windows allow the moonlight to shine into the room:

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,  
.....  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory, like a saint (217-18)

Madeline's body, like her chamber, are bathed in colored light which dyes her skin red and pink, the silver cross at her neck becomes amethyst in the light from the moon, Porphyro and Madeline both enjoy the pleasant wonders that decorate her chamber: "A casement high and triple-arch'd there was, / All garlanded with carven imag'ries / Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass" (208-210). The rich carvings, gothic arches, and natural imagery that decorate Madeline's room evoke a rich and sensuous chamber that is beautiful for the eye to see – not for a sleeping virgin. Like Keats explained, Porphyro and Madeline see nothing but wonders in her chamber, whether it is

the light from the moon playing colors all over her body, her jeweled gowns, or the carvings of her room, the entire chamber is made for visual delight.

However, as Keats warns, the temptation to remain forever in the second chamber of maiden thought is tempered by a knowledge of mortality that "...convinc[es] one's nerves that the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness, and oppression" (91). The process outlined by Keats in this letter is exactly the same realization that Madeline encounters when she is awoken from her vision by Porphyro:

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" (311-315)

Confronted by Porphyro's mortal body, the threat that he will leave her and die, and the realization that her imagination presented a vision of a future that will never occur, Madeline is frightened at the Porphyro she knows sees in front of her. Her vision has fled, and where her maiden chamber was once bathed in golden light, a dark storm rages around them. The pair flee "Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found" (355) and exit into the night. As I mentioned before, the narrative voice of the poem abandons Porphyro and Madeline's identity as corporeal bodies and describes them as phantoms, echoing Keats: "We see not the balance of good and evil; we are in a mist. *We* are in that state..." (91) when he describes the state of those who have encountered both the pleasant and terrifying aspects of the chamber of maiden-thought. Though I have

established that both Porphyro and Madeline enter the chamber of maiden thought as described by Keats, only Madeline faces the darkness that surrounds the chamber once the visitor has understood the negative aspects of the chamber. She, ultimately, is the dreamer who wakes to find her vision fled, and the reality around her a darkness that she fears.

As I discussed earlier, Mark Sandy and Lynden Colglazier compellingly argued that each of Keats's 1820 poems represents a re-telling of the same story. I am intrigued by this reading and so my next question would be: what does Keats gain from his use of the chivalric romance to re-tell this same story already told in *Lamia* and *Isabella*? Why engage with the chivalric romance genre specifically to bring new questions to the same story as he tells and retells again in the 1820 volume? What benefits and insight does the chivalric romance provide for Keats in his continued exploration of the Imaginative experience?

## **II. "And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old": The chamber of chivalric romance**

Unlike the source for *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* Keats had no direct text from which to draw his story of *The Eve of St. Agnes*; rather, Keats identifies a tale which gave him the inspiration for the poem in a 1819 letter to Bailey: the poem was "on a popular superstition" (277).<sup>8</sup> With only a superstition for Keats to follow, it's no surprise that, in

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Stillinger cites Ellis who pulled the following description of the ritual from an undated chapbook called *Mother Bunch's Closet Newly Broke Open*: "On that day thou must be sure that no man salute thee...and then, at night, before thou goest into thy bed, thou must be sure to put on a clean shift, and the best thou hast, then the better thou mayst speed. And when thou liest down, lay thy right hand under thy head, saying these words *Now the god of Love send me my desire*; make sure to sleep as soon as thou canst,

the text of the poem, Madeline's own understanding of the St. Agnes ritual is a story that has been told to her many times by the older women in her family:

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
And soft adorings from their lovers receive  
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,  
If ceremonies due they did aright; (46-50)

If we remember the argument laid out by Mellor, "Keats invokes the village gossip, whispering stories to her friends and neighbors, as his image of shared wisdom" (217) we can see the importance both of how Keats acknowledges his source of the story, as well as how Madeline was told about it. This links the story both to Keats's anxieties about gender, but also with the feminine telling of the story. Woodhouse, in the same letter that began this piece, refers to the original text of the poem as "the legend" (Stillinger 455), which again reinforces the traditional narrative of the source of the poem. Neither a concrete text, nor a situation that Keats himself experienced, the plot of *The Eve of St. Agnes* comes from a legend, a story told to young girls by the "old dames" of their families. Thus, there is no historical basis for Keats to evoke the romance genre and, as I will argue, based on specific aims. The lack of a source for *The Eve of St. Agnes* factors greatly into Keats's use of the genre to construct a tale that *feels* like a chivalric romance,

