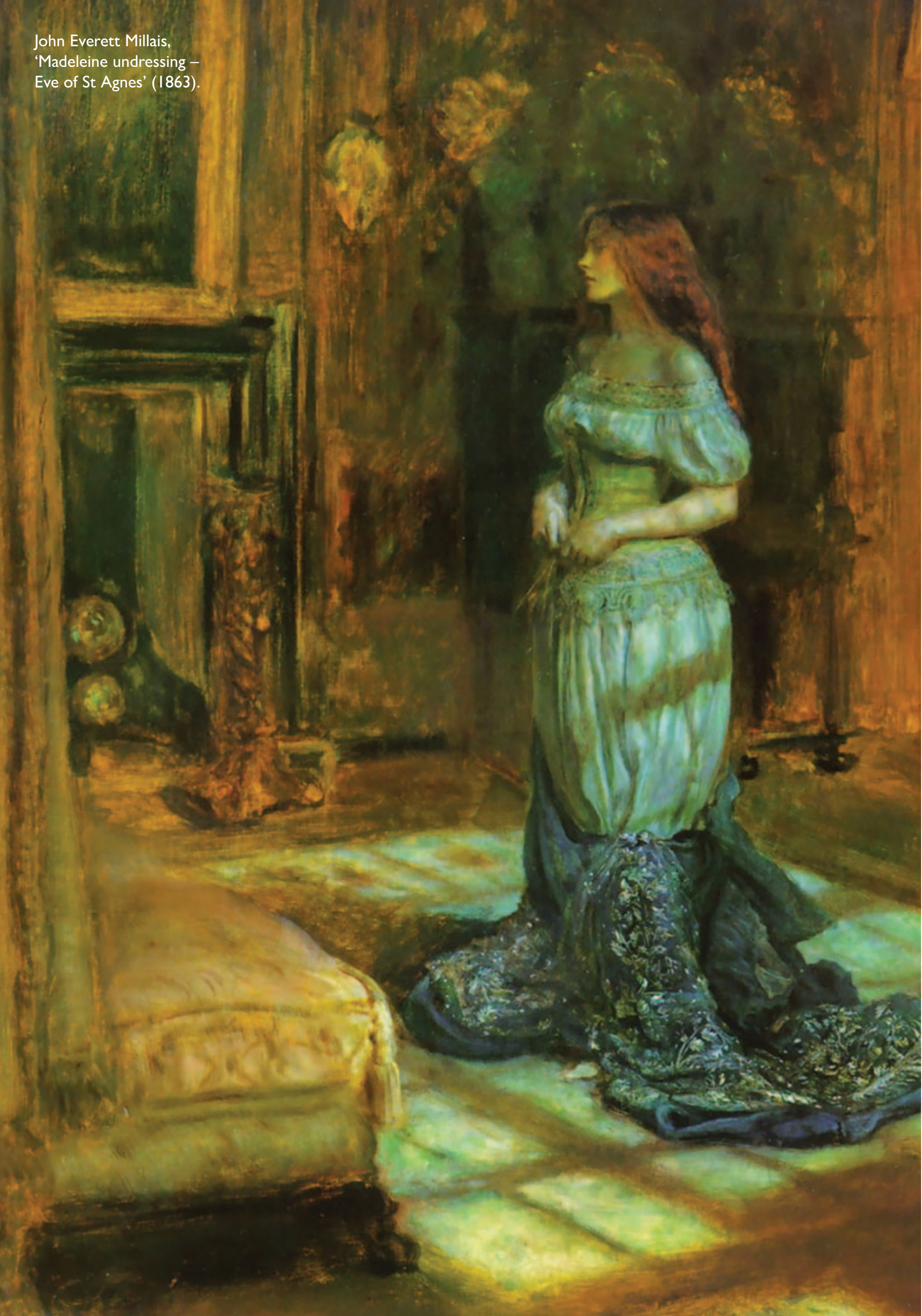

John Everett Millais, 'Madeleine undressing – Eve of St Agnes' (1863).

