AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: "Hadst thou liv'd in days of old": Medieval Elements in
         Keats's Poetry

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        During a brief period of his brief career, John Keats was

highly influenced by the Middle Ages. A number of his poems

reflect the literature of the Middle Ages in theme, imagery,

genre, and sometimes form. After several excursions into the

medieval period in his short poems, Keats first depicted the

Middle Ages at length in the poem "Isabella; or, The Pot of

Basil," based on a narrative by Boccaccio. Keats creates a

poetic version of the story significantly more medieval than even

Boccaccio's medieval original. "The Eve of St. Agnes" shares

some medieval elements with "Isabella" and adds still more. The

poem is so infused with color and imagery traditionally

associated with the writings of the Middle Ages that it

eventually served as the inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelites.

"The Eve of St. Mark," in addition to including numerous medieval details and imagery, is the first major poem in which Keats composes some lines in Middle English, a technique with which he experimented in earlier, briefer poems. The ballad "La belle dame sans merci" is Keats's final major poem to draw upon characteristics of medieval literature. Keats seems to have come to feel that the Middle Ages had failed him and he recorded his disillusion with the medieval period through the writing of "La belle dame sans merci." Keats, represented by the knight, is shown flirting with the Middle Ages, represented by the belle dame sans merci. In the end, the knight has lost the belle dame, as Keats has lost his desire for the resurrection of the Middle Ages through his poetry. Like the knight, who wanders around the withered sedge looking for the belle dame, Keats has attempted to capture the Middle Ages for his poetry. The hopeless tone of the poem and the fact that the belle dame is "sans merci" indicate that Keats has given up his search for those same elements--the belle dame--in his own poetry. He never experiments seriously with the characteristics of medieval literature again.

"HADST THOU LIV'D IN DAYS OF OLD":

MEDIEVAL ELEMENTS IN KEATS'S POETRY

_____

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CONTENTS

Chapter One

Medievalism in the Early Poems

John Keats produced a number of poems widely divergent in
subject matter and quality during his short writing career, but
the works in his canon written during one period of his life
indicate the strong influence on and undeniable presence of
medieval characteristics in his poetry. Amy Lowell, one of the
first notable biographers of Keats, describes Keats's writing
habits and partially explains the reasons for the varying content
and quality of his work:

>   [Keats had] an inveterate habit of keeping a number of
>
>   poems going at once. When a mood was on him, he wrote
>
>   as long as it lasted; if his mood changed, he dropped
>
>   the poem on which he was engaged, then and there, and
>
>   turned to something else. When the former mood
>
>   returned, if it did, he went back to his abandoned
>
>   poem. (227)

Of the seven years of his life during which Keats was engaged in
writing poetry, a full fourteen months he devoted to four major
poems heavily influenced by the writings of the medieval period.
Beginning in February of 1818, Keats wrote "Isabella," "The Eve
of St. Agnes," "The Eve of St. Mark," and "La belle dame sans
merci," the poems in his collection most medieval in content and,

some critics argue, among his very best work. Sidney Colvin
notes that, during this period of his life, "even while health
and peace of mind and heart deserted him, [Keats was able] to
produce in quick succession the series of poems which give us the
true measure of his powers" (147).

Until "Isabella," however, Keats only toyed with vague
themes culled from his interest in the medieval period, an
interest brought about mainly through his reading of Leigh Hunt
and Edmund Spenser. Hunt's sometimes controversial writings in
his newspaper, the Indicator, were an early influence on Keats's
writing, and Keats's readings of Spenser proved to have a
profound influence on his poetry throughout his life. The series
of his early poems, including such works as "Had I a man's fair
form," "Hadst thou liv'd in days of old," "Specimen of an
Induction to a Poem," and "Calidore," deal mainly with the
chivalry and sentimentality common to Hunt's poetry. J. Philip
Eggers, in his article, "Memory in Mankind: Keats's Historical
Imagination," states that these minor poems "mingle a Gothic love
of a storybook chivalric past with tributes to heroes who fought
for liberty" (991). Indeed, Keats's background reading in
literature and poetry so influenced his poetry that the history
books themselves, says Eggers, "seldom did much to help Keats
achieve his most effective historical glimpses, which [seemed] to
grow out of previously assimilated knowledge" (993). The earlier
works suggest that Keats tended to rely too much on Hunt's
writing and, consequently, on Hunt's version of the Middle Ages,

which had more to do with sentimentality than with history.

