

Into the green-recessed woods they flew;
Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do.

Left to herself, the serpent now began
 To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,
 Her mouth foamed, and the grass, therewith besprent,
 Withered at dew so sweet and virulent;
 Her eyes in torture fixed, and anguish drear, 150
 Hot, glazed, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,
 Flashed phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.
 The colours all inflamed throughout her train,
 She writhed about, convulsed with scarlet pain:
 A deep volcanian yellow took the place 155
 Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;
 And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
 Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
 Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,
 Eclipsed her crescents, and licked up her stars. 160
 So that, in moments few, she was undressed
 Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,
 And rubious-argent; of all these bereft,
 Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.
 Still shone her crown; that vanished, also she 165
 Melted and disappeared as suddenly;
 And in the air, her new voice luting soft,
 Cried, 'Lycius! gentle Lycius!'—Borne aloft
 With the bright mists about the mountains hoar
 These words dissolved: Crete's forests heard no more. 170

Whither fled Lamia, now a lady bright,
 A full-born beauty new and exquisite?
 She fled into that valley they pass o'er
 Who go to Corinth from Cenchreas' shore;
 And rested at the foot of those wild hills, 175
 The rugged founts of the Peræan rills,
 And of that other ridge whose barren back
 Stretches, with all its mist and cloudy rack,
 South-westward to Cleone. There she stood
 About a young bird's flutter from a wood, 180
 Fair, on a sloping green of mossy tread,
 By a clear pool, wherein she passioned

To see herself escaped from so sore ills,
While her robes flaunted with the daffodils.

Ah, happy Lycius!—for she was a maid 185
 More beautiful than ever twisted braid,
 Or sighed, or blushed, or on spring-flowered lea
 Spread a green kirtle to the minstrelsy:
 A virgin purest lipped, yet in the lore
 Of love deep learned to the red heart's core; 190
 Not one hour old, yet of sciential brain
 To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain,
 Define their pettish limits, and estrange
 Their points of contact, and swift counterchange;
 Intrigue with the specious chaos, and dispart 195
 Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art;
 As though in Cupid's college she had spent
 Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent,
 And kept his rosy terms in idle languishment.

Why this fair creature chose so faerily 200
 By the wayside to linger, we shall see;
 But first 'tis fit to tell how she could muse
 And dream, when in the serpent prison-house,
 Of all she list, strange or magnificent:
 How, ever, where she willed, her spirit went; 205
 Whether to faint Elysium, or where
 Down through tress-lifting waves the Nereids fair
 Wind into Thetis' bower by many a pearly stair;
 Or where God Bacchus drains his cups divine,
 Stretched out, at ease, beneath a glutinous pine; 210
 Or where in Pluto's gardens palatine
 Mulciber's columns gleam in far piazzian line.
 And sometimes into cities she would send
 Her dream, with feast and rioting to blend;
 And once, while among mortals dreaming thus, 215
 She saw the young Corinthian Lycius
 Charioting foremost in the envious race,
 Like a young Jove with calm uneager face,
 And fell into a swooning love of him.
 Now on the moth-time of that evening dim 220
 He would return that way, as well she knew,

To Corinth from the shore; for freshly blew
 The eastern soft wind, and his galley now
 Grated the quaystones with her brazen prow
 In port Cenchreas, from Egina isle 225
 Fresh anchored; whither he had been awhile
 To sacrifice to Jove, whose temple there
 Waits with high marble doors for blood and incense rare.
 Jove heard his vows, and bettered his desire;
 For by some freakful chance he made retire 230
 From his companions, and set forth to walk,
 Perhaps grown wearied of their Corinth talk:
 Over the solitary hills he fared,
 Thoughtless at first, but ere eve's star appeared
 His fantasy was lost, where reason fades, 235
 In the calmed twilight of Platonic shades.
 Lamia beheld him coming, near, more near—
 Close to her passing, in indifference drear,
 His silent sandals swept the mossy green;
 So neighboured to him, and yet so unseen 240
 She stood: he pass'd, shut up in mysteries,
 His mind wrapped like his mantle, while her eyes
 Followed his steps, and her neck regal white
 Turned—syllabbling thus, 'Ah, Lycius bright,
 And will you leave me on the hills alone? 245
 Lycius, look back! and be some pity shown.'
 He did—not with cold wonder fearingly,
 But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice—
 For so delicious were the words she sung,
 It seemed he had loved them a whole summer long. 250
 And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up,
 Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,
 And still the cup was full—while he, afraid
 Lest she should vanish ere his lip had paid
 Due adoration, thus began to adore 255
 (Her soft look growing coy, she saw his chain so sure):
 'Leave thee alone! Look back! Ah, Goddess, see
 Whether my eyes can ever turn from thee!
 For pity do not this sad heart belie—

