

Gendering Readers: *The Eve of St. Agnes*

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Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems (1820) is the third and final volume that John Keats published during his life. In comparison with the sale of 4,000 copies of Lord Byron's *Child Harold Canto IV*, its success was unremarkable. As his publisher, John Taylor, commented to John Clare: "we have some Trouble to get through 500 Copies of his Work, though it is highly spoken of in the periodical Works".¹⁾ Taylor was not the first of Keats's publishers who had 'trouble' with book sales. Charles and James Ollier, publishers of his first collection, the 1817 *Poems*, declined further dealings with Keats because of his poor sales. Moreover, *Endymion*, published by Taylor in April 1818, had been violently attacked by the critics and had sold poorly.

By the end of 1818 Keats was driven to the somewhat desperate recourse of asserting at once his determination to write for the benefit of mankind, and his defiant carelessness of the response to his poems of ordinary men and women. He wrote to Haydon on December 22, 1818:

I have a little money which may enable me to study and to travel three or four years — I never expect to get any thing by my Books: and moreover I wish to avoid publishing — I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men* — I should like to compose things honorable to Man — but not fingerable over by *Men*. So I am anxious to exist with [out] troubling the printer's devil or drawing upon Men's and Women's admiration — in which great solitude I hope God will give me strength to rejoice. (*KL*, I, p. 415, Keats's italics)²⁾

1) Edmund Blunden, *Keats's Publisher: a Memoir of John Taylor* (London: J. Cape, 1936), pp. 111-112.

2) See Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge:

His distinction between the singular noun 'Man' and the plural 'Men' indicates that he has been driven to postulate two readerships. In his letters, particularly to his publishers, but significantly not in his letters to his brother, George, Keats outspokenly denies that he is at all concerned with the judgement of the second readership, that consisting of the leisured, moneyed people who constituted the actual reading public and determined the sales figures of volumes of poetry.

Keats, in fact, however, could not always despise and disregard "Men's and Women's admiration", and, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes voluntarily, he appeals for their favour, and to make such an appeal was for Keats especially humiliating because he was aware that the poetry-reading public was composed disproportionately of women:

1. "Try the Public Again"

The Eve of St. Agnes, one of the romances in the volume of *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*, enables us to trace Keats's attempt to "try the public again" through the history of two draft versions. Keats wrote the first draft perhaps during the early months of 1819. In September 1819, however, he revised the draft for publication by making three significant alterations. First, he added one stanza after line 54. Secondly, he revised lines 314-322. Lastly, he re-wrote the final stanza. In addition to these revisions there are other differences between the revised fair copy, and *W1* and *W2*, two manuscript books of Richard Woodhouse, including an additional stanza after line 27 in *W1*, *W2*, and slight differences in lines 340-342, and 350-351 in *W1*, *W2* from the copy text.³⁾ This textual history is very important in two senses.

The publishers preferred the original draft, which we may consider a more 'effeminate' version of the romance, whereas Keats wanted to publish the

Cambridge University Press, 1958). Subsequent references to Keats's letters abbreviated as *KL* are placed in the text with the page number.

3) On the history of the revision 'The Eve of St. Agnes', see Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), Appendix II, pp. 158-166 and Stillinger, *The Text of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 214-220.

revised version, a version in which the revisions seem self-consciously to aspire to a manner that Keats associated with Byron's *Don Juan*, a manner that Byron considered distinctively, even exclusively masculine. If we compare the two drafts, we can surmise Keats's own 'stratagem': in the first version he woos the reader with a certain shy tenderness, which is compromised in the second by insertions that seem marked by a more brutal masculine assertiveness. But this is to over-simplify. It would be truer to say that an uneasy alternation between the two manners is evident in all texts of the poem, and that the revisions function only to make the discords more strident. In comparison with Keats's other male figures like Endymion and the knight-at-arms, Porphyro seems a confidently self-assertive lover, whose task is to rescue from her captivity the seemingly innocent and virginal Madeline. But Keats never seems quite comfortable with the uncomplicated display of masculinity that the poem's plot seems to demand, and the revised version leaves intact almost all the elements of the poem that so clearly distinguish it from a Byronic love-roman.