Spenser's writing was most likely the greatest influence on Keats's own poetical content and form. From the time he was introduced to the _Faerie Queene_, Keats strove to imitate what he considered Spenser's great qualities. It is significant to this study that, as Elizabeth Cook notes, "Keats's first and last known poems were written in imitation of Spenser--as much a Middle English pasticheur as was Chatterton" (xxv). The highly medieval content of many of Keats's works, then, can be partly attributed to his love of Spenser. The later poems influenced by the Middle Ages, such as "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," "The Eve of St. Mark" and "La belle dame sans merci," reflect more fully Spenser's influence on Keats than do the early poems, which, although inspired to a certain extent by Spenser, are closer to Hunt's in writing style.

Later, the influence of Chaucer can be found in Keats's works. This influence, probably an extension of his admiration for Spenser, is most evident in poems like "Sleep and Poetry," in which Keats uses for his motto five lines of a poem he believed was Chaucer's, and "He is to weet a melancholy Carle," a poem parts of which are written in Middle English. Keats's discovery of Chaucer and his great admiration for Spenser, together, of course, with his increased practice at writing poetry, most likely account for the higher quality of work to be seen by the time Keats writes his four major medievally themed works. Cobban, who discusses the revolt of the Romantic movement in his

essay "The Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century," addresses a possible reason Keats spent so much time dwelling aesthetically in the Middle Ages. The revival of interest in medieval history during the Romantic period, Cobban notes, largely involved the substitution of "an idealized mediaevalism for the equally idealized and even more misconceived classicism" (140). He goes on to say that "there can be no doubt that the Romantic school on the whole painted the Middle Ages in unjustifiably roseate hues" (142). The reasons for the Romantics' adoration of the medieval period was that, to them, the Middle Ages represented a time in which two contrary concepts, "the principles of permanence and development," were reconciled and formed "a body in which the elements [were] always changing without the body losing its identity, and [that identity was] the family, the clan, the city, the community, the nation" (143). By contrast, the divergent beliefs of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, new and at times contradictory, were hard for Keats and others to accept. It was to some extent for comfort that the Romantics recalled the medieval period in their writings.

It is apparent from an examination of Keats's source material, which included Spenser, Chaucer, and also Boccaccio, that Keats was well read in the literature of the Middle Ages. In reference to the literary influence of the Middle Ages on the Romantic poets, Cobban asserts the following:

> [O]ne of the best clues to the ideals of an age
>
> is the fiction it reads, because people do on the whole

> prefer to read not of what they are but of what they
>
> would like to be, not of their environment as it is,
>
> but of the environment in which they would like to be
>
> placed. (142)

This claim seems to define the motivating force behind Keats's
use of medieval material for some of his poetry. It was true for
other generations as well, notably the Pre-Raphaelites, who were
greatly inspired by Keats's medievally oriented works.

The group of Keats's minor poems that can be classified as
medieval in theme or form can be subdivided into two groups. The
first group is the poetry initially inspired by Hunt and Spenser.
These poems, primarily medieval in content, are also
distinguished by the fact that they deal with the ubi sunt topos,
the thematic motif recurrent in medieval literature of better
times that have been somehow lost. The second group of poems is
noticeably influenced by Chaucer, as can be seen primarily
through Keats's use of that author's works as models, and through
his use of a dialect of Middle English that was Chaucer's--the
West Midland dialect. All are of differing quality; the later
poems are, for the most part, his best. The majority of these
minor, medievally based poems precede "Isabella," "The Eve of St.
Agnes," "The Eve of St. Mark," and "La belle dame sans merci,"
Keats's four major works with medieval themes. The writing of
the poems inspired by the Middle Ages during the fourteen-month
period of his short life seems to be the culmination of Keats's
flirtation with his medieval muse. The ubi sunt topos, says