Porphyro is Dead: Exploring Narrative Ambiguity and Folk Intertexts in Keats' 'The Eve of Saint Agnes'

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John Keats' 'The Eve of Saint Agnes' (1820) remains one of the most popular texts of the Romantic period, frequently read, anthologised and taught. Critics have proposed dozens of interpretations, ranging from the quasi-biographical to the metaphysical to the tragic. In his book *Reading The Eve of St Agnes: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction* (1999), Jack Stillinger lists 59 ways to understand the poem, and *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Eve of St. Agnes* (1971) considers seven popular readings. In this article, we offer a new Fantastic interpretation of the text that embraces narrative ambiguity and folkloric intertexts – we propose that Porphyro is best understood as a demon lover, a popular figure in Romantic era literature and folklore. Although another new reading might seem superfluous given the many that have already been suggested, our unconventional interpretation sheds light on some of the questions raised by the text, questions that other critical interpretations cannot wholly answer. Ambiguities such as the death-saturated frame, the tension between sanctioned religion and folk superstition, and even the reference to Merlin and Arthurian legend can be rendered legible through the lens of demon lover folklore.

John Keats' 'The Eve of St Agnes'

Written in 1819 and published in 1820, 'The Eve of St Agnes' is a narrative poem that tells the story of two young lovers, Porphyro and Madeline, whom critics have frequently compared to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: the poem's protagonists are from two feuding families, and their love is forbidden. Bound within a frame that dwells on 'bitter chill' (line 1) and mortality, the narrative details how Porphyro infiltrates Madeline's bedchamber with the help of an elderly servant named Angela. The lovers consummate their relationship before fleeing the castle in the midst of a storm.

Before exploring our own folkloric reading, we offer a brief review of some of the more prevalent readings of 'The Eve of St Agnes'. Many critics engage with the

more realistic aspects of the text rather than exploring its supernatural potential, and the figure of Madeline is a common focal point for their analyses. Some, like Aileen Ward, have argued that she is a poetical expression of Fanny Brawne, Keats' fiancée, casting Keats himself as the lovelorn hero.[1] Others, including Mary Arseneau, have read Madeline as an emblem of Keats' ambivalent attitude towards women and female power, a trend that she identifies across major poems such as 'Lamia' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.[2] In another influential article, 'The Hoodwinking of Madeline', Jack Stillinger returns to the discussion of gender to address the voyeuristic aspects of Porphyro's behaviour, highlighting the imbalance of power in their relationship.[3] Though Stillinger does not discuss demon lovers, his reading does serve to underline Porphyro's advantage over Madeline, which dovetails with our own discussion of the supernatural and superstition in the text. Though these articles maintain a realist focus, these poems often feature supernatural and mortal women who engage in magical rituals or whose behavior holds echoes of witchcraft; Madeline's superstitious search for a vision of her future husband or Isabella's unnatural attachment to her pot of basil come to mind.

Critics have also proposed philosophical readings of the text, linking the poem to metaphysical reflections, such as the Mansion of Many Apartments, culled from Keats' personal correspondence. Newell Ford and Earl Wasserman have both endorsed this perspective, understanding Keats as a metaphysician who explores the ontology of the imagination, the connections between the physical world and the afterlife, and the process of individual spiritualisation.[4] In these readings, 'The Eve of St Agnes' is a validation of the Romantic visionary imagination rather than a reflection of Keats' own life and desires. Of course, folklore is a crucial part of the Romantic imagination, an animating force that enlivened the texts of the period through traditional narratives and culture. Poets such as William Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott draw heavily from ballad tradition, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge's verse is indebted to fairylore and other legends.

While Porphyro has not been discussed in detail in the context of demon lover folklore, some critics have explored his connection to fairies and even vampires. Jack Stillinger has observed that when Angela tells Porphyro that he 'must hold water in a witch's sieve,/ And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays' (lines 120-1), she is linking 'him with witches and fairies rather than with' respectable Christianity.[5] Indeed, Stillinger's reading of Porphyro as playing an elaborate trick on Madeline heightens Porphyro's association with fairies, as they are characterised in British folklore by their love of illusions, tricks, and half-truths.

