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The Trouble about Merlin: The Theme of Enchantment in “The Eve of St. Agnes”

KAREN J. HARVEY

ENCHANTMENT is a major theme in the medieval realm of “The Eve of St. Agnes,” in which Keats portrays a world of sorcery, charm, and spell. Throughout the poem the reader is presented with persistent imagery of “faery fancy” (line 70) and magic.¹ The young knight Porphyro is aided in his quest for the love of the maiden Madeline by an aged beldame who carries an “ivory-headed wand” (line 92) and is seen by him as an old crone “who keepeth clos’d a wond’rous riddle-book” (line 130). Madeline, the object of Porphyro’s pursuit on the eve of St. Agnes, plays “the conjuror” (line 124). “Legion’d fairies” (line 168) pace the coverlet in her bedchamber, where “pale enchantment” (line 169) holds her as “St. Agnes’ charmed maid” (line 192). When she enters her bedroom where Porphyro is hiding, she is “all akin / To spirits of the air” (lines 201–202). Once she sleeps, he despairs of bringing her out of “such a stedfast spell” (line 287); when she awakens, he fears to move or speak because of her strange dreaming look. Indeed, “‘twas a midnight charm / Impossible to melt” (lines 282–283). As St. Agnes’ moon sets, a storm arises, described by Porphyro as “an elfin-storm from faery land” (line 343), into which the lovers flee. They leave behind the baron and the revelers, whose dreams are occupied by “shade and form / Of witch and demon” (lines 372–373).

In perhaps the most striking passage reflecting this theme of magic and enchantment, Keats writes of the eve that “Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt” (lines 170–171). Attempts to determine the meaning of these lines and their rela-

1. All textual citations are to *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

tionship to the poem have presented readers with problems of interpretation that M. R. Ridley has characterized aptly as “the trouble about Merlin.”² There is general agreement that the two lines obviously allude to Arthurian legend; beyond this, critical commentary on the passage has often been marked by diversity and contradiction.

According to the most frequently cited interpretation, that of H. Buxton Forman, the magician Merlin’s “monstrous debt” was “his existence which he owed to a demon,” sent by his fellows to father a child who was to serve as their representative on earth. The debt was repaid with his disappearance, or death, when he was imprisoned through the working of one of his own spells by Vivien, whom he loved. “Never on such a night” in this interpretation refers to a tradition of a storm over the forest of Broceliande, the place of Merlin’s enchantment, the night after his imprisonment.³

However, regarding Merlin’s existence as a form of “debt” to be somehow recovered seems a rather forced interpretation, and, as Ridley notes, “his Demon” is an odd way of alluding to the wizard’s father.⁴ Moreover, if Forman’s purpose in citing the storm over Broceliande was to show a parallel to the storm that arises in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” it is a misplaced one—the allusion to Merlin occurs in stanza 19; the “elfin-storm” does not appear until stanza 36. Finally, as Ernest de Selincourt pointed out, there is no reference to a storm in Dunlop’s *History of Fiction*, Forman’s suggested source for this version of the Merlin tale.⁵ Other commentators, acknowledging these difficulties, propose that the reference to Merlin is simply an additional instance of Keats’s attempt to suggest a world of enchantment, or to lend a “magical atmosphere to an otherwise ordinary stock story.”⁶ But Keats was generally too careful a craftsman to use such an allusion to no discernible end; indeed, he appears to be deliberately drawing attention to it.

2. M. R. Ridley, *Keats’ Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 136.

3. *The Complete Works of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman, 5 vols. (Glasgow, 1900–01; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1970), II, 74n.

4. Ridley, p. 137.

5. *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 7th ed. (London: Methuen, 1951), p. 468.

6. See Marian Hollingsworth Cusac, “Keats as Enchanter: An Organizing Principle of ‘The Eve of St. Agnes,’” *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 17 (1968), 116; and Charles I. Patterson, *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 113.