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and thou shalt be sure to dream of him who shall by thy husband, and see him stand before thee, and thou wilt take great notice of him and his complexion, and, if he offers to salute thee, do not deny him" (Stillinger 454).

even if there is no solid indication of the period.<sup>9</sup> Keats's invocation of the chivalric romance through the diction of the poem, and Porphyro's conception of himself as a knight to Madeline's lady, as well as the allusion to Arthurian legend through form, conjure an imagined English past of chivalry. Keats encourages the reader to place *The Eve of St. Agnes* securely back in the chivalric past and uses this imagined past as a tool to construct a chamber of Maiden-Thought into which the reader enters and experiences a vision.

Though the narrative voice quickly moves away from the party at which Madeline avoids seeing, the invocation of the romance genre and its particular place in the content of the line establishes one reason why, I argue, Keats uses the aesthetics of the genre in this poem in order to generate, on the part of the reader, a vision of an imagined past. The first mention of romance comes after the narrative has moved from the frame of the Beadsman and his chilly prayer. Following the sounds of the party, the narrative moves through one of the open doors of the castle: "The level chambers, ready with their pride, / Were glowing to receive a thousand guests" (32-33). These guests, the revelers who Madeline later avoids seeing, are watched by carved stone angels who witness:

At length burst in the argent revelry,  
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,  
Numerous as shadows haunting fairily  
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay

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<sup>9</sup> Daniela Garofalo describes the poem as "...Keats's pseudo-medieval world" and argues that it "is evacuated of the kind of meaning observable in Medieval art" (356). In the poem, Keats is using the Medieval world, and his reader's imagination of it, to create a feeling, not to meet the Medieval world and its complicated aesthetics, politics, and culture on its own terms.

### Of old romance (37-41)

“Old romance” (41) formally closes a stanza that is embellished with lush material details, but hints at the sadness that eventually closes the poem. The decorative details evoke glittering tiaras and heavy fabrics, but also gestures to “numerous shadows”(39) that prefigure Madeline and Porphyro’s later description as ghosts, “old romance” ends the phrase. The plume, tiara, and rich array gesture both to the wealth of Madeline’s family, and also a time in which those accouterments of wealth were displayed by the participants in the youthful triumphs supported by a romance: the knight on a quest to win his lady. Here, “old romance” is surrounded by both an evocative vision of material wealth, and also the triumph of a courtly love relationship. Keats will continue to depend on these material details, and the lush language with which he describes them to guide the reader into an imaginative vision of the romance genre. By engaging with material wealth, and subtle hints to the tradition of the period, as well as his use of Spenserian stanzas, Keats creates a chamber of medieval-esque thought that the reader enters.

Though the narrative, following Madeline, avoids the revelry of the feast, it does not abandon the evocative imagery that generates nostalgia for an imagined past that is confirmed by the aesthetics of the romance genre. In order to generate this vision of the romance with its knights, ladies, and quests, Keats employs the language of rich material objects when the narrative voice describes Madeline’s room:

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 in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,

And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,

A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings. (208-10,

214-216)

The arched casement and stone carvings that decorate Madeline's room invoke the Gothic architecture of churches and palaces and their cool stone foundation is offset by the colored light that streams in through her paneled windows, bathing her room in light. Madeline's room is laden with embellishment, from the carvings of the natural world, to the thousand heraldries that are littered around Madeline's room. These heraldries represent both Madeline's family history and but also an ancient tradition of bearing arms in support of royalty. Her pedigree and her family's investment in the feudal or royal system is not only present in Madeline's room, but represented by the "thousand" (214). In the midst of these heraldries, Madeline's room also houses "A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings" (216). Madeline's coat of arms is not only represented in the "thousand heraldries" in her room, but also attached to a bloody shield that again reinforces her family's pedigree based in involvement in defending the monarchy. This precious object of war shares the space of Madeline's chamber with delicate arches, natural carvings, and portraits of saints thus establishes her commitment not only to beautiful material objects, but also to a feudal tradition in which her family has played a proud part. This tradition, represented by the language of heraldries and

royal blood, firmly locates Madeline's chamber in the world of knights and ladies, in the world of the chivalric romance.