It was Richard Woodhouse who first copied Keats's original draft and commented on his revisions. His letter to Taylor of 19 September 1819 makes clear that Keats disagreed with Taylor's own view that the new volume should open with *Isabella*, because he considered the poem "too mawkish", and that Keats was more satisfied with *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Lamia*.⁴ Keats seems concerned that *Isabella* would leave him vulnerable to the same kind of criticism to which Endymion had been subjected, whereas the other two narrative poems seemed to him better protected against the charge of 'mawkishness' by virtue of sharing a poetic character that Keats seems to equate with 'manliness'. This lends support to an assumption that the revisions of *The Eve of St Agnes* are intended to stamp the poem with a more aggressively masculine character, and thus to armour it still more strongly against a charge of mawkishness or effeminacy. But the responses of both Woodhouse and Taylor indicate their conviction that Keats had avoided effeminacy only at the cost of alienating the feminine, and women readers, as

4) See Woodhouse's letter to John Taylor of 19 September 1819. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, vol. II, p. 162.

both knew, constituted a market that no publisher of poetry could afford to ignore:

As the Poem was origy written, *we* innocent ones (ladies & myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with Madeline's love for him, & when "he arose, Etherial flushd &c &c (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to go off with him, & succeeded & went over the "Dartmoor black"±(now changed for some other place) to be married, in right honest chaste & sober wise. But, as it is now altered, as soon as M. has confessed her love, P. <instead> winds by degrees his arm round her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bon fide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a Wife in a dream. (*KL*, II, p. 163)

If 'mawkishness', as Kurt Heinzelman argues, denotes a poetic manner bent on "capturing an audience by capitalizing on its sentimentality, on the popular sense of what will 'succeed'",⁵⁾ then the readily available alternative seems to be to develop a poetic mode designed to outrage the audience's feelings, and Byron had shown in *Don Juan* how such a mode might even win popular and commercial success. As an alternative to a "too smokeable" effeminacy Keats chooses, especially in his revisions, to develop a cynical and masculine character that allows him, in the poem's style as much as in its plot, to address his women readers with the same kind of confident, sometimes brutal, disregard for 'feminine sensitivities' that many contemporary readers identified as the distinguishing characteristic of *Don Juan*.

Woodhouse disliked the revised draft. Taylor represented it still more severely as "the most stupid piece of folly", and a decision likely to provoke exactly the response that Keats seemed to have intended to evade, ensuring that the new volume would be met with "the same Neglect or Censure" that *Endymion* had received. He wrote in his letter to Woodhouse of 25 September 1819:

5) Kurt Heinzelman, 'Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*', *ELH*, vol. 55 (1988), p. 168.

Had he known truly what the Society and what the Suffrages of Women are worth, he would never have thought of depriving himself of them. — So far as he is unconsciously silly in this Proceeding I am sorry for him, but for the rest I cannot but confess to you that it excites in me the Strongest Sentiments of Disapprobation — Therefore my dear Richd if he will not so far concede to my Wishes as to leave the passage as it originally stood, I must be content to admire his Poems with some other Imprint, & in so doing I can reap as much Delight from the Perusal of them as if they were our own property, without having the disquieting Consideration attached to them of our approving, by the “Imprimatur”, those Parts which are unfit for publication. (*KL*, II, p. 183)

According to Woodhouse’s letter to Taylor of 19 September 1819, Keats’s revisions were intended to secure two effects: one was “to make the legend more intelligible” and the other was to “leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust” by the darkened ending. For Taylor, however, the revisions showed only that Keats was “too dull to discover Right from Wrong in Matters of moral Taste”, and rendered the poem “unfit for publication”. It seemed to Taylor that Keats’s revisions demonstrated his ignorance of the commercial importance of women readers, and that this in itself, paradoxically, displayed a failure of masculine intelligence, because being a man, to Taylor, meant “facing up to the facts of the audience and the value of women — that is, knowing what women ‘are worth’ in several senses”.⁶ If Keats’s revisions are inspired by the self-imposed need to confront the world with a ‘manly defiance’, then, how does he manage such a ‘stratagem’? Nor is the question confined to the revised version, for even in the first draft there is intermittent evidence of a desire to cultivate an authorial stance characterised by its manly defiance.

6) Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 305.