Even as thou vanishest so I shall die. 260
 Stay! though a Naiad of the rivers, stay!
 To thy far wishes will thy streams obey.
 Stay! though the greenest woods be thy domain,
 Alone they can drink up the morning rain:
 Though a descended Pleiad, will not one 265
 Of thine harmonious sisters keep in tune
 Thy spheres, and as thy silver proxy shine?
 So sweetly to these ravished ears of mine
 Came thy sweet greeting, that if thou shouldst fade
 Thy memory will waste me to a shade— 270
 For pity do not melt! —‘If I should stay,’
 Said Lamia, ‘here, upon this floor of clay,
 And pain my steps upon these flowers too rough,
 What canst thou say or do of charm enough
 To dull the nice remembrance of my home? 275
 Thou canst not ask me with thee here to roam
 Over these hills and vales, where no joy is —
 Empty of immortality and bliss!
 Thou art a scholar, Lycius, and must know
 That finer spirits cannot breathe below 280
 In human climes, and live. Alas! poor youth,
 What taste of purer air hast thou to soothe
 My essence? What serener palaces,
 Where I may all my many senses please,
 And by mysterious sleights a hundred thirsts appease? 285
 It cannot be—Adieu!’ So said, she rose
 Tip-toe with white arms spread. He, sick to lose
 The amorous promise of her lone complain,
 Swooned, murmuring of love, and pale with pain.
 The cruel lady, without any show 290
 Of sorrow for her tender favourite’s woe,
 But rather, if her eyes could brighter be,
 With brighter eyes and slow amenity,
 Put her new lips to his, and gave afresh
 The life she had so tangled in her mesh; 295
 And as he from one trance was wakening
 Into another, she began to sing,

Happy in beauty, life, and love, and every thing,
 A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres,
 While, like held breath, the stars drew in their panting fires 300
 And then she whispered in such trembling tone,
 As those who, safe together met alone
 For the first time through many anguished days,
 Use other speech than looks; bidding him raise
 His drooping head, and clear his soul of doubt, 305
 For that she was a woman, and without
 Any more subtle fluid in her veins
 Than throbbing blood, and that the self-same pains
 Inhabited her frail-strung heart as his.
 And next she wondered how his eyes could miss 310
 Her face so long in Corinth, where, she said,
 She dwelt but half retired, and there had led
 Days happy as the gold coin could invent
 Without the aid of love; yet in content
 Till she saw him, as once she passed him by, 315
 Where 'gainst a column he leant thoughtfully
 At Venus' temple porch, 'mid baskets heaped
 Of amorous herbs and flowers, newly reaped
 Late on that eve, as 'twas the night before
 The Adonian feast; where of she saw no more, 320
 But wept alone those days, for why should she adore?
 Lycius from death awoke into amaze,
 To see her still, and singing so sweet lays;
 Then from amaze into delight he fell
 To hear her whisper woman's lore so well; 325
 And every word she spake enticed him on
 To unperplexed delight and pleasure known.
 Let the mad poets say whate'er they please
 Of the sweets of Faeries, Peris, Goddesses,
 There is not such a treat among them all, 330
 Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,
 As a real woman, lineal indeed
 From Pyrrha's pebbles or old Adam's seed.
 Thus gentle Lamia judged, and judged aright,
 That Lycius could not love in half a fright, 335

So threw the goddess off, and won his heart
More pleasantly by playing woman's part,
With no more awe than what her beauty gave,
That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save.

Lycius to all made eloquent reply, 340

Marrying to every word a twinborn sigh;
And last, pointing to Corinth, asked her sweet,
If 'twas too far that night for her soft feet.

The way was short, for Lamia's eagerness
Made, by a spell, the triple league decrease 345

To a few paces; not at all surmised
By blinded Lycius, so in her comprised.
They passed the city gates, he knew not how
So noiseless, and he never thought to know.

As men talk in a dream, so Corinth all, 350
Throughout her palaces imperial,
And all her populous streets and temples lewd,
Muttered, like tempest in the distance brewed,
To the wide-spreaded night above her towers.
Men, women, rich and poor, in the cool hours, 355
Shuffled their sandals o'er the pavement white,
Companioned or alone; while many a light
Flared, here and there, from wealthy festivals,
And threw their moving shadows on the walls,
Or found them clustered in the corniced shade 360
Of some arched temple door, or dusky colonnade.

Muffling his face, of greeting friends in fear,
Her fingers he pressed hard, as one came near
With curled gray beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown,
Slow-stepped, and robed in philosophic gown: 365
Lycius shrank closer, as they met and passed,
Into his mantle, adding wings to haste,
While hurried Lamia trembled: 'Ah,' said he,
'Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully?
Why does your tender palm dissolve in dew?'— 370
'I'm wearied,' said fair Lamia: 'tell me who
Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind
His features—Lycius! wherefore did you blind
Yourself from his quick eyes?' Lycius replied,
'Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide 375
And good instructor; but tonight he seems
The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams.'

While yet he spake they had arrived before
A pillared porch, with lofty portal door,
Where hung a silver lamp, whose phosphor glow 380
Reflected in the slabbed steps below,
Mild as a star in water; for so new,
And so unsullied was the marble hue,
So through the crystal polish, liquid fine,
Ran the dark veins, that none but feet divine 385

Could e'er have touched there. Sounds Aeolian
Breathed from the hinges, as the ample span
Of the wide doors disclosed a place unknown
Some time to any, but those two alone,
And a few Persian mutes, who that same year 390
Were seen about the markets: none knew where
They could inhabit; the most curious
Were foiled, who watched to trace them to their house.
And but the flitter-winged verse must tell,
For truth's sake, what woe afterwards befell, 395
'Twould humour many a heart to leave them thus,
Shut from the busy world of more incredulous.