Porphyro furthers the poem's engagement with the chivalric romance through his own conception of his actions of the night, his diction when describing his aims toward Madeline, and his choice of song with which he wakes Madeline from her dream. Calling to mind the feuding families that would keep a knight away from his lady, Porphyro imagines his desire for Madeline as a quest in which he must fight against great powers in order to simply gain sight of his beloved: "But for one moment in the tedious hours, / That he might gaze and worship all unseen" (78-79). Here, Porphyro depicts his love for Madeline as chaste and adoring; the perfect knight loving his lady from afar and with only the most honorable intentions in his heart. Later, when Porphyro implores Angela to grant him access to Madeline, Porphyro again verbally conceives of himself and his intentions as pure and chaste:

"I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,"

Quoth Porphyro: "O may I ne'er find grace

When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,

If one of her soft ringlets I displace,

Or look with ruffian passion in her face" (145-149).

Not only does Porphyro promise not to touch Madeline, he promises not even to look upon her face with passion. Porphyro establishes his honorable intentions in the above speech, even indicating that he would rather shout and incur the wrath of Madeline's family members before he would passionately look upon Madeline. His desire for only a

look rather than a physical interaction, his language of veneration instead of lust, and his honorable vow to die violently before using any force on Madeline establish his actions as those that a courtly knight would also promise to do for his lady. Porphyro further aligns himself with the chivalric romance genre with the song he sings to Madeline:

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;" (289-292)

Porphyro's song is both a reference to Keats's own work, published one month before the 1820 volume, and written in 1819, and an indication of the chivalric nature of Porphyro's song. The figures of the poem and the plot of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* clearly follow the chivalric romance genre, and the invocation of the poem here cements Porphyro's conception of himself as the devoted knight to Madeline's unattainable lady. Though Porphyro's actions do not follow the usual actions of the knight, and as I have argued, he takes advantage of Madeline's confusion to complete the stratagem he had planned all along, Porphyro still conceives of himself as the loyal knight.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Keats completes his invocation of the romance genre through his use of Spenserian stanzas and Arthurian legend in *The Eve of St. Agnes*: "Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt" (170-171). Both Keats and Spenser use the Arthurian legend to point to an imagined English past, but one that would be familiar to

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<sup>10</sup> Porphyro also goes as far to compare himself to a faithful supplicant at the altar of his goddess, which has led some critics to absolve him of lustful intentions in regards to Madeline. However, it is my belief that just because Porphyro calls himself a pilgrim, it doesn't negate his sexual assault and abduction of Madeline during her confused half-dreaming half-waking state.

any reader. Porphyro adopts the language of the chivalric romance in order to achieve his goals, just as I argue, Keats uses the chivalric romance genre and its aesthetics in order to invoke a memory of an imagined past in the mind of the reader. If, as critics have argued, this poem pursues many different experiences of imagination through its characters, I argue that another kind of imaginative process is being explored – the reader’s imaginative vision invoked by the language of the poem.