2. A Stratagem and Revision

Porphyro, especially in the revised consummation scene, reminds us of the more impetuous 'knightliness' of the protagonist in the *Indicator* text of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' who dominates la belle dame and his narrative simultaneously, unlike the 'androgynous' Endymion or the 'haggard' knight-at-arms of the Brown / 1848 text. Madeline in the revised text, especially in her relationship with her dauntless lover, resembles la belle dame of the *Indicator* text who readily falls in love and willingly submits to the sexual demands of her lover, and is quite unlike the Indian Maid or Cynthia of *Endymion*, or the femme fatale of the Brown text. If Keats aims at "making the legend more intelligible" through revising the bed chamber scene (II, 314-322), how does this greater clarity alter his mode of address to his readership, and what is the 'stratagem' involved?

In their treatment of Porphyro modern critics have in the main alternated between two approaches: one is Earl R. Wasserman's, the other is Jack Stillinger's. For the former Porphyro makes a spiritual pilgrimage in the course of the poem, ascending higher by stages until he arrives at transcendent reality in Madeline's bed, hence, the union between the human Porphyro and the ideal Madeline, "the completed form of all completeness by the magic of St. Agnes's Eve", unites the mortal and the divine in a consummation very similar to that achieved in the union of Endymion and Cynthia.⁷⁾ Stillinger, on the contrary, focuses on Porphyro's "peeping Tomism", so that he, "the villainous seducer", is regarded as representing the ordinary cruelties of life in the world.⁸⁾ At the same time, Madeline, "a victim of self-deception", is a "hoodwinked dreamer" rather than the emblem of immaculate spirituality. In short, *The Eve of St Agnes*, like many other poems by Keats, represents life as "a complexity of pleasure and pain".⁹⁾ Neither of these two

7) Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 107.

8) Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, p. 83.

9) Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, p. 93.

approaches, however, is able fully to explain Keats's own 'stratagem' and the perplexed relationship with his readership that the stratagem reveals.

It is best to begin with a consideration of the genre within which Keats writes. Stuart Curran has pointed out the centrality of the romance in Keats's entire oeuvre.

It is an interesting fact that the only titles Keats used in presenting his three poetic volumes to the public are romances: *Endymion* is followed in 1820 by *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*, whose identified titles are romances in the mode of the Greek (in couplets), Italian (in ottava rima) and British (in Spenserian stanzas). [. . .] Keats in his romances writes wholly within the liminal. The art is polished to a high sheen, but it is without question the art of Scott and Shelley, and even, with its touches of wit, the art of Moore. Most particularly, it is the art of Byron, who in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* — with its sinuous, associative structure, its doubled sensibility, its innumerable thresholds between antitheses, its endless demystification, and equally inexhaustible quest — wrote the quintessential romance of the period.¹⁰⁾

Even though Curran does not note it, we may suspect an interrelationship between Keats's recurrent choice of the 'romance' title for publication and his consciousness of Scott's and Byron's commercial success. But it was a success that seemed to result from their re-creation of the romance as a 'manly' genre. There is at least a suggestive analogy between the 'stratagem' that Porphyro uses to position himself for his attempt on Madeline, and the 'stratagem' by which Keats sought to win his way into the affections of the reading public.¹¹⁾

10) See Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 150-151.

11) According to Sperry, Angela's objections to Porphyro's intruding into Madeline's chamber forced him partly to conceal, and partly to disguise his full intention. In this sense, Angela could be identified with Keats's publishers: "It is somewhat ironical to reflect that the hero's plight was in certain ways similar to Keats's own when he discovered that passages in the completed manuscript of the poem offended the scruples of his publishers and he was forced to revise them, partly unwillingly, to

According to Karla Alwes, Porphyro has two roles in this poem: one is to awaken Madeline to consciousness and the other is to restore her passion and her own vision. As Alwes points out "it is a strangely aberrant role for Keats's male, but, as the only character to live outside the castle and, thus, outside the religious ceremony that has caused the blindness, he is the only one in the poem capable of such restoration".¹²⁾ It is true that Porphyro is a sufficiently aggressive male hero to propose a stratagem to Angela as soon as he realises that tonight is the eve of St. Agnes:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
 Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
 Made purple riot; then doth he propose
 A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:
 (136-139)¹³⁾

There is a marked discrepancy between the 'riot' in his heart, and his emphatic protestations that his intentions are wholly innocent: "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: / Good Angela, believe me by these tears'" (145-150). What is the riot that he imagines exactly? On the surface, his promise is that he will restrict his role to that of the voyeur.¹⁴⁾ Angela's response, however, anticipates a closer contact between the two:

bring them into conformity with the demands of propriety". See Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 212-213.

