

**“Of heaven with upward eyes
for all that they desire”:
Sacredness and Eroticism in Keats’s
*The Eve of St. Agnes****

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ABSTRACT

Modern interpretations of John Keats’s *The Eve of St. Agnes* have been dominated by the dichotomy between the “idealist reading,” which regards the sexual union between Porphyro and Madeline as a fulfilment of Romantic love and imagination that prevails over social restrictions, and the “sceptical reading,” which considers such a union a potential rape of Madeline by Porphyro. In a departure from the preceding research, this paper focuses on Keats’s synthesis of the religious and the erotic and proposes that he construes religious sacredness as a unique experience of eroticism in both Christian and non-Christian contexts. First, the ritual of St. Agnes’s Eve signifies Keats’s eroticisation of Christian images, which reincorporates sexual desire into the concepts of resurrection and the second coming of Jesus. By doing so, Keats looks forward to a divine intimacy of sexual vitality, in contrast to the weak and sterile state represented by the Beadsman’s asceticism. Second, with pagan images such as Merlin, the mermaid, and Medusa, Keats complicates the interaction between Madeline and Porphyro by dissolving the oft-assumed power relationship between them. *The Eve of St. Agnes* shows a unique aspect of Keats’s idea of sacred experience, which is essentially sensual and erotic, and offers an alternative angle to approach the poet’s understanding of religion and its connection to poetic creation.

KEYWORDS: John Keats, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, sacredness, eroticism

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In his letter to John Taylor in September 1819, Richard Woodhouse expresses his concerns for Keats's revisions of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which he calls "trifling alterations" (Keats, *Letters* 2: 162). The negative effects of such alterations, however, are indeed not trivial for Woodhouse. In this letter, he first identifies the inclusion of Angela's grotesque death, which generates "a sense of pettish disgust," as a mischievous design of "mingling up sentiment & sneering" to "play with his reader" (2: 162). He then targets Keats's treatment of Porphyro's final encounter with the sleeping Madeline, criticising the poet for suggesting a pre-marital consummation, which renders the poem "unfit for ladies" (2: 163). Woodhouse observes that even without direct sexual depiction, Keats entices the reader's indecent imagination. He refers to Keats's own words that "he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men" and that "he should despise a man who would be such a eunuch in sentiment as to leave a <Girl> maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation" (2: 163). If Woodhouse's record of Keats's words is true, through *The Eve of St. Agnes* the poet not only espouses sexual fulfilment by resonating William Blake's disdain of "He who desires, but acts not" (35), but also promotes a male-centred form of such fulfilment, an issue that engenders the subsequent divided readings of this poem.

In early stages of modern Keats studies, the interpretations of *The Eve of St. Agnes* are divided into two categories. First, there is the so-called "idealist reading" initiated by Earl R. Wasserman, who holds a positive evaluation of the sexual union between Porphyro and Madeline as a fulfilment of Romantic love and imagination that prevails over social restrictions imposed by the two hostile families. Porphyro's venture into Madeline's castle is represented as a pilgrimage, a quest for "heaven's bourne, where the intensities of mortal life are repeated in a finer tone and divested of their mutability" (Wasserman 120). Equalising dreams with imagination, Wasserman regards Madeline's awakening to meet and elope with Porphyro as an actualisation of Romantic imagination that leads them into the region "where the human and ethereal, beauty and truth, are one" (123). Second, contrary to the idealist reading, the "sceptical reading" is initiated by Jack Stillinger's influential essay "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in *The Eve of St. Agnes*," in which the apparently Romantic fulfilment of erotic love is interpreted as a potential rape of Madeline by the opportunistic Porphyro, who employs a "stratagem" which is "a ruse, an artifice, a trick of deceiving" (539). The studies of *The Eve of St.*

Agnes following this division between idealism and scepticism, as Stillinger observes, all strive to find a middle ground for new interpretations (*Reading* 39-40).

Instead of attempting another moral judgment about Porphyro's action, this paper focuses on Keats' synthesis of the religious and the erotic. In Keats studies, the interrelationship between sexual love and religion in *The Eve of St. Agnes* has evoked certain critical discussions. Some critics affirm the sexual union in the poem as a celebration of Christian marriage.¹ Others hold that instead of actualising the idea of Christian marriage, Keats's allusions to paganism and "old religions" in the couple's interaction challenge and surpass Christianity.² Both groups of criticisms assume a division between Christianity and paganism. This paper departs from such a dichotomy by proposing that Keats does not stress the antithesis between Christianity and paganism in the poem. In contrast, he construes religious sacredness as a unique experience of eroticism in both Christian and non-Christian contexts. First, the ritual of St. Agnes's Eve signifies Keats's eroticisation of Christian images, which reincorporates sexual desire into the concepts of resurrection and the second coming of Jesus. This is particularly manifested by the image of "no weeping Magdalen" in the deleted stanza between Stanza 6 and 7, a biblical reference neglected by most critics who discuss the poem from Christian perspectives, such as Katherine Garvin, David Wiener, and James Boulger (see footnote 1). By eroticising Christian images, Keats aspires to an alternative divine experience of sexual vitality, in contrast with the weak and sterile state

¹ For example, in "The Christianity of St. Agnes' Eve: Keats' Catholic Inspiration," Katharine Garvin argues that St. Agnes's Eve represents "a mythical marriage" free from mundane contamination, and Madeline is a "humanized Agnes" whose sexual union with Porphyro confirms a realisation of heavenly bliss in the corporeal world. (360). In his "The Secularization of the Fortunate Fall in Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*," David Wiener reads the elopement as a secular version of *felix culpa*, which leads the couple away from an innocent but inert paradise to a harsher but enlightened world of experience. From a similar perspective, James Boulger in his "Keats's Symbolism" interprets Madeline's ritual as a secular version of the Eucharist, which fulfils the Romantic love with religious images.

² Judith Arcana observes in the poem an embodiment of early Celtic sacred ritual by identifying certain archetypal figures: Madeline as the mother-to-be maiden, Angela as the crone, the guiding priestess, Porphyro as the young god of love, and the Beadsman as the powerless representative of Christianity (43). Marcia Gilbreath traces the etymology of Porphyro's name and finds his counterpart Porphyron in Joseph Spence's *Polymetis*, Abbé Banier's *Mythology and Fables of the Ancients*, and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Combining the characterisations in these documents, Gilbreath deems Porphyro "a young pagan ravisher with no regard for the religious taboo he is breaking" against "the barren religious ideal of sexual purity" in Christianity (25). For more details of the previous studies based on the division between Christianity and paganism, see Stillinger's summary in *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes*, pp. 42-65.

represented by the Beadsman's asceticism. Second, with pagan images such as Merlin, the mermaid, and Medusa in the latter part of the poem, Keats complicates the interaction between Madeline and Porphyro, which is more than either an embodiment of typical Romantic love or a potential rape. It dissolves the power relationship between the two protagonists proposed in sceptical readings. There is no differentiation between the active male subject (Porphyro) and the passive female object (Madeline). Both parties relieve control of their bodies and transcend their pre-existing identities in this erotic state accessed via religious ritual. In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats draws equally from both Christian and pagan images, rather than presenting a unilateral Christian marriage, as held in the studies of Garvin, Wiener, and Boulger, or allowing paganism to overcome Christianity, as Judith Arcana and Marcia Gilbreath maintain. The poem shows a unique aspect of Keats's idea of sacred experience, which, essentially sensual and erotic, encompasses both Christianity and paganism. Also, the poem offers an alternative angle to approach the poet's understanding of religion and its connection to sexual desire and poetic creation.