Part II

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is—Love, forgive us!—cinder, ashes, dust;
Love in a palace is perhaps at last
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast.
That is a doubtful tale from faery land,
Hard for the non-elect to understand.
Had Lycius lived to hand his story down,
He might have given the moral a fresh frown,
Or clenched it quite: but too short was their bliss
To breed distrust and hate, that make the soft voice hiss. 10
Besides, there, nightly, with terrific glare,
Love, jealous grown of so complete a pair,
Hovered and buzzed his wings, with fearful roar,
Above the lintel of their chamber door,
And down the passage cast a glow upon the floor.

For all this came a ruin: side by side
They were enthroned, in the eventide,
Upon a couch, near to a curtaining
Whose airy texture, from a golden string,
Floated into the room, and let appear 20
Unveiled the summer heaven, blue and clear,
Betwixt two marble shafts. There they reposed,
Where use had made it sweet, with eyelids closed,
Saving a tithe which love still open kept,
That they might see each other while they almost slept;
When from the slope side of a suburb hill,
Deafening the swallow's twitter, came a thrill
Of trumpets—Lycius started—the sounds fled,
But left a thought, a buzzing in his head.
For the first time, since first he harboured in 30
That purple-lined palace of sweet sin,
His spirit passed beyond its golden bourne
Into the noisy world almost forsworn.
The lady, ever watchful, penetrant,
Saw this with pain, so arguing a want
Of something more, more than her empery

Of joys; and she began to moan and sigh
 Because he mused beyond her, knowing well
 That but a moment's thought is passion's passing-bell.
 'Why do you sigh, fair creature?' whispered he: 40
 'Why do you think?' returned she tenderly:
 'You have deserted me—where am I now?
 Not in your heart while care weighs on your brow:
 No, no, you have dismissed me; and I go
 From your breast houseless — ay, it must be so.'
 He answered, bending to her open eyes,
 Where he was mirrored small in paradise,
 'My silver planet, both of eve and morn!
 Why will you plead yourself so sad forlorn,
 While I am striving how to fill my heart 50
 With deeper crimson, and a double smart?
 How to entangle, trammel up and snare
 Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there
 Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose?
 Ay, a sweet kiss—you see your mighty woes.
 My thoughts! shall I unveil them? Listen then!
 What mortal hath a prize, that other men
 May be confounded and abashed withal,
 But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic,
 And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice 60
 Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth's voice.
 Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,
 While through the thronged streets your bridal car
 Wheels round its dazzling spokes.'—The lady's cheek
 Trembled; she nothing said, but, pale and meek,
 Arose and knelt before him, wept a rain
 Of sorrows at his words; at last with pain
 Beseeching him, the while his hand she wrung,
 To change his purpose. He thereat was stung,
 Perverse, with stronger fancy to reclaim 70
 Her wild and timid nature to his aim:
 Besides, for all his love, in self despite,
 Against his better self, he took delight
 Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.

His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue
 Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible
 In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.
 Fine was the mitigated fury, like
 Apollo's presence when in act to strike
 The serpent—Ha, the serpent! Certes, she 80
 Was none. She burnt, she loved the tyranny,
 And, all subdued, consented to the hour
 When to the bridal he should lead his paramour.
 Whispering in midnight silence, said the youth,
 'Sure some sweet name thou hast, though, by my truth,
 I have not ask'd it, ever thinking thee
 Not mortal, but of heavenly progeny,
 As still I do. Hast any mortal name,
 Fit appellation for this dazzling frame?
 Or friends or kinsfolk on the citted earth, 90
 To share our marriage feast and nuptial mirth?"
 'I have no friends,' said Lamia, 'no, not one;
 My presence in wide Corinth hardly known:
 My parents' bones are in their dusty urns
 Sepulchred, where no kindled incense burns,
 Seeing all their luckless race are dead, save me,
 And I neglect the holy rite for thee.
 Even as you list invite your many guests;
 But if, as now it seems, your vision rests
 With any pleasure on me, do not bid 100
 Old Apollonius—from him keep me hid.'
 Lycius, perplexed at words so blind and blank,
 Made close inquiry; from whose touch she shrank,
 Feigning a sleep; and he to the dull shade
 Of deep sleep in a moment was betrayed.