In brief, the various readings of these lines neither explain nor reflect in an entirely satisfactory manner Keats's purpose in employing the reference to Merlin. If, as most commentators agree, the payment is that of Merlin's imprisonment, what is the significance of "such a night," what is the "debt" owed, and who is the "demon" to whom it is paid? Most important, how does the allusion to Merlin relate to either the structure or the theme of the poem? In order to answer these questions, it is first necessary to examine this particular segment of the Merlin tale and its characters.⁷ The Arthurian Merlin, magician and seer, was created in the twelfth century in the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, which were based in part on old Celtic tales and traditions. Embellishments and continuations by fourteenth-century French writers, which include accounts of the magician's fate, comprise the Merlin segments of the Arthurian romance cycle. In these romances, Merlin, the wizard born of a human mother but fathered by an incubus, is enthralled by the fay, or fairy-woman, Vivien. Overcome by his passion for her, he follows her constantly, seeking her love and courting her with demonstrations of his magical powers. Vivien promises Merlin her affections, on the condition that he reveal to her the secrets of his wizardry. He teaches her his magic art, and she eventually imprisons him by means of one of his spells. With this legend for reference, the "demon," "debt," and "night" in the Merlin allusion may be examined further, along with Keats's possible sources for the Merlin tale.

As stated earlier, the "demon" in the Merlin allusion has often been understood as the incubus who fathered the future wizard. However, an examination of, first, the nature and characteristics of a fay and, second, Keats's use of the term in his poetry, may provide another possibility—Vivien.⁸ For the Celtic *fay*, or in its British form *fairy*, is not the benefi-

7. The following summary of the Merlin tale is necessarily limited to only those events that can be legitimately related to the particular passage under discussion. A good general survey is Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson, 1963). For more detailed accounts of the development of the Merlin legend and the controversies concerning its origin and variations, see James Douglas Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance from the Beginnings Down to the Year 1300*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vanderboeck and Ruprecht, and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1923) and *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

8. I can find three instances of Vivien's identification as "his Demon" in critical commentaries. In *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Longmans, 1970), Miriam Allott states in her note in lines 170–171 (p. 464) only that the relationship between Merlin and "his Demon" refers to that of Merlin and "his mistress." Jack Stillinger's note in *John Keats: Complete*

cent figure of children's fairy-tales, whose antisocial behavior tends to be at most mischievous. The Celtic, and later Arthurian, fay or fairy-woman is a powerful enchantress, who can be kind and solicitous to those whom she favors, but also malign and cruel to those who displease her. The fairies of British folklore also have their darker side.⁹ Contacts with fays and fairies, particularly with the female figure of the fairy-mistress, are often sinister and ominous, indeed dangerous. This is a reflection not only of the general association of fairies with spirits of the dead, but, even more important, of the fairy-mistress's well-known predilection, attested in both Celtic and British folklore, for detaining or imprisoning her lover.

Folkloric descriptions of fairy activities provide numerous examples of association with those linked to demons—the raising of storms, the abduction of children, and the spoiling of crops. Lines of division between the two are frequently blurred, and the world of Faery is often shadowed by that of the demonic. Most medieval and Renaissance pneumatologists as a matter of course classified fairies among the demonic spirits, whether they viewed demons in the pre-Christian Greek or Celtic sense as powerful supernatural beings capable of both good and bad, or even non-moral, behavior, or in the orthodox Christian sense as exclusively evil.¹⁰ By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Christian view of fairies, elves, and similar figures as emissaries of the devil predominated. Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a work Keats possessed and with which he was demon-

Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 456–457, suggests that “since Merlin and ‘his Demon’ are categorized as ‘lovers’ (170), Keats must have been thinking of some aspect of Merlin’s betrayal and perpetual imprisonment by his mistress, the Lady of the Lake (sometimes called Nimue or Vivien).” Philip Elliott in “Merlin and His Demon in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes,’” *Furman Studies*, 24, No. 1 (1976), 59–64, firmly identifies Vivien with the demon in the Merlin tale. However, his arguments for this identification rest on neither the character of a fay nor Keats’s use of the word “demon” in his poetry—simply that “Vivien had bad consequences” for Merlin and was the means for his destruction (p. 61).