The Eve of St. Agnes begins with the perspective of the Beadsman, who represents orthodox Christianity. With this opening, Keats presents the struggle of religious people, who seek comfort from an exterior and abstract divine power to cope with bleak reality. In vain is this struggle, as Keats indicates with a tone of indeterminacy that the Beadsman's "frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old, / Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death, / Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith" (*Poems* 299).³ The image of ascending incense is worth noticing. In his analysis of the Bible in *Words with Power*, Northrop Frye detects a "up and down vertical pattern," which he terms as *axis mundi* (151). The pattern consists of two opposite movements of human beings in the material world, a vertically middle sphere: the ascent and the descent. The former signifies an aspiration to and reunion with God and the once lost paradise, while the latter represents a further alienation from God and an approximation to eternal death, or Hell. While *axis mundi* is a "vertical dimension of cosmos" that represents space, time is a horizontal dimension. The two cross each other at the very point of true

³ All quotations from *The Eve of St. Agnes* are from *The Poems of John Keats* (Heinemann, 1978), edited by Jack Stillinger, hereafter referenced as *Poems*. And all quotations from Keats's letters are from *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821* (Harvard UP, 1958) in two volumes, edited by Hyder Edward Rollins, and the volume and page numbers are indicated in parenthesis.

salvation, where spatial and temporal limits are conquered: “the point where the *axis mundi* crosses time, the moment of incarnation, is, we saw, ‘the still point of the turning world,’ and the centre of the axis” (176). The image of the Beadsman’s incense-like “frosted breath” that floats upward to heaven is an image of “ascent” in the pattern of *axis mundi* in the Christian context, according to Frye’s formulation. But for Keats, such an aspiration is ineffectual and futile, as the very word “Seem’d” suggests a sense of fictional appearance, a blindly optimistic semblance, and an illusion that religion can provide an existence “without a death.” The past tense of “Seem’d” contradicts the present tense of “his prayer he saith” in the next line. That is, in the Beadsman’s case, the vertical line of *axis mundi* fails to cross the horizontal line of time, thus denying him any chance of true salvation.⁴

Michael Ragussis likewise considers the Beadsman a victim of time’s power, and he accentuates Keats’s “fluctuation between past tense and present tense throughout the poem” that generates a sense of oscillation between “a fiction of long ago . . . and a present reality” (382). The past tense of “Seem’d” not only obscures the boundary between the fictional and the real, but also signals the inability of the Christian faith to bring forth salvation. The present tense of the Beadsman’s actual actions—“His prayer he saith” repeated in the first line of Stanza 2, and “takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees, / And back returneth” (*Poems* 299)—represents a disparity between religious performances in reality and spiritual comfort that religious people aim to achieve through these practices; the former does not lead to the latter. In Stanza 2, the Beadsman is “meagre, barefoot, wan” and of “weak spirit” walking through the chapel aisle, where “The sculpture’d dead . . . / Emprison’d in black, purgatorial rails” already foreshadows his doom, as well as the doom of other religious people: the “Knights, ladies,” who pray “in dumb orat’ries” and Angela, who dies a gruesome death at the end of the poem.

In Stanza 3, Keats presents a malignant consequence of religious practice. The Beadsman is tempted by material and sensual enjoyments, when “Music’s golden tongue / Flatter’d to tears this aged man and poor” (*Poems* 299). The narrator coldly declares the Beadsman’s detachment from them: “already had

⁴ The ascending image of incense also appears in Keats’s dedication poem to Leigh Hunt in his 1817 collection. In this poem, Keats shows a blissful state of Greco-Roman paganism in the past, where *axis mundi* and time do cross each other: “wreathed *incense* do we see upborne / Into the east, to meet the smiling *day*” (*Poems* 93; emphasis added). Ironically, the moment of salvation is denied in the Beadsman’s Christian practice, but granted in a pagan ceremony.

his deathbell rung; / The joys of all his life were said and sung: / His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve" (299). The Beadsman then turns away to his penance, which is originally followed by a deleted stanza that depicts an alluring picture of sensual pleasures:

But there are ears may not hear sweet melodies,
And there are eyes to brighten festivals,
And there are feet for nimble minstrelsies,
And many a lip that for the red wine calls. —
Follow, then follow to the illumined halls,
Follow me youth—and leave the Eremite—
Give him a tear—then trophied banneral,
And many a brilliant tasseling of light,
Shall droop from arched ways this high Baronial night.
(*Poems* 300)

In this discarded stanza, Keats casts doubt on religious asceticism, which is practiced in exchange for spiritual peace in this life and eternal happiness in the afterlife. The better afterlife has been indicated as false and illusory in the past-tense "Seem'd" in Stanza 1, and the spiritual peace in this life is now proven futile, as the Beadsman obtains no internal peace by practicing his religious penance. He is still tormented by the temptation of material luxuries and sensual pleasures, as Robert Kern observes that his "ability to alter or ignore reality is shown to be an inability, a failure of nerve, a turning away from possibilities and feelings to which he is vulnerable but which he has long repressed" (182). As Frye further elaborates in *Words with Power*, a successful ascent marks the return to the prelapsarian paradise, which is "associated with sunshine, youth and fertility and form[s] a *locus amoenus* or pleasant place where it is always spring and autumn at once," a primary state exemplified by the Garden of Adonis in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, a symbolic image of Mother Nature's womb that represents sexual vitality (180). Frye's formulation of *axis mundi* and time underscores the original sexual undercurrents in the biblical context, which is later toned down and excluded by institutionalised Christianity. Keats observes the deprivation of sexual vitality in the contemporary Church, as his 1816 sonnet "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition" demonstrates. In this poem, institutionalised Christianity puts human beings in an inert state of

lifelessness: “The church bells toll a melancholy round” with “Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares” and “the sermon’s horrid sound” (*Poems* 88). What remains in Christianity is “A chill as from a tomb” that is “dying like an outburnt lamp,” and its lost sexual vitality can only be found in paganism—the “fireside joys, and Lydian air,” “fresh flowers,” and “many glories of immortal stamp” (88)—that promotes exuberant energy of sexuality. The Beadsman’s penance and asceticism thus represent the sterile status of contemporary Christians, who are denied a successful ascent and alienated from the primary paradise. Therefore, Keats’s characterisation of the Beadsman suggests that it is impossible to utterly renounce earthly desires by means of asceticism. On the contrary, the true meaning of religious sacredness in Christianity lies in the reincorporation of sexual desire, as the ritual of St. Agnes and the interaction between Madeline and Porphyro will attest to in the poem.

After criticising the Christian tradition of asceticism, Keats initiates his presentation of an alternative sacredness of eroticism, which, instead of forsaking material and sensual experiences, reincorporates sexual desire into its operation. In Stanza 5, in which Madeline is introduced, Keats invites the reader to consider “wing’d St. Agnes’ saintly care,” indicating St. Agnes’s role as the patron saint of various female identities: girls, virgins, betrothed women, and rape victims (Trüeb 98). By implying Agnes’s patronage of these female identities, Keats gives the character of Madeline a potential sense of ambiguity. Madeline is a girl and a virgin at this point, and she can be a betrothed woman to Porphyro, as scholars who hold idealist interpretations argue; but, as Stillinger and others suggest in a more sceptical and negative reading, she can also be a rape victim of Porphyro. Thus, prior to Porphyro’s actions, Keats already complicates Madeline’s identity with the hidden meanings of the figure of St. Agnes.