It was the custom then to bring away
 The bride from home at blushing shut of day,
 Veiled, in a chariot, heralded along
 By strewn flowers, torches, and a marriage song,
 With other pageants: but this fair unknown 110
 Had not a friend. So being left alone,

(Lycius was gone to summon all his kin)
And knowing surely she could never win
His foolish heart from its mad pompousness,
She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress
The misery in fit magnificence.
She did so, but 'tis doubtful how and whence
Came, and who were her subtle servitors.
About the halls, and to and from the doors,
There was a noise of wings, till in short space 120
The glowing banquet-room shone with wide-arched grace.
A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone
Supportress of the faery-roof, made moan
Throughout, as fearful the whole charm might fade.
Fresh carved cedar, mimicking a glade
Of palm and plantain, met from either side,
High in the midst, in honour of the bride;
Two palms and then two plantains, and so on,
From either side their stems branched one to one
All down the aisled place; and beneath all 130
There ran a stream of lamps straight on from wall to wall.
So canopied, lay an untasted feast
Teeming with odours. Lamia, regal dressed,
Silently paced about, and as she went,
In pale contented sort of discontent,
Missioned her viewless servants to enrich
The fretted splendour of each nook and niche.
Between the tree-stems, marbled plain at first,
Came jasper panels; then anon, there burst
Forth creeping imagery of slighter trees, 140
And with the larger wove in small intricacies.
Approving all, she faded at self-will,
And shut the chamber up, close, hushed and still,
Complete and ready for the revels rude,
When dreadful guests would come to spoil her solitude.

The day appeared, and all the gossip rout.
O senseless Lycius! Madman! wherefore flout
The silent-blessing fate, warm cloistered hours,

And show to common eyes these secret bowers?
The herd approached; each guest, with busy brain, 150
Arriving at the portal, gazed amain,
And entered marvelling—for they knew the street,
Remembered it from childhood all complete
Without a gap, yet ne'er before had seen
That royal porch, that high-built fair demesne;
So in they hurried all, mazed, curious and keen —
Save one, who looked thereon with eye severe,
And with calm-planted steps walked in austere;
'Twas Apollonius: something too he laughed,
As though some knotty problem, that had daffed 160
His patient thought, had now begun to thaw,
And solve and melt—'twas just as he foresaw.

He met within the murmurous vestibule
His young disciple. "Tis no common rule,
Lycius,' said he, 'for uninvited guest
To force himself upon you, and infest
With an unbidden presence the bright throng
Of younger friends; yet must I do this wrong,
And you forgive me.' Lycius blushed, and led
The old man through the inner doors broad-spread; 170
With reconciling words and courteous mien
Turning into sweet milk the sophist's spleen.

Of wealthy lustre was the banquet-room,
Filled with pervading brilliance and perfume:
Before each lucid panel fuming stood
A censer fed with myrrh and spiced wood,
Each by a sacred tripod held aloft,
Whose slender feet wide-swerved upon the soft
Wool-woofed carpets: fifty wreaths of smoke
From fifty censers their light voyage took 180
To the high roof, still mimicked as they rose
Along the mirrored walls by twin-clouds odorous.
Twelve sphered tables, by silk seats ensphered,
High as the level of a man's breast reared

On libbard's paws, upheld the heavy gold
Of cups and goblets, and the store thrice told
Of Ceres' horn, and in huge vessels, wine
Come from the gloomy tun with merry shine.
Thus loaded with a feast the tables stood,
Each shrining in the midst the image of a God. 190

When in an antechamber every guest
Had felt the cold full sponge to pleasure pressed,
By ministering slaves, upon his hands and feet,
And fragrant oils with ceremony meet
Poured on his hair, they all moved to the feast
In white robes, and themselves in order placed
Around the silken couches, wondering
Whence all this mighty cost and blaze of wealth could spring.

Soft went the music the soft air along,
While fluent Greek a vowel'd undersong 200
Kept up among the guests discoursing low
At first, for scarcely was the wine at flow;
But when the happy vintage touched their brains,
Louder they talk, and louder come the strains
Of powerful instruments. The gorgeous dyes,
The space, the splendour of the draperies,
The roof of awful richness, nectarous cheer,
Beautiful slaves, and Lamia's self, appear,
Now, when the wine has done its rosy deed,
And every soul from human trammels freed, 210
No more so strange; for merry wine, sweet wine,
Will make Elysian shades not too fair, too divine.

Soon was God Bacchus at meridian height;
Flushed were their cheeks, and bright eyes double bright:
Garlands of every green, and every scent
From vales deflowered, or forest-trees branch rent,
In baskets of bright osiered gold were brought
High as the handles heaped, to suit the thought
Of every guest—that each, as he did please,

Might fancy-fit his brows, silk-pillowed at his ease.

220

What wreath for Lamia? What for Lycius?

What for the sage, old Apollonius?

Upon her aching forehead be there hung

The leaves of willow and of adder's tongue;

And for the youth, quick, let us strip for him

The thyrsus, that his watching eyes may swim

Into forgetfulness; and, for the sage,

Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage

War on his temples. Do not all charms fly

At the mere touch of cold philosophy?

230

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:

We know her woof, her texture; she is given

In the dull catalogue of common things.

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,

Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,

Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—

Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made

The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade.

By her glad Lycius sitting, in chief place,

Scarce saw in all the room another face,

240

Till, checking his love trance, a cup he took

Full brimmed, and opposite sent forth a look

'Cross the broad table, to beseech a glance

From his old teacher's wrinkled countenance,

And pledge him. The bald-head philosopher

Had fixed his eye, without a twinkle or stir

Full on the alarmed beauty of the bride,

Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her sweet pride.