Johan Huizinga, "is expressed by the question: where are now all those who once filled the world with all their splendour?" (124). This theme is a common one in Keats's medievally based poetry, and its use, while in itself reflective of medieval poetry, seems to express feelings Keats had for a time gone by. Because Keats, at least in his early poems, pictures the Middle Ages as something no doubt more exalted than they may have been, in "roseate hues," as Cobban says, the use of the ubi sunt theme is easy to understand. The great poets of the past are gone, yet those are the ones he modeled himself after. Because the poets lived in the Middle Ages, like Chaucer, or chose the Middle Ages as their muse, like Spenser, Keats must have felt there was something grand to be found in the time. The romantic, rosy depiction of the medieval period in Keats's early poetry, and the way he sometimes juxtaposes the past with the present, or with another, less preferable time, demonstrates his employment of the ubi sunt topos.

The poem "Had I a man's fair form, then might my sighs" was possibly written as a valentine for Keats's brother George to give to Mary Frogley (Bate 54). In the sonnet, the narrator laments the misfortune that he does not have a "man's fair form." Some believe this to be Keats's reference to the fact he was only five feet tall, even though the poem was written for his brother (Woodhouse, Cook, Allot). Whatever the case, the narrator wishes he could be a knight so that he might win his lady's love, or that he were a shepherd who has secured the love of a maiden:

But ah! I am no knight whose foeman dies;

No cuirass glistens on my bosom's swell:

I am no happy shepherd of the dell

Whose lips have trembled with a maiden's eyes.   (5-8)

These references to figures common to the Middle Ages indicate
that Keats felt that the value of a person during that time was
not measured by his form--or height--but by his accomplishments
or by his station in life. The implication is that in times
past, and more specifically during the medieval period, the
narrator would have been more acceptable than Keats found himself
in his day. This treatment suggests that there was in Keats's
thinking something positive and admirable about those figures and
the time in which they lived.

The same type of theme directs the next poem, in which the
Middle Ages is even more sharply defined. "Hadst thou liv'd in
days of old" is also believed to be a poem written as a
valentine, again from George to Mary Frogley, and deals with two
periods, the classical and the medieval. The first stanza tells
its intended reader that, had she lived in classical Greece, she
would have been guided by the Muses and practically honored for
her beauty and lineage. The second stanza, though, considers
what the recipient's life would have been had she lived during
the age of chivalry. It is worth quoting in full because of the
striking medieval imagery woven throughout:

Hadst thou liv'd when chivalry

Lifted up her lance on high,

Tell me what thou wouldst have been?

Ah! I see the silver sheen

Of thy broidered, floating vest

Cov'ring half thine ivory breast;

Which, O heavens! I should see,

But that cruel destiny

Has placed a golden cuirass there;

Keeping secret what is fair.

Like sunbeams in a cloudlet nested

Thy locks in knightly casque are rested:

O'er which bend four milky plumes

Like the gentle lilly's blooms

Springing from a costly vase.

See with what a stately pace

Comes thine alabaster steed;

Servant of heroic deed!

O'er his loins, his trappings glow

Like the northern lights on snow.

Mount his back! thy sword unsheath!

Sign of the enchanter's death;

Bane of every wicked spell;

Silencer of dragon's yell.

Alas! thou this wilt never do:

Thou art an enchantress too,

And wilt surely never spill

Blood of those whose eyes can kill. (41-68)

Here, Keats compares Mary Frogley to Britomart, Spenser's "woman knight of Chastity" from the <u>Faerie Queene</u> (Cook 561). The imagery and detail in this passage, including the mention of chivalry, the "alabaster steed," the sword, and the theme of enchantment, inspired by Spenser's <u>Faerie Queene</u>, are distinctly medieval. The implication of this poem, also, is that life during the Middle Ages, or even other "days of old," was preferable to that in the time in which Keats lived. Hence we encounter again the <u>ubi</u> <u>sunt</u> <u>topos</u>.