9. On the Arthurian fairy-woman, see Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1903), pp. 4–6, 248–249. For treatments and examples of the fairies’ and fays’ characteristics, activities, and associations with the demonic the following are helpful and informative: W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford, 1911; rpt. New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1966); Katharine M. Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) and *The Anatomy of Puck* (London, 1959; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1977); and Lewis Spence, *The Fairy Tradition in Britain* (London: Rider & Co., 1948).

10. Robert Hunter West, *The Invisible World: A Study of Pneumatology in Elizabethan Drama* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1939), p. 234, n7.

strably familiar, reflects this view when he classifies fairies among the "terrestrial devils" (III.ii.1.2). Despite eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attempts to sentimentalize fairies and fays, and thus render them harmless, this darker conception of the world of Faery and its association with the demonic would continue, and was available for Keats to draw upon.

Moreover, an examination of Keats's use of the word "demon" in his poetry reveals a striking pattern.¹¹ When it is used in a thematic sense and applied to a specific character, "demon" invariably refers to a female who bewitches and enthralls her male adorer, with fateful consequences for him. For example, the "demon" in *Otho the Great* is Auranthe, who works her wiles on Ludolph, the son of the German emperor. Enthrallled by her, he conspires against his father for her sake and refuses his intended bride, all according to Auranthe's "demon's plot" (IV.i.138). It is remarked "How deep she has bewitch'd him" (III.ii.14), and Ludolph himself acknowledges this: "now I follow thee, / A substance or a shadow, wheresoe'er / Thou ledest me" (IV.ii.23–25). When her true character is revealed—"Auranthe—lewd demon" (II.ii.64)—Ludolph dies of his anger and grief. In "Lamia" the "demon" is the serpent who, transformed into a woman by the god Hermes, enthralls the young Corinthian Lycius. Lamia, who "seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf, / Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self" (I.55–56), has the familiar effect of the enchantress on her male adorer: Lycius "Swoon'd, murmuring of love, and pale with pain" (I.289), and becomes "tangled in her mesh" (I.295). Their love ends when her real nature is discovered by Apollonius the philosopher: Lamia vanishes and Lycius dies. Both the fairy tradition's association with the demonic and Keats's use of "demon" suggest, then, that "his Demon" in the Merlin allusion could refer not just to the incubus, but to Vivien as well—in terms

11. Two works that deal with aspects of the "demonic" in Keats's poetry—Werner Beyer, *Keats and the Daemon King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947) and the previously cited study by Charles I. Patterson, *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats*—both interpret "daemon" in an exclusively Platonic sense, as a being with powers over man and nature dwelling in an ecstatic world beyond human limits; both are primarily concerned with the influence of this concept on the development of Keats's ideas on poetic inspiration and perception. Although both contain commentary on "The Eve of St. Agnes," neither work specifically identifies or explicates "his Demon." While Patterson discusses enthrallment as useful for interpreting much of Keats's poetry, emphasizing this "daemonic" aspect of females in "Lamia," *Endymion*, and "La Belle Dame sans Marci," he does not note or discuss it in *Otho* or "The Eve of St. Agnes."

of both her nature as fay and her effect on Merlin, the male who adores her and has been enthralled by her to disastrous effect.

As for the phrase "Never on such a night," it may well, as one commentator has suggested, refer exclusively to the meeting of Madeline and Porphyro on the eve of St. Agnes, "a night of magic and enchantment such as has not been seen since Merlin's magical powers left the world."¹² There is, however, a version of Merlin's fate that may make a reference to night-time pertinent in terms of the Arthurian tale. A thirteenth-century continuation of the Merlin legend known as the *Suite de Merlin* tells of Merlin and Vivien's journey to the forest of Broceliande in Brittany. He shows her where two lovers are buried in a great rock, and she, taken with the lovers' tale, wishes to spend the night in their tomb. When Merlin falls asleep, Vivien, using the magical powers she has learned from him, imprisons him there. This version refers specifically to "la nuit elle enchante Merlin" and was used by Malory in *Morte D'Arthur*, which is the basis for most subsequent English treatments of the Merlin tale.¹³