Lycius then pressed her hand, with devout touch,

As pale it lay upon the rosy couch:

250

'Twas icy, and the cold ran through his veins;

Then sudden it grew hot, and all the pains

Of an unnatural heat shot to his heart.

'Lamia, what means this? Wherefore dost thou start?

Know'st thou that man?' Poor Lamia answered not.

He gazed into her eyes, and not a jot
 Owned they the lovelorn piteous appeal:
 More, more he gazed; his human senses reel;
 Some hungry spell that loveliness absorbs;
 There was no recognition in those orbs. 260
 'Lamia!' he cried—and no soft-toned reply.
 The many heard, and the loud revelry
 Grew hush; the stately music no more breathes;
 The myrtle sickened in a thousand wreaths.
 By faint degrees, voice, lute, and pleasure ceased;
 A deadly silence step by step increased,
 Until it seemed a horrid presence there,
 And not a man but felt the terror in his hair.
 'Lamia!' he shrieked; and nothing but the shriek
 With its sad echo did the silence break. 270
 'Begone, foul dream!' he cried, gazing again
 In the bride's face, where now no azure vein
 Wandered on fair-spaced temples; no soft bloom
 Misted the cheek; no passion to illumine
 The deep-recessed vision. All was blight;
 Lamia, no longer fair, there sat a deadly white.
 'Shut, shut those juggling eyes, thou ruthless man!
 Turn them aside, wretch! or the righteous ban
 Of all the Gods, whose dreadful images
 Here represent their shadowy presences, 280
 May pierce them on the sudden with the thorn
 Of painful blindness; leaving thee forlorn,
 In trembling dotage to the feeblest fright
 Of conscience, for their long offended might,
 For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,
 Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.
 Corinthians! look upon that grey-beard wretch!
 Mark how, possess'd, his lashless eyelids stretch
 Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!
 My sweet bride withers at their potency.' 290
 'Fool!' said the sophist, in an undertone
 Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing moan
 From Lycius answered, as heart-struck and lost,

He sank supine beside the aching ghost.
'Fool! Fool!' repeated he, while his eyes still
Relented not, nor moved; 'From every ill
Of life have I preserved thee to this day,
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"
Then Lamia breathed death-breath; the sophist's eye,
Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly, 300
Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging: she, as well
As her weak hand could any meaning tell,
Motioned him to be silent; vainly so,
He looked and looked again a level—*No!*
'A Serpent!' echoed he; no sooner said,
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:
And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,
As were his limbs of life, from that same night.
On the high couch he lay!—his friends came round—
Supported him—no pulse, or breath they found, 310
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.

↳ 'hasten to the grave': criticism

↳ understanding vs. critical
Emotional anguish (cf. to Melancholy) vs. questioning of any meaning at all in seeking death (cf. hasten to the grave)

- Beauty is transient but transience doesn't diminish beauty

↳ Keats: To Autumn

- Presentation of sorrow and struggle w/ intense emotions → 'Stanzas Written in Dejection'

- Inevitability of transience as an inevitable part of human life → 'Mortality'

- Human experience: Portrayal of abstract/emotional forces that are elusive, intangible yet essential to life → Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

Why in the name of Glory were they proud?

A greater love through all my essence steal.'

The flint was there, the berries at his head.

Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm.

- ↳ Imagery of slashing
- ↳ Implication of harm
- ↳ She is harming herself

- Love and suffering → Adonais (stanzas w/ Urania)
(Isabella's grief is more mad / obsessive)
(stanzas 51-53, 54) (not exhaustive)

↳ Grief of mothers

- Motifs of nature to describe physical states → Adonais (stanza 6)
(stanza 19)
(Adonais uses to express tragedy of Keats' death / more despairing)

- Tragedy and Myth → Adonais
(stanza 56: Melpomene) (Urania)

(Exalts power of love vs power of art)

- The doomed innocent → Adonais
(Keats)

(Ordinary name here vs great goddess)

Poetry Foundation

Keats explores these antinomies of **human desire** in one of his finest and best-loved long poems, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, a romance in Spenserian stanzas written in January 1819. The story recalls *Romeo and Juliet*, though its details are based on several traditional French romances (see Robert Gittings, *John Keats*, 1968). In Keats's hands the story itself is less important than what, through a highly self-conscious art, it becomes, a meditation on desire and its fulfillment, on wishes, dreams, and romance. It is framed by the coldness of eternity, by an ancient Beadsman whose frosty prayers and stony piety contrast with the fairytale-like revelry and warm lights within. The heroine, Madeline, does not mix with the company but ascends to her own kind of dream, the superstitious wish that, by following various rites on this St. Agnes' Eve, her future husband will appear in her dreams. Porphyro, of some feuding clan, has crept into the party, and is aided by Angela, the old nurse, in a "stragem": he will sneak into her room and fulfill the dream, wakening her to his warm, real presence. He does so, after watching her undress and sleep, spreading before her a feast of delicacies (rather magically), and easing her into a wakefulness instinct with romance. The lovers flee into the cold storm; and suddenly the poem shifts to a long historical vision, the tale acknowledged as a story far away and long ago, the Beadsman himself cold and dead.