"Specimen of an Induction to a Poem," inspired by Keats's reading of Leigh Hunt's <u>The Story of Rimini</u>, is also a pointedly medieval tale, and one that paints the Middle Ages in an exceedingly complimentary light. Claude Finney, in his two-volume work <u>The Evolution of Keats's Poetry</u>, notes that, although Keats is obviously "impelled to tell a tale of chivalry" (hence the term "induction" in the poem's title), Keats had only medieval pictures in his mind, and no actual tale (103). The images include a plume, a lance, and a knight. Keats initiates his poem with the following:

> Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry;
>
> For large white plumes are dancing in mine eye. (1-2)

Next, he elaborates on the image of a lance:

> Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry;
>
> For while I muse, the lance points slantingly
>
> Athwart the morning air. . . . (11-13)

And finally, he begins his tale a third time, this instance

involving the introduction of a "gentle knight":

> Yet must I tell a tale of chivalry:
>
> Or wherefore comes that steed so proudly by?
>
> Wherefore more proudly does the gentle knight
>
> Rein in the swelling of his ample might?   (45-48)

Although Keats starts his tale, one clearly intended to be set in the Middle Ages, he gets no farther than forming these vague images before he implores his two muses, Spenser, whom Finney labels "the god of chivalry," and "Libertas" (Leigh Hunt), "the priest of the Spenserian cult," to inspire him (104). The images Keats paints depict only a grand, colorful, chivalric life, and the implication, once again, is that Keats seeks to capture the Middle Ages because it provides a way of life more to his liking than that provided by the present time. The poem ends with Keats's declaration, "I will rest in hope / To see wide plains, fair trees and lawny slope: / The morn, the eve, the light, the shade, the flowers; / Clear streams, smooth lakes, and overlooking towers" (65-68), and the tale of chivalry never evolves.

Keats's next poem, written shortly after his attempt at a chivalric tale in "Specimen," is titled "Calidore: A Fragment." Finney sees in both poems "Hunt's vulgar and sentimental adaptation of Spenser's chivalric statement" (110), and blames the poems' failure on Keats's tendency to imitate Hunt. Although Keats's intentions are, once again, to "tell a tale of chivalry," he gets only a little farther in "Calidore." The story is of a

young man, Calidore--a name taken from Spenser's Faerie Queene--
"pictured as a youth whose knighthood is yet to win: the
adventures, in other words, lie ahead and will presumably be
traced" (Bate 62). The poem, while it is longer than "Specimen,"
and while it proceeds further into its tale, is still a fragment.
Calidore only reaches the destination where his adventures are to
begin, but even that movement takes awhile, because Keats spends
time describing Calidore's setting thoroughly. Next, Calidore
meets two ladies, and Keats gives him ample time to help them
from their "noble steeds" (76-98) before a knight emerges onto
the scene. The group enters a castle, and, after they are
seated, the poem suddenly stops. The ubi sunt topos is evident
in this poem through the romantic, pastoral setting and the
characters of Calidore, the ladies, and the knights. Through his
portrayal of Calidore and the other characters as exemplary human
beings who do everything in their power to make each other happy,
Keats presents the characters as nearly perfect and assuredly
worthy of admiration. In this way, Keats has then, once again,
pictured the past and its characteristics as preferable to the
present.

Two additional poems, written a short time later, also well
exemplify the ubi sunt theme. Both "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern"
and "Robin Hood: To a Friend" are poems lamenting the lost past
and its heroes. "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern" was inspired by
Keats's visit to the Mermaid Tavern, the "famous meeting-place of
poets such as Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher" (Cook

580). The poem deals, appropriately enough, with "Souls of Poets dead and gone," and asks, "What Elysium have ye known, / Happy field or mossy cavern, / Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?" (1-4). Keats pictures the poets sitting in the tavern eating hearty food, drinking "mine host's Canary wine" (6), and dressed "as bold Robin Hood / Would, with his maid Marian" (10-11). The second stanza places the past poets at a Mermaid Tavern in the sky, drinking and eating just as they used to. Both the allusions to great, past poets and better times present the ubi sunt theme, even to the extent of presenting Heaven, where the poets now reside, as a place made better merely by the poets' presence.