In Stanza 6, Keats presents his version of the ritual of St. Agnes’s Eve:

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.
 (*Poems* 301)

Compared with his possible sources of the ritual, namely John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Keats's version retains the common element of fasting in both sources.⁵ In addition, Keats includes a specific practice that is unseen in Brand's and Burton's documents: nakedness. Both fasting and nakedness are significant for the ritual. Discussing fasting in *Anatomy*, Burton rejects the practice in pagan religions of "Turks, Chinese, Gentiles, Abyssinians, Greeks, Latins" (342). But he then argues that "Not that fasting is a thing to be discommended" and describes the advantages of fasting in the Christian context. In his own copy of *Anatomy*, it is on the margin of this passage about fasting that Keats wrote his one-word comment "good"—"for it is an excellent means to keep the body in subjection, a preparative to devotion, the physic of the soul, by which chaste thoughts are engendered, true zeal, a divine spirit, whence wholesome counsels do proceed, concupiscence is restrained, vicious and predominant lusts and humours are expelled" (342).⁶ We cannot be certain to what extent Keats's "good" signified his agreement with Burton's discourse. Considering Keats's general hostility to institutionalised Christianity and his affinity with Greco-Roman mythology, as postulated in the sonnet "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition" discussed previously, I would suggest that what Keats deems "good" is not Burton's differentiation between pagan fasting and Christian fasting (as the line marking Keats's "good" only encompasses the passage quoted above).⁷ For Keats, what is significant is Burton's idea that the

⁵ In his letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats mentions that he has written two poems in the past two months, and one of them is "call'd St Agnes' Eve on a popular superstition" (*Letters* 2: 139). In terms of Keats's sources, Jeffery N. Cox notes that Keats might have read about the superstition from Brand's 1777 book *Observations on Popular Antiquities*, which was reprinted in 1813 (Keats, *Poetry and Prose* 445). And in Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which Keats read avidly, the ritual is also mentioned: "or by fasting on St. Agnes' Eve or Night, to know who shall be their first husband" (181).

⁶ The image of page 510 of Keats's own copy of *Anatomy*, which shows his one-word comment "good," is reproduced in Janice Sinson's *John Keats and The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 1.

⁷ In addition, in the dedication poem to Leigh Hunt "Glory and loveliness have passed away" of his 1817 collection, Keats again shows nostalgic sentiments for the classical "Glory and loveliness" of "crowd of nymphs" and "The shrine of Flora" (*Poems* 93). Perhaps his preference for Greco-Roman mythology can also be reflected in several contemporary criticisms on his poetry. In his 1818 article "On the Cockney School of Poetry" published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, John Gibson Lockhart dismisses Keats's works as "loose, nerveless versification" and the poet as "a still smaller poet" and "a boy of pretty abilities" (530) after attacking Keats's "profane and vulgarised" adaptation of Greek mythology. Also, during Keats's meeting with Wordsworth at Richard Monckhouse's place in London in 1817, as Benjamin Robert Haydon records, Keats recited an ode to Pan in *Endymion* for Wordsworth, who gave the famous remark: "a Very pretty piece of Paganism" (Roe 196). Moreover, as Anthony John Harding's study shows, Keats might have followed the contemporary trend of interest in the ancient classical world and its religion, promoted by the new archaeological discoveries and

practice of fasting, the prohibition of one bodily desire, offers the access to another form of desire. For Burton, this latter form of desire is religious devotion, “chaste thoughts,” “true zeal,” and “divine spirit,” but for Keats, being “supperless” enables Madeline to “have visions of delight . . . Upon the honey’d middle of the night” (*Poems* 301), to aspire to sexual fulfilment. In this sense, Keats is potentially equalising sacred experience with erotic experience. Also, Keats takes heed of Burton’s concept that fasting positions “the body in subjection,” as he recognises that both sacred and erotic experiences require the subject to surrender his/her individuality and subjectivity, forsaking control of his/her own body. Keats’s trope of Madeline’s nakedness also reflects this concept of “the body in subjection.” Being naked in St. Agnes’s ritual reminds the reader of Agnes’s famous humiliating punishment before her martyrdom. As L. Sherling’s 1677 hagiography *The Life of the Blessed St. Agnes* records, the Roman Prefect Symbonius “commanded her to be stript of all her Cloths, and then to be led to be Naked to the common *Bordelli*, and there to be exposed to the lust of all comers” (85).⁸ This episode serves as the explanation of St. Agnes being the patron saint of rape victims. Also, Agnes’s humiliation of being naked and “exposed to the lust” of men prefigures Madeline’s naked subjection to Porphyro’s lustful gaze and reinforces the undertone of voyeurism and rape. Aware of his source materials, Keats draws the element of fasting from Brand and Burton, and includes the element of nakedness that is possibly extracted from Agnes’s own story recorded in Sherling’s document. By combining fasting and nakedness, Keats’s unique design of St. Agnes’s ritual delineates his idea of sacredness as an experience of annihilating individuality and forsaking control of the body. For Keats, “the body in subjection” in St. Agnes’s ritual is the very condition of accessing the state of sacredness.

In the earlier version of the poem in Richard Woodhouse’s transcription, there is a deleted stanza between Stanza 6 and Stanza 7, in which Keats gives a further depiction of Madeline’s vision, which is “the sweetest of the year” (*Poems* 301). In the dream of the maiden who performs the ritual, her future

“late-Enlightenment speculation about the origins of religious belief in the response of early human societies to the natural world” (137).

⁸ L. Sherling’s *The Life of the Blessed St. Agnes: Virgin and Martyr in Prose and Verse* published in 1677 is a detailed and vivid narrative that relates the saint’s life, struggle, and death—how she, as a devout Christian, rejects the love of a Roman governor’s son and is consequently humiliated and executed by the Roman authority when her Christian identity is exposed. Though there is no direct evidence showing that Keats did read this document, it is possible that Keats gains inspiration for Madeline’s nakedness in St. Agnes’s ritual from it.

husband not only appears, but also

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. (*Poems* 301)

According to Stillinger's study, Keats wrote the first draft of *The Eve of St. Agnes* in January 1819, and revised the poem and produced its fair copy in early September ("Text of *The Eve of St. Agnes*" 208). It was in this revision that this stanza was inserted between Stanza 6 and Stanza 7, to which both Woodhouse and John Taylor strongly objected.⁹ In the final version published in the 1820 *Lamia* collection, Keats complied with Woodhouse's and Taylor's suggestions and removed the added stanza, whose sexual connotations render the poem "unfit for ladies" (*Letters* 2: 163) and "unfit for publications" (2: 183), in Woodhouse's and Taylor's words. Stillinger argues for the restoration of this deleted stanza, because it supports his sceptical reading of Madeline as a "hoodwinked" young woman in dream and a rape victim of Porphyro in reality. Keats's additional stanzas, as he contends, "heighten the irony of Madeline's self-deception and clarify Keats's condemnation of 'dreaming'" and "Madeline's engrossment in superstitious ritual to the point of losing touch with reality" (Stillinger, "Text of *The Eve of St. Agnes*" 211). I also propose a reconsideration of this discarded stanza, because it provides an example of Keats's erotic appropriation of a Christian image, namely Mary Magdalene, and helps us better understand his unique idea of religious sacredness.