Charles Brown's inventory of Keats's books includes a "History of K. Arthur," which, it is assumed, was at least one source for his knowledge of Arthurian romance and the Merlin tale. It is almost certain that this Arthurian book was *The History of the Renowned Prince Arthur, King of Britain*, an 1816 edition of Malory.¹⁴ However, Malory's version of Merlin's fate, while incorporating the *Suite de Merlin* account of Merlin's imprisonment under the great rock, makes no specific mention of night-time as the setting, nor do later treatments of Merlin, based on Malory, in Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (III.iii.8–11) and Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (IV.335–340), also in Keats's personal library.

Nonetheless, there remains another possible source for this particular reference. Merlin, unlike most of the other Arthurian figures, retained a place in popular culture throughout the eighteenth century into the Romantic revival of medievalism, chiefly in the form of prophet or seer. His

12. James Douglas Merriman, *The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in England between 1485 and 1835* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973), p. 255.

13. *Merlin: Roman en Prose du XIII Siecle*, ed. Gaston Paris and Jacob Ulrich, *Société des Anciens Textes Français*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1886; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1965), II, 196.

14. Merriman, *The Flower of Kings*, pp. 130, 250. For the inventory of Keats's books, see *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, 1816–1878*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), I, 259.

name recurs in plays and chapbooks, and particularly in almanacs of prophecies under the title *Merlinus Liberatus*, or "Merlin Freed," one appearing in the early eighteenth century and another in a later version from 1819 to 1864.¹⁵ This would imply, as Howard Maynadier has pointed out, a continuing popular familiarity with, and currency for, versions of Merlin's enchantment and imprisonment by the fay Vivien.¹⁶ Keats's access to, or familiarity with, versions of the Merlin tale that may have mentioned Merlin's entombment at night, whether in literary form, artistic representation, or through exposure to more popular traditions, is, at present, still conjectural.¹⁷ Yet such a tradition existed, and Keats may well have incorporated it in his allusion to Merlin.

To sum up, evidence in the forms of folk tradition, literary source materials, and the patterns of Keats's own poetry would suggest that the "monstrous debt" paid by Merlin to "his Demon" on "such a night" was not "the debt of his existence" owed to his incubus father, but rather the debt of his entrapment and perpetual imprisonment paid, through the working of one of his own spells, to the demonic fay Vivien as a result of his enthrallment to her.

If the allusion to Merlin is interpreted in this way, I believe that in "The Eve of St. Agnes" Keats is purposely comparing Porphyro to Merlin; indeed, that there is a striking parallel of the position of Porphyro in the poem with the position of Merlin in the Arthurian legend. For the tale of

15. William Edward Mead, "Outlines of the History of the Legend of Merlin," in *Merlin: or, The Early History of King Arthur*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley, Early English Text Society, O.S. Nos. 10, 21, 36, and 112 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1865-1899), 1, lxxviii-lxxx.

16. Howard Maynadier, *The Arthur of the English Poets* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1907), pp. 304-305.

17. In this connection, a Henry Fuseli painting of Titania and Bottom (ca. 1789-90), one of a series done for the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, is worthy of note. It was engraved on copper plate with aquatint in 1796 and also printed in a collection completed in 1805. See *Henry Fuseli, 1741-1825* (London: Tate Gallery, 1975), pp. 61-62. It is possible Keats may have seen this picture or a print of it through his friendships with Leigh Hunt, not simply a connoisseur of art but also a nephew of Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy; or Benjamin Robert Haydon, one of Fuseli's pupils. *Titania and Bottom* is a night-scene, centering on the fairy queen and the weaver but also containing a group of figures on the right that includes a young woman leading a tiny bearded figure on a noose-like leash. At least one art historian has seen this as a representation of an enslaved, shrunken Merlin under the control of the fay Vivien. See Gert Schiff, *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (Stuttgart, 1961), as cited in Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature*, p. 164, and Schiff's commentary in *Henry Fuseli, 1741-1825*, pp. 61-62.