The moment of Madeline's awakening is a crucial one, pointing out the poem's central dilemma. Porphyro must waken her to his real presence, but his fulfillment also depends on his "melting" into her dream. The moment is typical of so many romantic "falls" from innocence to experience: the consummation of their love "is no dream," says Porphyro, but Madeline weeps in fear that he has betrayed her. "Sweet dreamer!" Porphyro then responds, "'tis an elfin storm from faery land," into which he will carry her to be his bride, "o'er the southern moors." In the nineteenth century, Hunt and others admired the rich pictorial beauty, the beautiful contrasts of warmth and chill, sensuality and religion, color and gray. Today we see the poem more as a great achievement not only in style but also in thoughtful and carefully balanced tone. Some modern critics, including Earl Wasserman, have the story arguing for success of imagination and warm love over cold piety; others, such as Jack Stillinger, have argued that Keats meant to debunk the conventions of fairy tale by suggesting that Porphyro's motive is a rather sinister seduction. But most critics today see the poem as an extraordinary balance of these opposing forces, shrewdly and at times playfully self-aware of its own conventions, leading the reader to a continuous series of mediations between artifice and reality, dream and awakening. Finally, waking life seems to require some degree of enchantment to be humanly fulfilling; yet dreaming, being "taken in"—as one is by the rich tapestry of *The Eve of St. Agnes*—is precarious, and the deeper one sleeps the ruder one's awakenings.

This dialectical probing of **enchantment**, of the always-threatened artifice by which imagination seeks its fulfillment in the world, initiates Keats's most profound meditations in the spring of 1819. The dangers of enchantment deepen in the haunting, beautifully suggestive ballad, "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*," written 21 or 28 April 1819, and published in a slightly altered version by Hunt in his *Indicator* of 10 May 1820. Here a knight-at-arms is seduced by a strange, fairylike woman, reminiscent of Morgan Le Fay or Merlin's Niniane, and in the midst of this enchantment a warning dream comes to him from other lost princes and warriors. But his awakening from her does him little good; he wanders "palely" on "the cold hill's side," where "no birds sing," a world as empty of charm as the fay's was empty of real life. The poem has been seen as allegorical of Keats's ambivalent feelings for Fanny Brawne or for poetry itself. More fundamental, though, is Keats's growing sense, here and in his letters, of the dark ironies of life, that is, the ways in which evil and beauty, love and pain, aspiration and finitude, are not so much "balanced" as interwoven in ways that resist philosophical understanding. The more we imagine beauty the more painful our world may seem—and this, in turn, deepens our need for art.

Bloom's Guide

Written between January 18 and February 2, 1819, Keats's embellished account of the rites of St. Agnes's Eve is mainly taken from oral tradition, as well as additional information from Henry Ellis's 1813 edition of John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (originally published in 1777). While various legends exist concerning St. Agnes's martyrdom, in Brand's account she was "a Roman virgin and martyr, who suffered in the tenth persecution under the Emperor Dioclesian A.D. 306. She was condemned to be debauched in the common stews before her execution, but her virginity was miraculously preserved by lightning and thunder from Heaven." The feast of St. Agnes is celebrated annually on January 21 in the basilica of St. Agnes by the presentation and blessing at the altar of two white unshorn lambs. Brand's account further records that, on the eve of St. Agnes's day, "many kinds of divination are practiced by virgins to discover their future husbands." Keats combined the superstitious belief in this practice with *Romeo and Juliet* (another important source for "The Eve of St. Agnes," given its theme of young love thwarted by feuding families). Keats weaves an elaborate narrative based on these and other literary sources, combining the legend of a saint with tales of ill-fated love, to tell a story of physical love that survives both death-dealing spirituality and unbridled profligacy.

The entire poem consists of a series of oppositions that stem from these two main conflicting ideas: spirituality that will not tolerate physical love and overindulgent and thoughtless licentiousness that will forever remain just that. These two conflicting themes become the outer framework of Keats's narrative, with the story of the lovers' determination to overcome these destructive forces contained within the middle sections of the poem.

As the poem begins, we are given a cold and dispirited portrayal of the landscape and inhabitants of this strange and alienating world. Nature itself seems to have forsaken her charges and left the animals of the field and forest without the resources to stay alive. "The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold; / The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass, / And silent was the flock in woolly fold."

Neither can the Beadsman, a pensioner endowed to pray for the repose of his benefactor's family and friends, be long for the physical world; in the performance of his religious offices, he must absolutely deny this world. "Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told / His rosary, and while his frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old, / Seemed taking flight for heaven, without a death." The "meagre, barefoot, wan" Beadsman was never truly alive, we sense, and because of this, he will skip the necessary step of first dying in the natural world before entry into the spiritual realm. Indeed, the attenuated figure of the Beadsman seems at one with the cold and silent stone carvings that surround him. "The sculptured dead, on each side, seem to freeze, / Imprisoned in black, purgatorial rails. / Knights, ladies, praying in dumb ora'tries, He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails."