⁹ As referred to in the beginning of this paper, in his letter to Taylor, Woodhouse mentions that Keats "had made trifling alterations, inserted an additional stanza early in the poem to make the legend more intelligible . . . he retains the name of Porphyro—has altered the last 3 lines to leave on the reader a sense of pettish and disgust, by bringing Old Angela in (only) dead stiff & ugly" (Keats, *Letters* 2: 162-63). Woodhouse even feels that Keats took pleasure in his objections, "trying his hand at an attempt to play with his reader & fling him off at last" (2: 163). Taylor responds to Woodhouse on 25th September, agreeing the latter's negative view of Keats's revisions: "I cannot but confess to you that it excites in me the Strongest Sentiments of Disapprobation . . . 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" (Keats, *Letters* 2: 183).

In this stanza, the vision of Madeline features material and sensual enjoyments; it is a ritual of “sacrifice” and a feast of “Delicious food . . . Viands, and wine, and fruit, and sugar’d cream” and “soft music” (*Poems* 301). All these material luxuries are brought to Madeline in a highly erotic manner by the envisioned husband, who originally represents Jesus Christ as a spiritual lover in Agnes’s hagiography.¹⁰ Keats interweaves the corporeal with the spiritual, emphasising Madeline’s lips and palate, “with the fine extreme / Of relish” and even suggests that “More pleasures follow’d in a dizzy stream / Palpable almost” (*Poems* 301). Titillating Madeline’s senses of tasting and hearing, Keats invites the reader to imagine another sense that is “Palpable almost,” the bodily sense of erotic touching that can bring forth “More pleasures” and make Madeline “wake again / Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen” (301). Keats’s reference to Mary Magdalene in this dropped stanza barely draws critical attention; it seems a strange reference unrelated to the plot. However, it bears significant meanings in Keats’s unique construction of religious sacredness in this poem. Mary Magdalene appears in several episodes in the New Testament, including Jesus’s exorcism on her to expel seven demons, her presence at the crucifixion and in Jesus’s empty tomb, and her witness of the resurrection. The “weeping Magdalen” appears in the Gospel of John, when she and other disciples cannot find Jesus’s body in the tomb: “But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping” (*The Bible*, John 20.11). Asked by the two angels about the reason for her weeping, Mary replies: “Because they have taken away my LORD, and I know not where they have laid him” (20.15). Mary Magdalene is weeping because she loses sight of the corporeal existence of Jesus, and because at that moment she is ignorant of the spiritual return of her Lord: “For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead” (20.9). In Madeline’s case, after the dream of St. Agnes’s Eve, which is imbued with bodily pleasures, she is no longer a “weeping Magdalen” because she has already embraced the corporeal existence of her envisioned husband, based on Agnes’s lover as Jesus Christ, within a spiritual sphere of religious vision. In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene ceases weeping after she witnesses Jesus’s resurrection, another crucial image of ascent in Frye’s formulation: “I

¹⁰ In *The Life of the Blessed St. Agnes*, Agnes rejects the love of Symbrionius’s son by declaring her love for Jesus: “my Soul is prepossess’d, and being engaged elsewhere cannot comply with your desires” (Sherling 12) and “thou hast a Rival; Know I Love him, and prefer him to all the World; and when thou know’st this, if thou wilt still pursue a fruitless passion, never expect any thing from me but scorn and contempt” (25).

ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God” (20.17). In this deleted stanza of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Madeline is “no weeping Magdalen” after the sexual interaction with her future love, a Jesus-figure who gratifies her with material and bodily pleasures, thus integrating the concept of resurrection and sexual love. In *Words with Power*, Frye examines the male-female imagery in the New Testament, noting that “the imagery of bridegroom and bride” is associated with “the second coming and the Apocalypse” (203). The conjugal union, which is termed *agape* and presented with highly erotic poetics in *The Song of Songs*, is sublimated and elevated to Jesus’s love for human beings and the Church in the New Testament. Such a phenomenon, as Frye further postulates, exemplifies a spiritual/sexual spectrum in the Western literature about erotic love. On one end is total sublimation, “where all sexual imagery ‘means’ or points away from sex to religious experience,” and on the other end is “a more directly erotic form where sexual experience is the central focus” (205). Paralleling Madeline with Mary Magdalene in the sensual vision of the hour of St. Agnes, who has Jesus as her spiritual lover, Keats subtly reverses the process of sublimation in Frye’s formulation by restoring Jesus’s role as a bridegroom to the sexual end of the spectrum. That is, with the reference to Mary Magdalene in this vision of somatic and material pleasures, Keats erotises the Christian concepts of resurrection and the second coming, pointing to a state of divine intimacy, which is accessed via sexual fulfilment brought forth by Jesus Christ not only as a spiritual leader, but also as a sexual lover. Revisiting this deleted stanza, we see that it not only supports Stillinger’s sceptical reading. More crucially, it exemplifies Keats’s unique construal of religious sacredness, which reincorporates material and somatic desires into religious experience by eroticising Christian images and motifs.¹¹

¹¹ The figure of Mary Magdalene as a cultural image of reformed prostitute in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is also noteworthy. This is reflected by the naming of the famous asylum founded in London in 1758 as the “Magdalen Hospital,” which is “a charitable foundation established to provide a reformatory refuge for distressed women who were either prostitutes or who had no recourse except prostitution” (Ellis and Lewis 11-12). Many historians have noted a significant transformation of the cultural image of prostitutes in the eighteenth century, from siren-like creatures of lustfulness to women forced by poverty to commercialise their bodies (see, for example, Carter 21; Rosenthal 4-7). The establishment of the Magdalen Hospital certainly reflected this new image of prostitutes, as the institute shaped the social view that “[f]rom vilified agent of moral and social contamination, the prostitute had become a virtuous and recuperable victim of circumstance” (Peace 141). From this perspective, the phrase “no weeping Magdalen” in *The Eve of St. Agnes* seems to suggest that the castle where Madeline resides is the very “circumstance” that will force her into sexual activities against her will, the similar distress St. Agnes had undergone. Only through the ritual of St. Agnes, in which “her future lord would there appear,” can Madeline be liberated from the marketplace of