Merlin and Vivien is, after all, a “tale of an enchanter who woos by magic means” and is, in turn, entrapped by his own magic.¹⁸ If Porphyro’s actions and responses in the poem are examined with this in mind, Keats’s allusion to the old tale of the enchanter enchanted becomes pointed.

Critics’ commentaries on the “The Eve of St. Agnes” have often stressed the enchantment of Madeline, who becomes ensnared not only in the spell of the ritual of the eve but also in Porphyro’s “stratagem” (line 139) of fulfilling the ritual by hiding in her room and, upon her awakening, becoming—in reality—the vision she has dreamed of.¹⁹ Less emphasis has been placed on Porphyro’s state in the poem. Nonetheless, he appears just as charmed or enchanted as Madeline. If we examine the reason why Porphyro comes to the castle, the means by which he gains entry into Madeline’s bedchamber, and what happens to him there, the theme of the enchanter enchanted is evident.

From his home across the moors, Porphyro has been drawn to the castle by his “heart on fire / For Madeline” (lines 75–76), despite the sure knowledge that he would be killed by its occupants if he were discovered. Indeed, Angela, the old beldame, regards Madeline as a “conjurer” (line 124) not only for her part in the ritual of the eve, but also for her ability to cause him to venture to such a dangerous place. Yet, she also considers Porphyro “liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays” (line 121) and capable of feats of magic, such as holding water in a “witch’s sieve” (line 120), to be able to even penetrate the castle. These two themes—Porphyro gaining access to Madeline and winning her through the seeming aid of magic or charm, and Madeline as conjurer, or as the object that draws and enchants him—will be repeated more than once in the poem.²⁰

18. Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, p. 212.

19. Jack Stillinger, “The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes,’ ” *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), 533–555, rpt. in Stillinger’s collection, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats’s Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

20. Porphyro’s association with and seeming enlistment of the powers of faery and magic have been occasionally commented upon. In *The Hoodwinking of Madeline* Stillinger notes them to bolster his conception of Porphyro as a character who is, at the very least, “up to no good” (p. 75). If Stillinger sees Porphyro as villain, or at least seducer, one other commentator, on the basis of the same evidence, assumes something far worse—Porphyro as vampire-lover: James Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1981), pp. 92–100. I would argue that the allusions to fairy-land and sorcery serve to firmly identify Porphyro with Merlin as enchanter and, following Stillinger, also as a kind of seducer—but, like Merlin, one whose scheme backfires.

Once Porphyro has entered the castle, he is aided in his quest by the old crone whose confidence he has gained. It is she, in an image reminiscent of the magus Prospero in *The Tempest* with a "wond'rous riddle-book" of spells, incantations, or charms, who will guide him to Madeline's bedchamber. Yet, Porphyro himself, while enlisting this aid with its strong overtones of magic, is also cast, in line 129, as a "puzzled" urchin fascinated by this strange creature.

When Porphyro has been safely conducted to Madeline's bedchamber and hidden, the descriptions of him as he observes her praying, disrobing, and falling asleep are noteworthy: "Porphyro grew faint" (line 224); he is "entranced" (line 244). When the playing of the lute and the song he sings awaken her, his reaction is to drop to his knees, "pale as smooth-sculptured stone" (line 297). Madeline, upon seeing him, exclaims, "How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!" (line 311). The emphasis on Porphyro's paleness is not irrelevant. At this point, he exhibits the pallor traditionally associated with the state of enchantment or enthrallment—as Madeline has exhibited earlier in the poem when she is in the grasp of "pale enchantment" (line 169). Moreover, the song he sings, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," suggests strongly the subsequent image Keats will create of the enchanted knight "alone and palely loitering" in a later ballad.²¹

Besides the physical description that suggests his enchantment, additional evidence for this view of Porphyro comes from the underlining and marginalia in a copy of an old Portuguese romance, *Palmerin of England*, that was in Keats's possession. The romance contains a passage, marked in Keats's copy, in which a knight, attempting to rescue a maiden from enchantment, kneels before her and becomes enchanted himself: "He being now so passionately afflicted, that his judgment and reason clearly abandoned him, and he determined to remain there . . . not remembering that he had no other food there than his own imaginations which would sooner destroy than support him."²² The situation clearly resembles Porphyro's.