Keats engages the reader’s imagination through his reference to the chivalric romance and, in doing so, constructs an imaginative vision, belonging to the reader that is sustained through the body of the poem. Laura Betz, though arguing for a different genre-based reading of the poem, articulates how Keats charms the reader: “...the poem uses this physical language for the purpose of manipulation – to control the reader’s attention and to command a certain sensory experience” (313-314).<sup>11</sup> Though Woodhouse is referring to the sexual content of the poem in his description to John Taylor, I think we can apply his comments to the overall sensation of the poem itself: “the Interest of the reader’s imagination is greatly heightened” (455). Keats’s use of this shared imagined past, and the delightful material details, and, as I will argue, the use of light in the poem, create a chamber of maiden thought for the reader. The reader enters the chamber of maiden thought, not with Madeline, but when the narrative voice abandons the Beadsman and enters the warm chamber associated with Madeline and her vision. Keats’s use of the chivalric romance intoxicates the reader by providing a romanticized version of a shared

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<sup>11</sup> Betz’s argument is primarily concerned with understanding the poem as a “charm” – both in the material sense of a beautiful decorated object, and as something that “charms” the reader through language.

past that is imaginatively shared by all English readers and his use of material objects and light create a visually beautiful space in which readers want to remain forever.<sup>12</sup>

Just like the “steadfast spell” from which Porphyro cannot pull Madeline, Keats too weaves a spell over his readers through his use of material language.<sup>13</sup> Madeline’s room, already important because of the allusions to her family’s tradition again is home to more material objects after she falls asleep and Porphyro gathers food from the feast around her bed:

..... soft he set  
A table, and, half anguish’d, threw thereon,  
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:  
.....  
While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr’d  
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Samarcand to cedar’d Lebanon.

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<sup>12</sup> I want to emphasize here that I don’t believe Keats is engaging with the chivalric romance on its own terms. Instead, what I believe Keats is drawing on is the cultural conception of the chivalric romance, the aesthetics of the chivalric romance, and the sense of tradition that accompanies it in the imagination of an English citizen. For a more detailed reading of *The Eve of St. Agnes* that argues for Keats’s direct engagement with the troubadour figure from the Middle Ages, see Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal*.

<sup>13</sup> For more about this argument, see Betz.

These delicacies he heap'd with glowing hand  
On golden dishes and in baskets bright  
Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand  
In the retired quiet of the night (254-56, 264-274)

Porphyro collects these material objects from the feast downstairs, the feast Madeline ignored in order to achieve her vision, to rouse Madeline out of her dream. Porphyro literally surrounds Madeline with wealth, with representations of her family's power to procure delicacies from distant lands and to arrange them in bowls of gold and silver. Though Madeline doesn't wake because of Porphyro's gathered feast, the function of this display of wealth generates, for the reader, a sensual experience of the objects. Daniela Garofalo explains:

It is as though the feast is consumed by reading/speaking the words, rather than by eating...Filled to the brim with juicy sweetness, the food seems to offer an enjoyment so complete that it fills the senses visually and orally, almost producing the effect of taste. The poem elicits surrogate senses as if trying to exceed the limits of its form and produce a sense of plentitude (357).<sup>14</sup>

By amassing these objects Porphyro creates a rich, sensuous display. The listing of each of the objects, including their exotic origin, and the beautiful containers that hold the

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<sup>14</sup> Garofalo's argument depends on the materiality of the objects in the poem, and how they represent an epistemological movement, on the part of Madeline and Porphyro, away from the self-denial of courtly love towards a more fulfilling erotic love. Garofalo argues that the objects represent an erotic world in which material objects mirror back human desires. Though my argument diverges from the one made by Garofalo, I am indebted to her comments about the ways in which the objects create a vision on the part of the reader for my own argument in this paper.

precious items, establishes then reinforces, over and over again, the sensual quality of each of the objects. As Garofalo has argued, readers can literally taste the food and feel the rich fabric of the cloth. By engaging directly with readers' senses Keats creates a sensory experience that casts a spell over the reader and locates them firmly in the chamber of maiden thought.

The Chamber of Maiden-Thought's intoxicating affect on the visionary has two parts – the atmosphere, which I have argued is generated by the wealth of the materials that Keats describes that decorate Madeline's chamber, and light. The entire poem is lit silver by the moon's beams, shining through Madeline's window: "Full on this casement shone the wintry moon" (217). Through the stained glass panels of Madeline's windows, the moon's light turns from silver to a kaleidoscope of hues that color the room: "Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes, / As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;" (213-214). These colors bleed onto Madeline's skin as well, "And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast... Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest, / And on her silver cross soft amethyst, / And on her hair a glory, like a saint" (218-219, 220-223). The moonlight is changed by the windows and that light changes the appearance of Madeline's skin and dress. Keats's use of light creates a visual image in the reader's mind that depends on the quality and color of the moonlight in the room. The chamber, suffused with colored light, and decorated with beautiful objects entice the reader to remain forever, which is exactly what Keats described when he imagined the chamber of maiden-thought: "...we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere. Nigel Wood explains: "it is the poetical painting that provides the transfiguring powers and