In Stanza 9, Keats introduces Porphyro, who, “with heart on fire / For Madeline” (*Poems* 302), sneaks into Madeline’s house, where once he is spotted, “a hundred swords / Will storm his heart, Love’s fev’rous citadel” (302). Porphyro’s role has been a centre of critical debates in the studies of *The Eve of St. Agnes*. He is interpreted as a typical Romantic lover by Wasserman; a messenger of the new secularised religion of beauty by Ronald Sharp (45); a lustful, cruel, deceitful, and opportunistic rapist by Stillinger; a liberating saviour for Madeline by Wiener; a sly but charismatic hero of Gothic tradition by Jerrold Hogle (211-14); and even a powerful sorcerer by Karen J. Harvey. And more recently, Susan Wolfson regards him as “a new kind of Keatsian hero . . . an artful adventurer . . . hoping to ‘gaze and worship’ unseen—or if things go well, ‘Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss,’ all chastely” (75). In addition to these possibilities, on a symbolic level, Porphyro can also be seen as an executor of sacrifice, in which Madeline has offered her naked body in subjection for the advent of her lover, who serves to complete the ritual of St. Agnes. In *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies*, Jennifer N. Wunder highlights Keats’s keen interest in contemporary secret societies such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry and their initiation rituals. She points out that for Keats, religious rituals signify a paradoxical route through which human beings can “attain a higher state or merge with the sublime” by “using ‘Things real’ that constitute the base matter of life” (132). In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the ritual initiated by Madeline to aspire to sexual love, to “require / Of Heaven with upward eyes” (*Poems* 301), has to be completed by Porphyro’s body, “the base matter of life,” the “Things real,” which, as Keats writes in his letter to Benjamin Bailey in March 1818, constitute “the ardour of the pursuer,” the “Ethereal thing” (*Letters* 1: 242). His actions upon Madeline, a sacrificial body in total subjection and passivity, will make her “no weeping Magdalen” by reuniting the spiritual and the corporeal—the eroticisation of the Christian ideas of resurrection and the second coming that are indicated in Madeline’s vision. Accordingly, Porphyro is a potential Jesus Christ stemming from Agnes’s story and the Magdalene reference in the discarded stanza. His sexual participation in Madeline’s ritual embodies spiritual love and exemplifies Keats’s idea of sacredness, in which religious devotion and eroticism are united.

political marriage, analogous to the loveless sex in prostitution, and become “no weeping Magdalen,” reformed and recuperated by her union with Porphyro.

After secretly entering the hostile castle of Madeline's and gaining Angela's help, Porphyro's "stratagem" is

to lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespied,
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
While legion'd fairies pac'd the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.
Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.
(*Poems* 306)

This stanza presents the theme of voyeurism, or what Stillinger calls "peeping Tomism" ("Hoodwinking of Madeline" 540), and indicates the final consummation. Keats prefigures the sexual relation and positions between Madeline and Porphyro in this stanza. At first look, in both actions of "see her beauty unespied" and "win perhaps that night a peerless bride," Porphyro is the active doer while Madeline is the passive receptor, which seems to conform to Stillinger's argument that Porphyro is a rapist and Madeline is an unconscious and cheated victim. Also, it is a religious ritual of "sacrifice," as suggested in the deleted stanza between stanza 6 and stanza 7. In other words, Porphyro as an actively sexual lover is also an executor of this ritual, in which Madeline offers her naked body in fasting, the "body in subjection" if put in Burton's words, as the sacrificial object in exchange of her lover's arrival.¹² Although Keats seemingly presents this sacrificial ritual as actively performed by Porphyro upon the passive Madeline, who has already forsaken the control of

¹² The motif of ritualistic sacrifice in Christianity represents a violent way to be attached to God, to the sacred experience of divine intimacy, through killing, especially in the Old Testament. Abel's sacrifice of "the firstlings of his flock" (*The Bible*, Gen. 4.4) earns him God's favour, which is reinterpreted by Lord Byron in his *Cain: a Mystery* as "The fumes of scorching flesh and smoking blood" (930). Abraham wins God's blessing by being willing to slay his own son Isaac in sacrifice (*The Bible*, Gen. 22.17). Moreover, Jesus's crucifixion is yet another manifestation of sacrificial violence that leads to boundless love and final salvation for human beings. Keats is probably aware of the concept of ritualistic sacrifice in biblical tradition and its potential violence as he weaves latent elements of violence into this scene: the "tongueless nightingale" that "should swell / Her throat in vain, and die" (*Poems* 308) that alludes to Philomel's rape and mutilation by Tereus, and "A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings" (*Poems* 309).

her body, he diminishes and even annihilates this dichotomy between male/doer and female/receptor. By doing so, Keats demonstrates that in St. Agnes's ritual, or in the experiences of sacredness and eroticism, there is no difference between the performer of the sacrifice and the sacrificial object. Despite his appearance as an active "gazing" and "winning" performer, Porphyro also puts his body and soul in subjection and passivity as Madeline does in the ritual of St. Agnes's Eve.

In the last line of Stanza 19, Keats foreshadows the dissolution of such dichotomy between activeness and passivity by juxtaposing Porphyro with the wizard Merlin in the Arthurian tales, who "paid his Demon all the monstrous debt" (*Poems* 307). Cox's note suggests that this reference is puzzling for critics, as Leigh Hunt confesses that he does not understand Merlin's function here (Keats, *Poetry and Prose* 450). H. Buxton Forman, in his edition of Keats's complete works, interprets Merlin's "monstrous debt" as his "monstrous existence, which he owes to a demon and paid when he died or disappeared through the working of one of his spells by Viviane."¹³ In his *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats*, Charles Patterson argues that in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats creates "a sustained daemonic atmosphere that adds subtly to the charm of the principals shut way from the world" (111), and the reference to Merlin simply serves as one of the magical elements to enhance the daemonic atmosphere. Karen J. Harvey offers another reading of Keats's juxtaposition of Porphyro and Merlin, which supports my argument of Porphyro's subjection and passivity in St. Agnes's ritual. Evoking the details of Merlin's story in documents such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* and Thomas Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*, Harvey proposes that the "Demon" refers to Vivien, the Lady of the Lake, rather than the incubus who begets Merlin as Forman suggests. She further argues that Keats deliberately compares Porphyro to Merlin, because they both woo their lovers "by magic means and is, in turn, entrapped by his own magic" (90). Keats's alignment between Porphyro and Merlin prefigures the former's position in Madeline's ritual, where, despite his apparent sexual initiative and aggressiveness, Porphyro also submits to the power of eroticism and sacredness.

In Stanza 23, with her body already subject to fasting, Madeline initiates the ritual of St. Agnes by another self-deprivation of an active potency, speaking: "No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!" (*Poems* 308). She is like "a

¹³ See Forman's note in his edition of *The Complete Works of John Keats*, p. 74.

tongueless nightingale” who “should swell / Her throat in vain, and die,” an image that alludes to Philomel, the rape victim of King Tereus of Thrace in Greek mythology, as noted by Cox and other critics (Keats, *Poetry and Prose* 451). Philomel’s tongue is cut by her violator to prevent her from disclosing the crime.¹⁴ The reference to Philomel accordingly becomes one of the textual evidences for sceptical readings that deem Porphyro a cruel and deceitful rapist. From another perspective, Wolfson detects in this passage “those anti-Catholic discourses of virgin hysteria, which manifests in dream, vision, and suppressed speech” (75). However, Keats complicates the seemingly unilateral images with opposite elements. In her silence, Madeline’s “heart was voluble / Paining with eloquence her balmy side” (*Poems* 309). In other words, her muteness reinforces her body’s power of charm; when verbal words are suspended, her somatic performance possesses even higher potency of erotic expression. After Stanza 24, which has this ritualistic place filled with material luxuries,¹⁵ Keats presents Madeline in a picture of Christian purity, as “down she knelt for heaven’s grace and boon” (*Poems* 309) and

. . . on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem’d a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint. (*Poems* 309)

Gazing upon Madeline in this sacred phenomenon, where the material, the corporeal, and the spiritual are synthesised, Porphyro “grew faint,” even as he is executing his active desire projection of erotic gazing. His self-control and subjectivity is corroded in this process of seeing Madeline, who is originally a typical image of the Burkean beautiful but is now endowed by Keats with the

¹⁴ Though tongueless, Philomela weaves a tapestry to reveal the crime to Procne, as narrated in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. A similar and more gruesome characterisation can be found in Shakespeare’s early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, in which Lavinia’s tongue and both hands are severed by Demetrius and Chiron after they rape her. She later reveals the atrocity by writing their names in the dirt with a stick held in her mouth.