21. This second poem is another illustration of Keats's use of the Celtic lore surrounding the fairy-mistress and its familiar themes of enchantment and seduction. For a discussion of these elements in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and other poems and their relevance to Keats's conception of the poetic consciousness, see Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 233–240.

22. Charles I. Patterson, "The Keats-Hazlitt-Hunt Copy of *Palmerin of England* in Relation to Keats' Poetry," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 60 (1961), 41.

In suggesting that Porphyro has become enchanted, Keats again uses the parallel situation of Merlin and the theme of self-enchancement. Porphyro has become entrapped, as has Merlin, through his own "stratagem."²³ Madeline is obviously a mortal woman, not a fay—although she is surrounded with an aura of enchantment through her adherence to the ritual of the eve which becomes, in a sense, spell-binding. However, Porphyro, through his intense desire and passion for her, has endowed her with fay-like qualities. By his participation in the ritual, through his "stratagem" or his attempt at weaving a spell over her, he has become enchanted by the image or illusion of her he has created. He has finally become "entail'd in woofed phantasies" (line 288). As Merlin's magic produced an unexpected result harmful to himself, so has Porphyro's. Both have paid the debt of their enthrallment, trapped by their fantasies and illusions—literally in Merlin's case, figuratively in Porphyro's.

The parallel of Merlin and Porphyro would seem to be carried through even to the end of the poem. The sense of the entrapment of Porphyro continues in the poem, as it does for Merlin in the legend. Porphyro begs Madeline to continue in the illusion he has created: "Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?" (line 335). The two lovers also appear not to have escaped the fairy world Keats associates with enchantment, for Porphyro refers to the storm into which they flee as "an elfin-storm from faery land" (line 343), and Madeline sees the drunken revelers as "sleeping dragons" (line 353).²⁴ Indeed, it is the conclusion of "The Eve of St. Agnes" that has

23. The concept of Porphyro's enthrallment is mentioned in Clifford Adelman's "The Dangers of Enthrallment" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Eve of St. Agnes,"* ed. Allen Danzig (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 99–115. However, no explanation of "his Demon" is given, and Adelman sees Porphyro's enthrallment not as a result of his own "stratagem," an integral part of the parallel themes of the enchanter enchanted, but in metaphysical terms only, referring to the allure of the "Chamber of Maiden Thought" in Keats's letter of 3 May 1818 to John Hamilton Reynolds. Moreover, he regards Porphyro and Madeline as awakening from their respective enchantments or "dreams" and interprets the ending of the poem in an optimistic manner. Neither the allusion to Merlin nor the imagery Keats uses would appear to support this interpretation. Philip Elliot, in "Merlin and His Demon in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" notes briefly the possibility of identifying Merlin with Porphyro, but sees the primary parallelism in the poem as that of Merlin and Madeline—with Madeline as the prisoner of enthrallment. His passing two-line reference to the former possibility offers little in the way of substantiation, nor does it provide any evidence for the relationship of such an identification to the theme of the enchanter enchanted.

24. Whether Keats meant mythical monsters or soldiers is not clear, since "dragon" was a variant spelling of "dragoon" in the early nineteenth century. Although the "dragons" at

become a topic of considerable critical debate—do the lovers live happily ever after or do they leave the castle only to be swallowed up in the storm, that is, the harsh reality of the outside world?²⁵ Keats's allusion to Merlin and the persistent images of fairy-land surely relate to this question. The allusion and imagery may simply reflect the difficulties in reconciling—both literally and figuratively—the opposites of fantasy and reality. These difficulties, however, are overcome by Madeline and Porphyro who escape, in true romantic fashion, "o'er the southern moors" (line 351), or, as some have suggested, undergo a metaphysical transcendence into another, happier, world. Nonetheless, the allusion to Merlin's enchantment, and thus to the darker side of Faery, tends to give a somber tone to the poem because it is a reflection of a theme running through much of Keats's poetry—the hazards of illusion.