While this holy man sleeps among "rough ashes," a great riot is heard in another part of this "mansion foul," an "argent revelry" with images of a noisy crowd in aimless celebration, the fires are in sharp contrast with the Beadsman's frosty surroundings. "The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide; / The level chambers, ready with their pride, / Were glowing to receive a thousand guests." These guests, thoughtlessly given over to an overindulged and unrestrained sensuality, are just as attenuated as the Beadsman. They are but figments of the imagination, living out a sensuous fiction, namely the romantic tales of a literary world long gone. "Numerous as shadows haunting fairily / The brain, new stuffed in youth, with triumphs gay / Of old romance. These let us wish away."

In his rejection of the old romances that affirm a lush sensuality, contrasted with a piousness that would assure a far greater life in the next world, Keats is implying a radically different agenda than that found in the romantic tales of a bygone age in which love so often went unrequited. Indeed, Madeline herself is at first seduced by these very same romantic tales, “asleep in lap of legends old,” and must be awakened from these fictions in order for her love to be consummated. As will be seen by the end of “The Eve of St. Agnes,” Keats affirms physical love in a world that seeks to undermine and destroy it; in this affirmation, the only chance for survival will be to escape its deadly message.

Keats’s agenda is most fully realized in those sections of the poem (Stanzas 29 through 35) in which the lovers meet and proclaim their love. Agnes is the figure that enables the two young lovers to come together in an otherwise impossible situation; poised between the “barbarian hordes” and the joyless holy man, is Agnes, an “old beldame,” who, though “weak in body and in soul,” nevertheless agrees to guide Porphyro to Madeline’s chamber. This “aged creature . . . / Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand” appears to be magical in that in her own being she can bridge the gap between two extremes. She recognizes Porphyro and reluctantly agrees to play the part of the deliverer. “Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon, / While Porphyro upon her face doth look, / Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone.” But Agnes helps him nonetheless in preparing a lavish feast, with all manner of delicacies, “of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd, / With jellies soother than the creamy curd,” and with a table set “cloth of crimson, gold, and jet” and dazzling “golden dishes . . . in baskets bright / Of wreathèd silver.”

While watching the chaste Madeline prepare for bed, as she “[u]nclasps her warmed jewels one by one; / Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees” the eroticism of the scene is sanctioned by Porphyro’s description of her as “a splendid angel, newly dressed, / Save wings, for Heaven.” This procedure of celebrating physical beauty within a sacred context is Keats’s version of the biblical “Song of Songs,” and it presages the ultimate triumph of physical love. That triumph is possible as Porphyro introduces his own rhetorical version of their escape from the mundane world, telling the sleeping Madeline that their coupling will be their salvation. “And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake! / Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite.” However, that triumph is only possible as the result of both Porphyro’s and Madeline’s rejection of the contrarities that enthrall them. While by Madeline’s bedside, Porphyro is alarmed by the noisy throng: “The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion, / The kettle-drum and far-heard clarionet, / Affray his ears.” Likewise, Madeline must forego her pleasant dreams of romantic opulence and the indulgence of a literary convention that made unrequited love an art.

Thus, Porphyro awakens his lover by the very same seductive thoughts that lulled her to sleep, and in so doing, he uses the same literary convention as a means of consummating his love for Madeline: “and in chords that tenderest be, / He played an ancient ditty, long since mute, / In Provence called, ‘La belle dame sans mercy.’” That spell, “the blisses of her dream so pure and deep,” persists even though she is now awake, but it is finally broken as Porphyro becomes a part of that lingering vision. “Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet, / Solution sweet.”

Having now been joined in the here and now, the story of the two lovers picks up a breathless pace. They must quickly leave lest their love be destroyed by the cold, bleak, and destructive environs of the world they have rejected. “’Tis dark; quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet,” but happily, it is “an elfin-storm from fairy land, / Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed” that comes to help the lovers make their escape. And so they finally leave a world whose authority is based on the power of illusion and the fear that accompanies it. Madeline “hurried at his words, beset with fears, / For there were sleeping dragons all around, / At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears.” They disappear into an enchanting storm while the “warrior-guests, with shade and form / . . . / Were long be- nightmared.”

York Notes

Summary

- After the feast on St Agnes' Eve, Madeline prepares to dream of her future lover.
- Porphyro steals into her bedroom and hides.
- As she dreams, he awakens her and she sees him in a living dream.
- Porphyro elopes with Madeline on St Agnes' Eve.

It is the eve of St Agnes, and a bitterly cold night. An ancient pensioner returns from his prayers through an empty chapel. He hears the sound of music coming from the castle above but continues on his way to say prayers for the souls of sinners. In the castle, preparations for the celebratory feast held on St Agnes's Eve are completed and the guests arrive. The narrator turns away from them to focus on Madeline who, oblivious to the guests and music, is thinking only of the legend of St Agnes. Virgins who observe certain ceremonial rites on this particular eve may see their future husbands in their dreams. Meanwhile Porphyro approaches the castle; he is in love with Madeline, but their fathers are sworn enemies. He penetrates the castle and learns from Angela, the ageing nurse., that Madeline is performing the rites associated with St Agnes. Angela reluctantly agrees to help Porphyro conceal himself in Madeline's bedchamber and then brings a selection of delicacies from the feast. Porphyro watches Madeline prepare for bed and fall asleep and then arranges the delicacies on a table. He tries but fails to awaken her. Eventually, playing her lute, he arouses her from dreams of him to a state between sleeping and waking in which she confesses her love; at this point, 'Into her dream he melted' (line 320). Their relationship is consummated as a storm arises, and Madeline is fully awakened. Initially distressed and fearing he will now forsake her, she eventually consents to elope with her lover and the two steal out of the castle under cover of the storm which now rages outside. The poem concludes with a reminder from the narrator that this all happened long ago.