¹⁵ Analysing the problematic “seeing” of Porphyro and the reader, Andrew Bennett argues that Stanza 24 presents a “rich, textured and lexically profuse form” that paradoxically detaches the reader from verisimilitude: “The gorgeousness of description nor only enhances the reader’s pleasure but also estranges him or her from an unmediated experience of the visual: the very virtuosity makes us wary, its very profusion alienates” (106-07).

absorbing power of the sublime.¹⁶ In Stanza 26, when Madeline begins to undress herself, Keats writes:

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
 Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
 Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
 Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
 Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
 In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed. (*Poems* 310)

Considering Keats's rhetorical strategy in this stanza, Andrew Bennett perceives "an opaque screen, a teasing veil over the spectacle of Madeline's body" (108). In line with Bennett, I also recognise Keats's deliberate indirectness. In Stanza 26 that displays Madeline's nakedness, one of the significant elements of the ritual, Keats does not describe her body directly, but employs other objects to incite readers' and Porphyro's erotic imagination. The jewels are "warmed" because they are attached to Madeline's "fragrant boddice" and her "rich attire creeps rustling to her knees," which offers a somatosensory pleasure as if Porphyro is really caressing her skin. Such indirect bodily intimacy strengthens Madeline's silent power of erotic enchantment. In line 231, Keats gives Madeline another unique characterisation in this scene—she is like "a mermaid in sea-weed." With this drastic shift from a purely Christian portrayal to a simile of magical creature of pagan legends or folklore, Keats further complicates and covertly endows Madeline with more power in terms of her relationship with Porphyro. Mary Arseneau notes in this passage that Keats's "combination of attractiveness with disturbing power is a recurrent pattern in the depiction of the feminine in Keats's poetry" (239), and reads Madeline/mermaid as one of the examples of this "disturbing power." The

¹⁶ In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke defines the beautiful as "that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (91) and elucidates the idea by analysing the female body, especially neck and breasts, parts that are iconic of femininity (107-09). As Burke puts it: "we submit to what we admire [the sublime], we love what submit to us [the beautiful]" (113), one of the most essential elements of the Burkean beautiful is the subject's passive and dominated status, contrary to the sublime that evokes fear and awe, to which the spectators "shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated" (68). Madeline, in her apparent subjugated posture of the Burkean beautiful, in fact possesses the power of the sublime to ensnare Porphyro and annihilate his identity as an active agent in their sexual interaction.

image of mermaid, as Arseneau contends, works with Keats's later reference to Medusa in Stanza 33, and is deliberately associated with the Christian images of "saint" and "splendid angel" in Stanza 25 to enthrall Porphyro, to "erase his physical strength and his consciousness" (235). I agree with Arseneau's interpretation of the "mermaid in sea-weed" in this stanza as a siren-like, "standard type of female demon" (236). That is, the mermaid simile blurs the power relationship between Porphyro and Madeline, in which it is often assumed that the former dominates the latter. Although Madeline is in a passive position of unconsciousness and nakedness, subject to Porphyro's gaze, she possesses the power deriving from such passivity to undermine and absorb the physicality and mentality of Porphyro, the active "gazer" who seems to hold the initiative in this voyeuristic scene.

Undressed, Madeline falls into sleep "In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay, / Until the poppi'd warmth of sleep oppress'd / Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away" (*Poems* 310). Keats interweaves both Christian and pagan images with the lines "Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray; / Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain, / As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again" (*Poems* 310). Keats obfuscates the distinction between Christianity and paganism by aligning "missal" with "Paynims," suggesting that the entrance into essential sacredness does not require identification with any particular religious sects. Once human beings can position themselves in subjection, relieve the control of their bodies, and forsake individuality and subjectivity, their perception is no longer restrained by the external circumstances ("blinded alike from sunshine and rain"). In this state, they can even transcend and reverse the sequence of time ("a rose should shut, and be a bud again"). Gazing at the naked and sleeping Madeline, Porphyro's subjectivity is continually undermined by her power of passivity and is absorbed into the ritualistic phenomenon, as he is "Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced" (*Poems* 311). The passive "Stol'n" instead of the active "Stealing" insinuates that though Porphyro plays a Romantic hero venturing into his lover's chamber, he is potentially the one who is "stolen" and "ventured" upon in this bower of erotic sacredness. After Porphyro "crept" out from his hiding place and attempts to awake Madeline, his subjugated status is aggravated in Stanza 32, as "It seem'd he never, never could redeem / From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes; / So mus'd awhile, entail'd in woofed phantasies" (*Poems* 313). The words "spell," "mus'd," and "entail'd" all conform to Keats's

previous juxtaposition between Porphyro's "stratagem" and Merlin's "monstrous debt." As Bennett notes, Porphyro's desire to visually gaze at Madeline "involves bewilderment, astonishment, curiosity: the control and power Porphyro's seeing gives him threaten to be disrupted by this fixed gaze" (100). Keats's design here once again implies that Porphyro's amorous adventure leads him into the enthrallment and imprisonment by female charms.

Stanza 33 is another crucial stanza with Keats's subtle designs of Porphyro's complicated condition:

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":
 Close to her ear touching the melody;—
 Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:
 He ceased—she panted quick—and suddenly
 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone;
 Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.
 (*Poems* 313)

In this stanza, critics have already paid attention to Porphyro's song "La belle dame sans mercy," which would become the title of another Keats's famous poem months later in April 1819. Daniela Garofalo holds that Porphyro sings the song to "play the lover seducing the beloved with . . . a song she does not conspicuously appear to hear" (363). Harvey notes that the song "suggests strongly the subsequent image Keats will create of the enchanted knight 'alone and palely loitering' in a later ballad" (91). Countering Stillinger's sceptical and Wasserman's idealist readings, Heidi Thomson argues that the song presents a "story of a mutual seduction" and "reassesses the relationship between Madeline and Porphyro as one of mutual consent as opposed to either rape or a (non-sexual) idealized dream illusion" (338-39). With whatever conclusions, the above critics assume that "La belle dame sans mercy" is sung by Porphyro to awaken Madeline;¹⁷ none of them take heed of Keats's careful syntactical

¹⁷ Mark Sandy also provides a different view, arguing that the song reduces Porphyro "to an immovable and silent form, intimating that he and Madeline will be absorbed into a tradition of courtly legend" (*Poetics of Self and Form* 57).

structure of the first line of this stanza. The fragment “Awakening up” seems to indicate that Porphyro is waking Madeline by taking her lute and singing the song, but the object of the verb phrase “awakening,” which should be Madeline, is missing. Its absence is not a result of Keats’s recklessness or metrical purpose. It is a subtle device to tell readers about Porphyro’s status in the ritual. That is, for Porphyro, singing “La belle dame sans mercy” is not a means to “awaken” Madeline, but a self-reflexive manifestation of his own awakening. Singing “La belle dame sans mercy,” which prefigures a knight enthralled by a Circe-like *femme fatale*, “Alone and palely loitering” (*Poems* 357), insinuates that Porphyro is no longer in control of himself after entering the ritual. He is waking from an illusion that he, an active male “gazer” and “doer,” holds initiative and superior position over an apparently receptive and passive female body in erotic experience. Porphyro’s chanting of the collapse of masculinity in confrontation with the absorbing power of the feminine emphasises the necessity of self-annihilation in sacred/erotic experience even for men, who appears to play an aggressive and dominant role in the Romantic tradition. This “awakening” is ascertained in the last two lines of this stanza. Seeing Madeline’s “blue affrayed eyes wide open shone,” Porphyro “Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone” (*Poems* 313). As Arseneau remarks, the hidden reference to Medusa in this line demonstrates “the dissipation in a female presence of the male’s identity and autonomy” (233).¹⁸ After his “awakening up,” Porphyro is now petrified and renounces his command of body and soul in the sphere of eroticism and sacredness.