delicate objects of the poem. They do not occur in an unfiltered light or as the result of a clear view of the central events. Like Madeline, the reader is seduced, willingly or not” (99).<sup>15</sup> We see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight” (91). Readers are led into the chamber of Maiden-Thought as soon as the narrative voice of the poem focuses on Madeline, and readers follow Madeline as she experiences the chamber of Maiden-Thought. Traditionally, critics have read Porphyro’s journey into Madeline’s chamber as his journey to the chamber of maiden-thought, but as I hope I have demonstrated, Madeline, too, makes this journey and more fully articulates her experience in the language Keats used in his letter to describe the after-effects of the chamber of maiden-thought. Madeline, too, experiences this chamber, which Betz describes as “...what Keats regarded as the most sophisticated union between sensory experience and the intellect in the process of ‘soul-making’” (316). I believe that, like Madeline who enters her own chamber as well as the chamber of maiden-thought, Keats constructs the narrative of the poem inside another chamber – a chamber built from both the aesthetics of the chivalric romance and the reader’s investment in imagining a chivalric English past. Both of these moves engage the reader’s imagination in a serious way – readers are asked to imagine a very specific kind of heraldry, a specific list of items on a feast, a multi-colored room and imagine how they function in the story to create a tale of pseudo-chivalric romance.

However, unlike Madeline and Porphyro who exit the chamber of Maiden-Thought as phantoms, the reader only fully realizes that she is out of the chamber of

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<sup>15</sup> Numerous other critics take seriously the reader’s presence in the text. Laura directly addresses the reader’s absorption in the language of the poem and how Keats manipulates the language to “charm” the reader.

Maiden-Thought at the close of the poem, when the narrative returns to the frame of the winter outside, the cold stone bodies, and reality. When the narrative voice reveals that Madeline and Porphyro are long since dead and that their story existed in the past, the spell of the chamber of Maiden-Thought is fully broken:

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-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meager face deform;  
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold" (370-378)

The narrative voice must confirm that Madeline and Porphyro are not only gone, but have been gone for many years, "...ay, ages long ago" (370), which echoes the repeated confirmation of Madeline and Porphyro's phantom forms from the stanza group above, "They glide, like phantoms into the wide hall: / Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide" (361-362). Not only are Madeline and Porphyro long dead, so are her family members, and even the Beadsman who formed part of the frame narrative of the poem. Jack Stillinger cites the following letter from Woodhouse to Taylor containing comments Keats made about the suddenness of the ending of the charmed state: "[Keats] has altered the last 3 lines to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust, by bringing old Angela in

(only) dead stiff & ugly. – He says he likes that the poem should leave off with this Change of Sentiment – it was what he aimed at” (Stillinger 454). Madeline’s story existed in the far away past and ended in pain and nightmare for those around her. In the final stanzas of the poem, readers are completely removed from the Chamber of Maiden-thought, standing outside of it in the cold darkness of the grave: “and at the same time, on all sides of it, many doors are set open - but all dark - all leading to dark passages” (91). This final move wrenches the reader from the chamber of maiden-thought and into the dark passageways that surround the space. Readers, thus, experience both aspects of this chamber: they have been intoxicated by the construction of the chivalric romance and now, they too, experience “that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of man, of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness, and oppression” (91).

Like the setting of St. Agnes’ moon (a gradual process) which ended Madeline’s ability to experience her vision, Madeline’s exit from her chamber and her escape into measured time marks the end of the reader’s experience in the chamber of Maiden-Thought. In his letter to J.H. Reynolds, Keats imagined life as “...a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me” (90). Like the reader, and Madeline, by the close of the poem, the chamber of Maiden-Thought is shut, but the next chamber is as of yet unopened. The poem offers no answers and closes with the pathetic vision of the sleeping (or dead) Beadsman.