Commentary

'The Eve of St Agnes' is a **narrative poem** in which the narrative impulse repeatedly leads towards description. The poem is primarily notable for its elaborate pictorial and musical effects. Its wealth of description meant that, like 'Isabella', the poem became a favourite with the Pre-Raphaelite artists of the nineteenth century. (You might look, for example, at Maclise's Madeline after Prayer or Hunt's Flight of Madeline and Porphyro and Eve of St Agnes.) Keats's use of the **Spenserian stanza** formally encourages this tendency towards descriptiveness. The stanza, containing eight lines of iambic pentameter and a final alexandrine, a line of iambic hexameter, does not require the kind of compression associated with the *ottava rima* Keats used in 'Isabella'. Nevertheless, as a self-contained unit, it encourages the creation of tableaux.

The poem is also notable for its **varied and sensual imagery** and **synaesthetic richness**. There is, for example, the imagery of sculpture used to suggest the way feeling is arrested or repressed and then released. There is a linked series of musical themes and images at work in the poem; in light of what has been said about sculpture, what is the significance of the image of the ballroom filled with 'music, yearning like a God in pain' (line 56). What use does Keats make of **colour imagery**? What are the effects of the numerous **animals, birds and insects** in the poem? Many images in this poem function to suggest opposition and set up boundaries: the cold outside is set against the warmth within, the noise and revelry of the feasters in the castle against the calm and quiet of Madeline's room, and the snarling trumpets which welcome the guests against the tender chords of the lute.

The poem has also been much admired for its **dramatic immediacy**. This is partly achieved by the way the **tense fluctuates between past and present**, one more of the oppositions that the poem sets up. In stanza 22, for example, there is a movement from past to present when the narrator, reflecting a sense of rising excitement, turns from straight description to address the concealed Porphyro, alerting him to the arrival of Madeline: 'Now prepare,/ Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;/ She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled' (lines 196-8). Following this, there is a return to the past tense until Madeline starts undressing when, again, we move into the more dramatic present tense in stanza 26. The narrative also moves into the present when the lovers make their escape, suggesting a sense of haste and urgency. While we have been caught up in the sensual immediacy of Porphyro and Madeline, we are now reminded that this all happened long ago, that we live in quite a different world. The concluding stanza might be seen to puncture the world of make-believe, distancing us from events, but perhaps this distance has always been subtly maintained throughout the poem by the narrator's tone, creating a tension between scepticism and the will to believe, between dream and reality.

Thematically, too, the poem can be seen as **structured around a series of oppositions**, and one of the most central of these is this opposition between dream and reality. The world of the young lovers might be thought of as a dream world, a world where a rose may shut 'and be a bud again' (line 243). But, as we are often

reminded, they actually live in a world where roses can only wither and die. If their love is to be validated, they must leave the protection of the warm and magical dream room and go out to face the storm. This reading of the opposition between dream and reality places both lovers initially on the side of dream.

There is, however, a great deal of evidence to suggest that the association of Porphyro with dreams is problematic from the start. Madeline desires a vision of her lover and a dream of consummation. Porphyro desires to gaze upon the actual form of Madeline and, perhaps, even to experience a physical consummation. Porphyro certainly gets what he wants, but are the two distinct desires resolved? Do both lovers get the fulfilment they crave or just Porphyro? Is the poem a celebration or an ironic critique of idealistic young love? Answering these questions involves making a decision about Porphyro's intentions. Does Porphyro intend to seduce Madeline all along; is that the thought which comes to him 'like a full-blown rose' (line 136)? In an influential essay entitled 'The Hoodwinking of Madeline', Jack Stillinger argues that Porphyro gains Madeline's bed only by a stratagem, a word used in the poem. Is Madeline then simply the victim of a trick? Do her dreams deceive her?

How we answer this question has significant implications for how we read the poem's position on the imagination. If he is bent on seduction from the start, Porphyro is villain as much as hero; the imagination, represented here by Madeline's dreams, is deceptive; she is the deluded victim. Such a reading emphasises the latent ironies of the poem and presents it as a sceptical antiromance. It is possible, however, that Porphyro only intends to awaken her in order to ensure, in accordance with the legend, that he will become her husband: he goes into the room with no plan, as Keats delicately puts it, to melt into her dream. If this is the case, the poem would seem to affirm the powers of romance and the imagination. His imaginative stratagem works; Madeline's dream comes true; the desires of both are fulfilled. Evidence can be found to support both sides of the argument; Madeline's dream does come true, but what makes it come true is a trick. Is the power of the imagination then both affirmed and ironically subverted?