- 12) Karla Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 79. According to Alwes, the name Porphyro derives from the Greek word for 'purple', 'porphura', which denotes passion, wine and sensuality, whereas the name Madeline connotes 'obsessive piety'. See Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry*, pp. 80-81.
- 13) All quotations with the line numbers are taken from Jack Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978).
- 14) Bennett argues that voyeurism itself, or gazing, could be dangerous and harmful to Madeline because it is related to the power of seeing. See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 99.

'All cates and dainties shall be stored there
 Quickly on this feast-night; by the tambour frame
 Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,
 For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
 On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
 Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer
 The while: Ah! Thou must needs the lady wed,
 Or may I never leave my grave among the dead.'
 (173-180)

His role is 'catering' for Madeline's enjoyment by providing food and music.¹⁵⁾
 It is by means of his role as caterer, as Alwes suggests, that Porphyro turns
 from a passive voyeur to an active seducer.¹⁶⁾

In the revised version, Keats grants this 'catering' role to Porphyro more
 emphatically by adding one stanza and altering several lines.

'Twas said her future lord would there appear
 Offering, as sacrifice - all in the dream -
 Delicious food, even to her lips brought near:
 Viands, and wine, and fruit, and sugar'd cream,
 To touch her palate with the fine extreme
 Of relish: then soft music heard, and then
 More pleasures follow'd in a dizzy stream
 Palpable almost; then to wake again
 Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen.
 (Added stanza after 54 of the first draft)¹⁷⁾

15) According to Leader, the role of 'catering' to the audience, especially when the
 audience is conceived of as female, again opens Keats to the accusation of weakness,
 effeminacy and lack of power, because of its class associations. See Leader, *Revision
 and Romantic Authorship*, p. 301.

16) Alwes regards this festive food as providing an oral analogy for genital enjoyment, so
 that Porphyro's supper can be construed as an initiation into sex. See Alwes,
Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry, p.
 85.

17) Stillinger, *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 301.

This added stanza replete with opulent sensual images suggests very clearly what Porphyro will do as “her future lord”; that is, to entertain her with ‘palpable’ sexuality. The final line is ambiguous, but, on the most obvious reading, it contrasts rather than equates Madeline with the “virgin” morn. She will awaken as a “Magdalen”, that is, as a sexually experienced woman, but she will be happily unrepentant, and hence she will not be “weeping”. Moreover, if we connect this added stanza with stanza 6 of the original, it is clear that the situation has become a more male-dominated one. According to stanza 6, the virgins are required to be supine, motionless:

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.
(52-54)

It is in such a supine condition that her lover tantalises her with “the fine extreme of relish”. It seems a consummation in which the woman’s role is that of passive partner rather than the pursuer of reciprocal union. It is also quite different from the emasculated ecstasy of the Brown text of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, which, as I have already argued, reflects Keats’s authorial anxiety concerning ‘gendered manliness’.

His second revision renders the sexual consummation more explicit:

See, while she speaks his arms encroaching slow,
Have zoned her, heart to heart, — loud, loud the dark winds blow!

For on the midnight came a tempest fell;
More sooth, for that his quick rejoinder flows
Into her burning ear: — and still the spell
Unbroken guards her in serene repose.
With her wild dream he mingled, as a rose
Marrieth its odour to a violet.
Still, still she dreams — louder the frost wind blows.¹⁸⁾

One crucial difference is that the revision deprives Madeline of control over her speech. In the first version Madeline is allowed to complete what she has to say. Sympathising with “those *sad* eyes” of Porphyro (my italics), she represents her thought, or, in some sense, her decision, as a response to his ‘catering’ to her desires by providing food and music: “O leave me not in this eternal woe, / For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go” (l. 314-315). It is the “voluptuous accents” of her voice that make him “arise” and melt “into her dream”. Their “solution” is “sweet” because it is a reciprocal melting ecstasy, neither surrendering to the other’s dominance: “Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet” (l. 320-321). In this sense, Porphyro’s song ‘La belle dame sans merci’ which comes just before the consummation scene is as important as the songs of the Indian Maid and la belle dame. Madeline’s entreaties imply that she can hear his song and interpret it. In the revised version, Porphyro’s arms are “encroaching to her while she speaks” and the effect is to silence her. Her final words are drowned out by the dark winds. She is forced to “be silent” and be dreamt continuously by a powerful male authority. Their sexual ecstasy is more one-sided, more like rape than the first text: “With her wild dream he mingled, as a rose / Marrieth its odour to a violet” (320-321). It is a “mingled” sexual ecstasy, not a melting one. Porphyro feels that her dream is “wild”, which implies that he still feels the distance between them. Compare the “wild wild eyes” of la belle dame of the Brown text. In the revised text, it is the man who controls the whole romance world. The more Porphyro exerts his sexual masculinity to keep her silent, the further he is estranged from Madeline’s dream. The more he feels strangeness, the stronger and the “louder” the “frost winds” blow outside. It is appropriate in the original text for Porphyro to interpret the “elfin storm” in stanza 39 as “a boon indeed”, whereas, in the revised version, this description seems to be incongruous with the loud, silencing wind of stanza 36.