The embodiment of Madeline’s dream of St. Agnes’s Eve takes place in Stanza 36, after Madeline’s awakening in Stanza 34 and 35. The “painful change” from the dreamt Porphyro to the real Porphyro “expell’d / The blisses of her dream so pure and deep” and makes her “moan forth witless words with many a sigh” (*Poems* 314). The dreamt Porphyro’s voice “was at sweet tremble in mine ear, / Made tuneable with every sweetest vow,” but the real Porphyro

¹⁸ It also reminds us of Keats’s employments of the image of Medusa in the omitted phrase “foul Medusa’s head” in *Isabella* (*Poems* 259) and the discarded stanza of “Ode on Melancholy”—“Your cordage large uprootings from the skull / Of bald Medusa” (*Poems* 374). Both instances categorise the image of Medusa as a representation of death. In *Isabella*, the “foul Medusa’s head” aggravates the horror of Lorenzo’s corpse. In “Ode on Melancholy,” Medusa is juxtaposed with “dead men’s bones,” “phantom gibbet,” and the poisonous plants and insects in Stanza 1, suggesting that true Melancholy cannot be found in the realm of death (Smith 684). The covert reference to Medusa in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, if read in light of the above discussion, indicates that the erotic interaction between Porphyro and Madeline is an experience that approximates to death.

is “pallid, chill, and drear” (*Poems* 314). Madeline’s astonishment and disappointment are read as textual evidence that she is “hoodwinked”—betrayed by Angela and deceived by Porphyro. However, she then implores the real Porphyro to “Give me that voice again, my Porphyro, / Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!” (*Poems* 314). Keats describes Madeline’s utterance as “voluptuous accents,” which allures Porphyro to consummate with her. Though appearing as a powerless victim facing a male advancement, Madeline again wields her erotic potency of passivity, which is confirmed by Keats’s word choice of “voluptuous.” Tempted by her words blended with fear, coyness, half-reluctance and half-urging, Porphyro consummates with the half-dreaming Madeline: “Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet,— / Solution sweet” (*Poems* 315). In this culmination of sexual fulfilment, Keats still reminds the reader that it is achieved through a religious ritual, as he concludes Stanza 36 with the line “St. Agnes’ moon hath set” and has Porphyro describe himself as “A famish’d pilgrim, —saved by miracle” (*Poems* 316), echoing his posture in Stanza 34, “Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye” (*Poems* 314). Ultimately, the sexual union between Madeline and Porphyro epitomises Keats’s conception of religious sacredness in both Christian and non-Christian contexts, which is the re-inclusion of sexual desire. It transcends the lifeless form of Christianity represented by the asceticism of the Beadsman, whose “pious incense” and “harsh penance” symbolise a failed ascent, in Frye’s words, back to the primary intimacy with God. Such sacred intimacy, as Keats suggests through his poetic rendering of St. Agnes and Mary Magdalene, contains sexual desire and erotic activities that are excluded in institutionalised and doctrinal Christianity.¹⁹ In the latter part of the poem, by deploying pagan and folklore images of Merlin, the mermaid, “La belle dame

¹⁹ In *The Eve of St. Mark*, another poem with a similar title and a Christian feast motif, Keats again presents the sacred experience with poetic imagination, though in a less sexual manner. In this poem, Bertha, “a maiden fair / Dwelling in the old Minster Square” (*Poems* 320) indulges herself in “A curious volume” (319) about St. Marks’ life and death. By reading the legendary martyrdom written in Middle English, she is thrilled by the saint’s suffering, “[r]ejoicing for his many pains” (322) and accesses the imaginary sphere of sacredness that borders on erotic ecstasy. Walter E. Houghton proposes that the poem “is built on the principle of contrast” (70); Bertha’s reading demonstrates a division between reality and the imagination, with the juxtaposition of “the near and familiar, the conventional and commonplace, with the strange, curious, and far-off, the visionary and the exotic” (71). Mary Rebecca Thayer argues that *The Eve of St. Mark* was supposed to feature the story in another poem by Keats, *The Cap and Bells*, in which the fairy emperor Elfinan attempts to steal Bertha from her home with a magical book, a theme that echoes Porphyro’s action in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (154-55). Keats’s idea of the sacred might be further explored by comparing these two poems based on the feasts of Catholic saints.

sans mercy,” and Medusa, Keats further demonstrates the erotic experience accessed through ritualistic practice dissolves the boundary between male activity and female passivity. Following Madeline, who positions her “body in subjection” through fasting and nakedness, Porphyro annihilates his subjectivity in the ensuing erotic interaction. As Merlin who is enthralled by a woman’s spell, Porphyro is confounded by the mermaid and petrified by Medusa.

The final elopement of Madeline and Porphyro appears to be contrasted with the dreadful fate of those in the castle: the Baron’s woeful dream, his guests’ lasting nightmares, and the deaths of Angela and the Beadsman. However, the line “[t]hese lovers fled away into the *storm*” (*Poems* 317; emphasis added) suggests that the elopement does not necessarily lead to an ideal future of love free from the confining castle. Ragussis writes that “the reader’s surprised awakening in the last stanza from a simple romance of happy love resembles Madeline’s own awakening to a cold winter storm and the prospect that she has been deceived” (380). Mark Sandy further argues that the horrid deaths of Angela and the Beadsman predict the couple’s fate, whose “untold future is blighted by the prospect of death, as the passage of time will inevitably consign them to a similar deathly state” (14).²⁰ Despite Keats’s adoption of the Christian concept of resurrection by referring to Mary Magdalene, he does not deny the inevitability of death. Nor does the sexual fulfilment presented in *The Eve of St. Agnes* transcend this inevitability, since Keats has already imbued it with potential violence that approximates to death. Madeline’s erotic dream, as Tilottama Rajan points out, is “being made real, and therefore mortal” (108). But through the ritual of St. Agnes that brings about this embodiment, Madeline and Porphyro are able to access the sacred/erotic sphere, in which they are temporarily unbound by the bustling castle and the winter storm. As Patricia A. Parker accurately observes, “both wintry circumference and charmed center are frozen, and the ‘solution’ seems to be in neither one world nor the other but in the whole poetic movement in between” (196). What Keats accentuates poetically is this instantaneous interaction of sacredness and eroticism between Madeline and Porphyro, which grants them a different life experience from that of the Beadsman and Angela,

²⁰ Sandy’s article “Dream Lovers and Tragic Romance: Negative Fictions in Keats’s *Lamia*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Isabella*” is collected in the online journal *Romanticism on the Net*. The numbers in parenthesis indicate the paragraph number shown on its webpage.

even though they are destined to the same gruesome fate of death.