It has been frequently observed that Keats, while acknowledging the

"glaring watch" suggest soldiers, John Barnard in his note on line 353 points out that dragons were cavalymen armed with carbines, which is at odds with the "ready spears" the dismounted "dragons" carry. *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 627. It would appear Keats was employing both meanings of "dragons" with their respective connotations: guards, certainly, but ones who are eerie and threatening. This would be consistent with the supernatural imagery throughout the poem.

25. Interpretations of the conclusion of the poem can generally be divided into optimistic or pessimistic views. The former are perhaps best represented by the following: Arthur Carr—in "John Keats' Other Urn," *University of Kansas City Review*, 20 (1954), 237–242—proposes that Madeline and Porphyro, following the fairytale formula of "happiness after danger," take flight from the castle into a happier reality, with nature itself cooperating by providing their escape with cover in the form of the "elfin-storm." Stuart M. Sperry in *Keats the Poet*, pp. 202–203, sees the romance of "The Eve" as wishfulfillment, with the imagination mediating between fantasy and reality and creating grounds for accommodation; all ends well with the lovers who transcend the world of reality and change. Earl Wasserman's metaphysical interpretation suggests Porphyro's adventure is a journey into the visionary imagination; at its end, the lovers experience a kind of immortality, a spiritual repetition of happiness on earth: see *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953), pp. 97–137. In sharp contrast are the views, among others, of Herbert Wright and Jack Stillinger. Wright, in "Has Keats' 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending?" *Modern Language Review*, 40 (1945), 90–94, views Madeline and Porphyro as akin to the tragic lovers in "Lamia" and "Isabella" and wonders if their flight from the castle might not "culminate in disaster." He sees the storm not as nature's boon to the lovers' escape but as the manifestation of a hostile agency, one of several indications of malign forces at work. Another pessimistic view of the lovers' fate is found in Stillinger's *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, in which he portrays her as a self-deluded dreamer who may wake up to a reality she is unable to face. Both Wright and Stillinger note the persistent references to Faery and the supernatural and suggest they lend a sinister aspect to the poem. Wright in particular finds in Keats's poetry a close connection between the world of Faery and the harm inflicted on humans who come into contact with it.

allure of fantasy and illusion as means of alleviating the harshness of the world, rejects, in his later poetry, their extreme forms as harmful retreats into isolation and withdrawals from reality and the world we must live in.²⁶ In “The Eve of St. Agnes” fairy-land is indeed illusion, unreality. Not only does enchantment by it in any form, external or internal, represent an escape from the real world, but the images of Faery in this poem, particularly those of Merlin and his demon, depict it as threatening. The enchanted knight’s imagination in *Palmerin* would, in the words Keats underscored, “sooner destroy than support him.” This is a theme continued in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” and “Lamia,” among other poems. In “Ode to a Nightingale” in particular, the realm of fairy-land is “forlorn” (line 70), because it is removed from reality, unfit, even impossible, for human habitation. Those who wish to dwell there—as Porphyro and Madeline would seem to, judging by their flight from the reality of the castle, harsh though it may be, into the “elfin-storm”—perhaps run the risk of being deceived by the “elf” (line 74) of fancy.

However the allusions to Faery and their reflection in “the trouble about Merlin” are interpreted, “faery fancy” and enchantment are integral and rich themes in the poem. Their relationship to the Keatsian exploration of the boundaries of fantasy and reality is essential to any assessment of “The Eve of St. Agnes.”

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26. Stillinger, pp. 87–93; Patterson, “The Keats-Hazlitt-Hunt Copy of *Palmerin of England*,” 41–43; Adelman, *passim*.