Lastly, Keats revised the ending of this poem as follows; “Angela went off / Twitch’d by the Palsy: and with face deform / The Beadsman stiffen’d — ‘twixt

18) Stillinger, *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 314.

a sigh and laugh, / Ta'en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough". This is very different in tone from the original ending:

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 meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.
(370-378)

Even in the first version the final stanza is astringently discordant with the poem that it ends. The bustle of the feast is ended, the lovers have gone, and Keats himself withdraws. A chilly, temporal distance separates him from those who remain in the castle. But in the revised version the coolness has intensified into a tone at once harsh and derisive. Up to this point the story has been told even somewhat sentimentally. Wolfson argues that the narrator himself revels so much in the 'romantic' entertainment that he is providing for the reader that he is tempted at times into somewhat melodramatic affectations like "Ah, bitter chill it was!". He tells the story until the final stanza from a close distance, as if he is at the shoulder of his characters, as, for example, when he depicts the chapel aisle along which the Beadsman returns to his room, the portal doors and banquet hall along which Porphyro sneaks into Madeline's room, the balustrade that old Angela grasps as she goes downstairs, the peep-hole through which Porphyro enjoys secretly Madeline's undressing and, lastly, the wide hall again as two lovers make their tip-toe exit from the castle. It is a narrative method that propels the reader towards an intimacy with the poem's characters, and it is this intimacy from which the first version of the final stanza withdraws, and which, in the revised version, is shattered by a harsh chuckle.

If Keats changed this ending in order to "leave on the reader a pettish

disgust", what was his purpose? Clearly, his intention is to ensure that the poem is armed against the "mawkish popularity" that, as we have seen, in some moods Keats affects to despise.¹⁹⁾ Just as clearly, he is concerned to render his poem less 'smokeable'. But the poem ends even in the first version by consigning its reader to perplexity, and in the revised version it provokes conflicting emotions for which perplexity is too weak a term.²⁰⁾

My own suggestion is that Keats's revisions clearly indicate that the poem's ambivalence has its origins in Keats's ambivalent feelings towards the genre within which the poem operates, the romance, which for Keats remained a feminine literary mode, and aroused in him the same kinds of ambivalence that women themselves did. So it is that his revisions insist, even too emphatically, on a strange duality. The poem's hero, Porphyro, yields tenderly to the enthralling power of love, and he and Madeline leave the castle secure in its spell. But Keats is unwilling himself to be 'hoodwink'd', and in the final stanza that he preferred he chose not to imitate his hero, but to abandon his reader with a callous, even brutal indifference, as a Byronic lover might abandon his mistress of a night.

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19) But, as Levinson makes clear, the manliness that Keats aspires to was not easily available to him: "Keats was a man whose almost complete lack of control over the social code kept him from living his life. He could not write his poetry in the manner he required, marry the woman he loved, claim his inheritance, hold his family together, or assist his friends. He could not, in short, seize any of the appurtenances of manhood. Keats was as helplessly and ignominiously a 'boy' poet as Chatterton, and Byron's 'Mankin' was a viciously knowing insult". See Marjorie Levinson, 'Keats and the Canon', in Karl Kroeber & Gene W. Ruoff (eds.), *Romantic Poetry: Recent Visionary Criticism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 391.

20) Sperry suggests that this poem's main concern is with the 'romantic spell', hence, "indeed, the reader is himself invited at Keats's own request not only to accept but to take part in a world where wishing has the force of willing". See Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 209.

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