Christine Gallant explores the fairy connection in detail in her book *Keats and Romantic Celticism* (2005). Interestingly, she does briefly discuss Scott's version of 'The

Demon Lover' and demon lover folklore as possible intertexts of 'The Eve of St Agnes', but offers very little evidence or analysis for this specific reading beyond noting the extreme cold depicted in the poem and the possibility that Porphyro is already damned, though she does not say how or why.[6] As mentioned, Gallant is more interested in the Celtic fairy connection, and she therefore blurs the categories of the fairy suitor and the demon lover. While this connection furthers the not-insignificant folkloric link between the realm of the dead and the realm of the fairies, we argue that the distinction between reading Porphyro as a fairy and Porphyro as a demon lover is an important one. While depictions of fairies and demon lovers have many similarities, these supernatural beings ultimately have different functions in folklore and in narrative. Demon lovers are strongly associated with a specific purpose – they return to claim those they loved in life and, frequently, to punish them. Fairies, however, are far less likely to act out of love, revenge, or any other human emotion. Fairies are largely ambivalent about their human lovers, and Porphyro is certainly anything but ambivalent regarding Madeline. Though fairies may be *a*moral, demon lovers choose to be *im*moral, and, in our reading, Madeline's inevitable damnation is distinctly more in line with the poem's dismal frame. Identifying Porphyro as a demon lover come back from the dead to claim his bride casts a distinctly tragic pallor over the text. Lastly, Porphyro, described again and again as cold and pallid, resembles a creature of the underworld – he is not vital or associated with the natural world, characteristics that traditionally mark fairies in their interactions with humans. As Gallant observes, 'a supernatural agency' is indeed 'at work' here, though we suggest a demonic alternative to her fairy reading.[7]

Of most relevance to our own reading is Herbert Wright's interpretation of 'The Eve of St Agnes' as tragedy. Wright proposes that the lovers die at the poem's conclusion, pointing towards the similarities to *Romeo and Juliet* and the atmosphere of cold and despair that pervades the text.[8] In addition, he notes that many of Keats' poems, such as 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', 'Lamia', and 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil', end tragically.[9] 'The death of Madeline ... would therefore harmonize with the trend of Keats' thought as it is revealed in these contemporary poems', and his narrative ambiguity regarding their fate is echoed in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', in which death is 'suggestion rather than definite statement'.[10]

We would like to propose a different interpretation of 'The Eve of St Agnes': that Porphyro is instead a deceased hero come back to claim his bride and take her with him to Hell. In British ballads and folklore, demon lovers are often signified by restlessness and a desire to flee from familiar spaces as well as by their drive to tempt, transgress, and seduce. Such a reading, of course, would presume that Porphyro is already dead at the time of the events of the poem.

The Demon Lover in the 19th-Century Imagination

Demon lover tales were popular and influential at the time Keats was writing 'The Eve of Saint Agnes'. Some well-known examples include Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' (1816), which features 'a woman wailing for her demon lover' in line 16, and Washington Irving's parodic story 'The Spectre Bridegroom' (1819). Of particular importance is Sir Walter Scott's 'William and Helen', published in 1796. Scott's version is 'a [loose] translation of the ballad "Lenore", by Gottfried Augustus Burger'.[11] In this poem, a young woman succumbs to despair while awaiting the return of her lover, and when he finally reappears, he convinces her to ride with him into the night. On the journey, Helen realises that William is dead and has come back to the realm of the living to claim her, and the poem ends with her death. Helen is only susceptible to demonic influence because of her suicidal hopelessness over William's fate and her refusal to pray or take the sacraments, a blatant rejection of Christian doctrine that connects her to Madeline and her pagan rituals.

The 'wild ride' depicted in Scott's poem is a reference to the wild rides and hunts of witches and fairies popular in European folklore, and these journeys frequently result in death for any human unfortunate enough to participate.[12] Indeed Katherine Briggs notes that these 'rides' are often a site at which 'the distinction between the fairies and the dead is vague and shifting'.[13] When Porphyro and Madeline 'fle[e] away into the storm' (line 371), they could be embarking on a wild ride of their own. Another notable similarity between the texts is their liminality, particularly with regard to ambiguity around sleeping and waking. Scott's poem opens with the line 'From heavy dreams fair Helen rose' (line 1), and when William comes to Helen's door, he wakes her from sleep, much as Porphyro wakes Madeline in the middle of the night. The state of wakefulness of both women is unclear, heightening the potential for supernatural intrusion. Scott returns to 'the demon lover theme in several of his [other] poems', including 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel' and 'The Lady of the Lake', and the theme recurs in the work of the Brontës, Poe, le Fanu, Haggard, James, and many other 19th-century writers.[14]