## Conclusion

Critics have argued that in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats explores different avenues of accessing the imagination through vision and usually, the figure most identified as the agent in this visionary experience is Porphyro. As I hope I have demonstrated, I believe that, through Madeline, Keats is exploring another form of legitimate vision – one based on tradition and devotion to a single figure through which she will experience her vision. Madeline’s visionary experience aligns with Keats’s own conception of the chamber of Maiden-Thought, an imaginative moment of life that allows the maturing subject to experience imagination, and therefore, poetic inspiration. Experience in the chamber of Maiden-Thought allows for visionary experience and authorizes artistic expression even as it reveals that reality is not full of pleasant diversions and a lovely atmosphere.

Like Madeline, who experiences the chamber of Maiden-Thought only to be removed from her vision by the lustful actions of Porphyro, readers, too, experience a visionary journey into the chamber of Maiden-Thought through Keats’s constructed narrative of chivalric romance. By calling on a shared imagined past, and manipulating the aesthetics of that imagined past, Keats encourages the reader to enter an imaginative space, become intoxicated by the language and visual images produced by the language, only to remove the reader from this chamber. This reminder of cold death that surrounds the chamber, the weight of reality, and the truth that the past that the reader experienced was imaginary place the reader back into the “Mansion of many Apartments” without a concrete direction upon which to proceed.

Jack Stillinger identifies a trajectory that he argues characterizes most of Keats's poetry: the reader begins in the real world, takes an imaginative flight to the ideal, and returns back to the real but "He has not simply arrived back where he began...He has acquired something – a new understanding of a situation, a change in attitude toward it – from the experience of the light, and for better or worse he is never the same afterward" (*Introduction*, xvii). Stillinger identifies the ideal world as a "higher reality" (xvii) and as "immortality, eternity, spirituality" (xvii); all are presented in a binary relationship to reality, which is where the figure starts and ends, though he is changed in the process. Stillinger identifies that the speaker in the poems is usually the one to take this journey, and does identify Madeline as one figure who has taken it. I would like to extend Stillinger's argument to the reader who, in the process of imagining the world of the chivalric romance in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and follows Madeline's visionary experience, leaves the world of the real to enter into the narrative realm, the chamber of Maiden-Thought.

These two experiences of the chamber of maiden-thought are connected in that they depend on granting equal legitimacy to the kind of vision that Madeline experiences and the kind of vision that Keats encourages his reader to experience. Madeline's experience of vision is dependent on both her belief in her ability to experience a vision, and her participation in the female-gendered work of weaving and sharing stories. Madeline experiences the chamber of Maiden-Thought, but awakes slowly due to the noise of Porphyro. Upon waking, she sees the dark corners of reality, and how even Porphyro pales in the face of her vision. Upset and confused, barely even awake,

Madeline is taken advantage of by Porphyro and spirited away into the night. The reader, too, follows Madeline. Spelled by the language that depends on an imagined past of the chivalric romance and the light and atmosphere described in Madeline's chamber, readers are pulled into their own chamber of maiden-thought, delighted by the beautiful images that the language of the poem encourages them to imagine. As Madeline realizes the truth of reality, readers are ripped from the warmth of the chamber only to realize that the freezing cold reality of the dead maid and Beadsman is what really exists, not the chivalric past, nor Madeline and Porphyro, who have been dead for ages.

Like Keats, who admits that he has only access to two of the many apartments that he imagines make up a life, the reader experiences the chamber of maiden-thought only to be left without direction. However, this space of uncertainty, though jarring and upsetting, is, for Keats, a space for potential poetic growth. Now that the reader has experienced the chamber of maiden-thought, the potential for poetic production and a union between the soul and intellect is possible. *The Eve of St. Agnes*, though ending in death and nightmares, actually closes in a space of negative capability, of potential. Keats encourages his reader to leave behind the imagined past and to open her mind to the potential of the other chambers inside the mansion of the mind.

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## Vita

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