In the letter to his brother George in April 1819, Keats shares his religious view of contemporary Christianity: “Man is originally ‘a poor forked creature’ subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other” (*Letters* 2: 101). Keats keenly perceives the cruel indifference and immense malice of nature: “Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes—Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness” (2: 101). As a rose that will inevitably be blighted by “a cold wind, a hot sun,” “no more can man be happy in spite, the worldly elements will prey upon his nature” (2: 101). Religion, especially Christianity, ought to redeem human beings from the afflicting world, “a vale of tears,” but Keats denounces it as “certain arbitrary interposition of God” and states that under its sway men are “the misguided and superstitious” (2.101-02). His ideal replacement of Christian religion is a construal of this “vale of tears” as “The vale of Soul-making” that is “a grander system of salvation than the chrystain religion . . . a system of Spirit-creation” (2: 102). This Keatsian system consists of three materials: the *Intelligence*, the *human heart*, and the *World*. Intelligence is begot by the affliction that the World, or Elemental space, imposes upon the human heart, thus forming the Soul and “the sense of Identity”: “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” (2: 102). By acknowledging, enduring, and learning from the cruelty, ugliness, and caprice of God’s creation, instead of blindly identifying only the agreeable aspects of the world and yearning for an improved world-to-come, human beings can thus establish their identity and subjectivity. Such is an alternative procedure espoused by Keats in lieu of Christian religion, “a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity” (2: 103).

This letter, along with “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition” and “Glory and loveliness have passed away,” demonstrates Keats’s dissatisfaction with Christianity and his eagerness to propose an alternative system as a valid substitute. In terms of religious revisionism, Keats is strongly influenced by Leigh Hunt’s conception of “the religion of the heart” that values strong feelings, poetic imagination, and artistic appreciation over doctrinism and

rationalism (Ryan 74), though he does not share the latter's general optimism.²¹ The crucial role of poetry in Keats's alternative system emerges when Keats ponders over "how is the heart to become this Medium in a world of Circumstances" and concludes the letter by juxtaposing "Poetry and Theology" (2: 104). The analysis of *The Eve of St. Agnes* in this paper once again underscores Keats's intention to revise or even replace contemporary Christian belief and institution with "a system of Spirit-creation" in the context of poetical creation. In this poem, Keats synthesises Christian sacredness with eroticism in the ritual of a Catholic saint; he presents "a grander system" that reincorporates sexual desire into Christianity, and by including pagan images of female sexual potency that corrode Porphyro's masculine identity, he presents the self-annihilating aspects in both sacred and erotic experiences. This evokes our attention to another significant letter to Woodhouse, in which he also highlights the phenomenon of self-annihilation in writing poetry: "As to the poetical Character itself . . . it is not itself—it has no self . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity" and is "in a very little time annihilated" (*Letters* 1: 386-87). For Keats, religious sacredness, eroticism, and poetic creation seem to share the same propensity of self-annihilation, a transcendental state of "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" (*Letters* 1: 193) that decentralises selfhood and dissipates pre-existing identity.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche finds in the Dionysian religion a state of intoxication and oblivion of selfhood and identity, from which overflows the essential art of music (40). His concept of religious ecstasy, as Rajan notes, correlates with the self-destructive negativity that exists in Romantic aesthetics, deconstructing "the central fictions of Romantic idealism" (46).²² Ross Woodman regards the Nietzschean Dionysian intoxication as an exemplification of Keats's displacement of metaphysics with metaphor, "the

²¹ In his introduction to *The Religion of the Heart*, Hunt states that "God has written his religion in the heart" (1) and "Doctrines revolting to the heart are not made to endure, however mixed up they may be with lessons the most divine" (2). "The religion of the heart," as Hunt elaborates, deems God "the Great Beneficence," whose power and benevolence are manifested in the beauty and sublimity of his creation. And through their "hearts/feelings," instead of "heads/reason," human beings are able to perceive the presence and work of God. Hunt further proposes that "the holders of the Religion of the Heart" believe that the creation of God, the very material world human beings dwell in, is undergoing constant improvement, moving towards an ultimate perfect state: "his divine occupation is to work ends befitting his goodness, out of different forms of matter, and out of transient, qualified, and unmalignant evils; —probably to the endless multiplication of heavens" (4).

²² See Rajan 42-50.

ceaseless turmoil of Becoming” (122).²³ Sandy also underscores Keats’s anticipation of Nietzsche’s ideas of “life as art” and ever-conflicting nature of the Romantic self.²⁴ The critical consideration of sacredness and eroticism in *The Eve of St. Agnes* of this paper, to some extent, resonates with the comparative evaluation of Nietzsche that has been undertaken in Romantic studies.²⁵ Apart from Nietzsche, Georges Bataille similarly claims that “all that is sacred is poetic and all that is poetic is sacred” (84), and associates both sacredness and poetry with eroticism, as they all signify *plethora*, the effervescence and consumption of human vitality. Analyzing Keats’s synthesis of religious sacredness and eroticism through poetic creation, my reading of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, as I hope, might point to a future ground for Romantic studies to further investigate the intriguing interrelationship between religion, sexual desire, literature, and art.

²³ In his article, Woodman first recognises Nietzsche’s division of “the artist” and “the priest,” pointing out that the former “seeks to construct a provisional self . . . out of the will to metaphor arising from the chaos of nature,” while the latter “arrests metaphor into a system of belief which he declares to be permanent, immutable, binding and true” (115). In Nietzsche’s view, God, the maker of this system of limitation, parallels Blake’s Urizen, Shelley’s Jupiter and Keats’s fallen Titans. As Woodman elaborates, overthrowing these patriarchs with artistic creation “restores man to the primacy of his experience and action,” which lies in the spirit of Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Woodman 116).

²⁴ In *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre*, Sandy observes that Keats and Shelley highlight in their works a “Nietzschean understanding of the self as a site of conflict” (viii) and “anticipate Nietzsche’s understanding of the self as fictional point towards a Nietzschean account of their own aesthetic theory and practice” (7). Sandy argues that Nietzsche’s construal of life as art, “a Dionysian ‘over-fullness of life,’” is embodied in Keats’s and Shelley’s “affirmation of life” that is “inextricable from a fictionalisation of self and world” (8).

²⁵ In addition to the above studies, in *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*, Kathleen Wheeler discusses the similarity between Shelley’s idea of poetry and knowledge and Nietzsche’s construal of philosophical writing and the concept of truth. Wheeler argues that for Shelley, in the process of imagining “a unity is created which releases new and previously unimagined relations,” and knowledge “is continuously expanding and rearranging itself as central elements are pushed to the periphery, while previously periphery unknown elements becomes centres and foci of knowledge” (8). Similarly, Nietzsche’s aphoristic style renounces “the notion of systems of thought and logical chains of reasoning, substituting instead rhetorical, figurative, metaphoric language, accompanied by sharp, stimulating, and disturbing jabs at the reader” (16). According to Wheeler, Nietzsche’s concept of truth not as an immovable thing-in-itself but as “a process of incessant appropriation, figuration, deciphering, or interpretation” (19) also corresponds to Shelley’s understanding of knowledge and the universe as “genuinely organic, in the sense of continuously evolving in unpredictable and unimaginable ways” with “indeterminate growth and transformation as a major character of existence” (5).

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