It is also key to remember that the concept existed in folklore that would have been well-known at the time through at least two significant avenues. Of most relevance is the traditional ballad 'The Demon Lover' (Child 243), a song popular 'in Scotland and England as early as the mid-seventeenth century'.[15] The ballad tells the story of a woman who, presuming her first lover lost, marries another and is later confronted by her original lover. He convinces the woman to run away with him, and it is only later revealed he is a ghost/demon and that they are both now bound to Hell. Scott included a version of this ballad in his *Minstrelsy on the Scottish Border* (1802-3), and it is well documented that Keats was an avid admirer of his work.[16] The second, already touched upon, is the demon lover-like aspect of fairy lovers, popular characters

in British lore. Those who fall in love with fairies are routinely rewarded with death – the fairy can be 'a kind of vampire' who 'ruins the man [or woman] to whom [he or she] attaches [him or her]self'.

Reading the Demon Lover in 'The Eve of St Agnes'

It is significant to first note that the poem is inspired by the folklore that surrounds the Catholic feast of St Agnes. Of particular relevance is the popular superstition that a young girl can see her future husband if she performs certain rites on the eve of the feast of St Agnes, a liminal period in which magic and the otherworldly become tangible. Several methods of this divination are outlined in John Aubrey's *Miscellanies Upon Various Subjects* (1696), including invocations to the moon, knitting rituals, and rhyming chants. Keats embellishes the folk tradition through the actions of Madeline, who foregoes supper, ritually undresses, and fixes her gaze so as not to disrupt the enchantment. This foundation in the occult, as well as the many references to fairies, ghosts, and magics of various kinds, renders the poem open to other supernatural intertexts.

Madeline's performance of a spell of sorts to summon a vision of her future husband both grounds the enchanted atmosphere of the poem and seemingly breaks with traditional conceptions of proper Christian behaviour. There is a tension between sanctioned religious belief and folk belief, and it is doubtful that these folkloric rituals were condoned by ecclesiastical authorities. Indeed the use of pagan spells such as this could, they would argue, open the door to more sinister influences, including demonic forces. Gary Farnell argues that 'although [Keats] takes an explicit interest in the specific iconology of the Christian faith ... his concern is in fact to expose what is seen as the basic iniquity of church values, rules, and practices'.[18] Describing Keats as a 'pagan poet' at heart,[19] Farnell believes that he intended '[t]he world of "The Eve of St. Agnes" to be essentially prohibitive and life-denying and therefore, as the actions of Madeline and Porphyro suggest, something to be defied and escaped from'.[20] If, as our reading would argue, Porphyro has left all pretences to Christian life behind him, then defying a world steeped in those values reinforces his character.

Reading Porphyro as a demon lover also offers a rationale for the poem's troubling frame. This frame, which describes the bleak, cold, final night of an ancient beadsman, is notoriously difficult to reconcile with the rest of a poem that seems, at first glance, to end with the lovers fleeing to their 'happily ever after'. Herbert G. Wright notes that the frame 'should be read in relation to the poem as a whole', as opposed to a reading that considers the cold of the outside as simply a contrast to the warmth of the castle, 'and it may be surmised that Keats' general design aimed at something more than this artistic effect'.[21] We suggest that the frame is meant to function as a signpost for the rest of the piece, a signpost that casts a death-haunted shadow over the lovers' escape. What does it mean, for example, that the other people in the castle have horrible nightmares (lines 372-5) as Madeline and

Porphyro leave and that the deaths of the beadsman and Angela close the poem (lines 375-8)? That a beadsman's chief occupation is saying prayers for the dead? Here it is important to remember that the story the poem most easily recalls – *Romeo and Juliet* – has a different conclusion than the one most commonly read in 'The Eve of St Agnes'. The frame is a deliberate choice that signals the fact that death has haunted the story in other ways as well and that the lovers' 'happy ending' may not be so happy after all.

The poem's descriptive language also reinforces an overall preoccupation with death, including multiple references to ghosts, phantoms, and demons throughout. To note only a few key examples, consider Angela's plea that Porphyro will '[f]lit like a ghost away' (line 105) and that, upon Madeline entering her bedchamber, her candle, 'in pallid moonshine' *dies* (line 200). Porphyro's specific descriptions throughout the piece further support the idea that he is already dead. He is 'pallid, chill, and drear' (line 311) and '[b]eyond a mortal man' (line 316). While Porphyro's ability to speak to Angela might seem to suggest that he is nothing more than human, demon lovers are able to speak and be heard in the ballad tradition. Furthermore, Angela's own nearness to death – she dies at the end of the poem – places her in a liminal state between life and death, which would make her particularly susceptible to otherworldly forces. Her name, 'Angela', is also evocative of angels, figures that traditionally mediate between the living and the dead.

Another aspect of the poem that has troubled readers is the appearance of the feast that Porphyro arranges in Madeline's bedchamber. As Porphyro was sneaking into the castle and attempting to evade detection, it is unlikely that he would be carrying large amounts of food, dishes, and utensils with him. His hands appear to be free, since Angela is able to grasp one in her own, and no descriptions of bags or other means of conveyance are described in the narrative. Yet, he is able to bring 'forth from the closet':

> a heap
>
> Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
> With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
> And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
> Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
> From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
> From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.
>
> These delicates he heap'd with glowing hand
> On golden dishes and in baskets bright
> Of wreathed silver

(lines 264-73)

The quantity and blatantly exotic nature of this food suggests a supernatural source rather than Porphyro's kitchen, and the precedent of magic or demonic food was already well established by the Romantic period and continued throughout the 19th century. Other notable literary examples include the Bible, the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'. The magically appearing feast is also a frequent feature of fairy tales, particularly ATU 563, 'The Table, the Donkey, and the Stick'.

Porphyro's status as outsider in Madeline's castle is also important. Joan Aiken, in a discussion of more contemporary demon lovers, observes that 'the mass unconscious, the common mind, may be deeply concerned about the foreigner, the refugee, the stranger, the incomer. An attitude of hostility plus interest and attraction, and concomitant guilt, is inevitably brewed up. The demon lover fits exactly into this scenario.'[22] In a folkloric context then, the demon lover signifies a horror of the unknown coupled with desire. Porphyro and Madeline's love is forbidden and dangerous. In the castle, Porphyro is precisely what Madeline both fears and desires.

Lastly we turn to the controversial reference to Merlin in lines 170-1: 'Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.' Karen J. Harvey notes that the poem's reference to Merlin is frequently met with 'problems of interpretation'.[23] What is his 'debt' and how does this line function within the context of the poem? She states that 'the most commonly cited interpretation', that of H. Buxton Forman, is that Merlin's 'monstrous debt' is that he is, according to legend, the child of a union between a supernatural demon and a human woman. His debt is only paid by his imprisonment, the night of which there is a storm akin to the one in 'The Eve of St Agnes'.[24] While Harvey goes on to suggest a different interpretation of these lines, this initial reading casts Porphyro as a demon lover who seduces Madeline. The commonalities between the night of the poem and the night of Merlin's 'monstrous debt' now take on a double meaning, referring to both the night he was conceived and the night he was imprisoned. Even Harvey's alternative interpretation – that 'his Demon' refers to the fae Vivien[25] – can be read as evocative of the demon lover. If Vivien is an evil fairy woman who seduces and traps Merlin, then the 'demon lover' connection remains with the gender roles simply switched. Indeed, the song Porphyro sings in the piece, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' seems in this light to be an allusion to Vivien and to herald the creation of another female fairy or demon lover in Keats' later poem of the same name.

Conclusion

In pursuing this unorthodox reading, we hope to have illuminated the folkloric intertexts that animate the poem and thus reinforce the connections between the fields of Romanticism and folkloristics. While 'The Eve of St Agnes' lends itself to numerous

possible interpretations, our reading of Porphyro as a demon lover not only resolves persistent questions about the text but also models how folklore and literary criticism can intersect to generate new meaning. Francis Lee Utley, writing about folklore and Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci,' noted his hope that his article 'succeeded in putting Hell back into the poem where it belongs'.[26] We hope to have done the same for 'The Eve of Saint Agnes'.

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Notes

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4. Newell F. Ford, *The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: a Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and its Implications* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951), 125-30; Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1953), 97-137.
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6. Christine Gallant, *Keats and Romantic Celticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89-92.
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12. Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 48-54.
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14. Aiken, 'Demon Lovers', 71-3.
15. Toni Reed, *Demon-Lovers and Their Victims in British Fiction* (Lexington, KT: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 2.
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22. Aiken, 'Demon Lovers', 76.
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