"Robin Hood" begins with the following lines:

No! those days are gone away

And their hours are old and gray,

And their minutes buried all

Under the down-trodden pall

Of the leaves of many years. (1-5)

Each stanza of the poem, except for the last one, recounts the loss of some great thing that has passed with time: the sound of the bugle, Robin Hood and Little John, the "song of Gamelyn" (34), "the tough-belted outlaw / Idling in the 'grenè shawe'" (35-36), and Maid Marian herself. The Middle Ages is evoked not only through the allusions to Robin Hood and his merry men, but through specific detail, including the reference to The Tale of Gamelyn, "a 14th-c. metrical romance about a band of forest

outlaws," and the mention of the "grenè shawe," a phrase used by Chaucer in his Friar's Tale (Cook 581). The ubi sunt theme here is, of course, quite obvious, especially in that Keats's last stanza pays homage to the days gone by:

> So it is: yet let us sing,
>
> Honour to the old bow-string!
>
> Honour to the bugle-horn!
>
> Honour to the woods unshorn!
>
> Honour to the Lincoln green!
>
> Honour to the archer keen!
>
> Honour to tight little John,
>
> And the horse he rode upon!
>
> Honour to bold Robin Hood,
>
> Sleeping in the underwood!
>
> Honour to maid Marian,
>
> And to all the Sherwood-clan!   (49-60)

Keats's evocation of the past and the honor he pays to it make evident the fact that, through Hunt and Spenser, he envisioned the Middle Ages as a time filled with romance, chivalry, and a kind of hero no longer around, and, consequently, as a time preferable to his own.

Keats was, as we noted earlier, influenced by Chaucer in addition to Hunt and Spenser. The medieval content of some of his poems includes Middle English in the Chaucerian dialect and even some allusions to Chaucer's own poetry and to other poetry once ascribed to Chaucer. Hyder E. Rollins, in his two volume

work, <u>The Keats Circle</u>, records a catalog of Keats's library at the time of his death. Among many other items, the library included a complete edition of Chaucer's poems: fourteen volumes bound as seven, it was the Edinburgh edition of 1782 (254). The critic Walter Savage Landor, Keats's near contemporary, alleges that "[s]ince the time of Chaucer there have been only two poets who at all resemble him: and these two are widely dissimilar from each other, Burns and Keats" (259). Keats's poetry does indeed sometimes resemble Chaucer's, much more so in his late poems than in the earlier ones.

In "Sleep and Poetry" and in "Written on a blank space at the end of Chaucer's tale 'The Floure and the Leafe,'" Keats affirms the impact his reading of Chaucer had on his poetry. The motto of the poem "Sleep and Poetry" is from "The Floure and the Leafe"; the poem was formerly thought to be one of Chaucer's works, but is no longer attributed to him. Eleanor Hammond's book, <u>Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual</u>, confirms that the 1782 Edinburgh edition, edited by John Bell, did include the poem "The Floure and the Leafe," attributed to Chaucer (132). The mere fact that Keats believes he is using Chaucer for his muse is significant. The poem quotes as its epigraph, with the inscription "Chaucer," the following five lines (17-21) from the pseudo-Chaucerian verse "The Floure and the Leafe":

> As I lay in my bed slepe full unmete
>
> Was unto me, but why that I ne might
>
> Rest I ne wist, for there n'as erthly wight

(As I suppose) had more of hertis ese

Than I, for I n'ad sickness nor disese.   CHAUCER

Although the poem does not deal with the themes or ideas of the Middle Ages, the motto and inspiration for the poem clearly indicates Keats's interest in Chaucer and the Middle Ages.

The poem "Written on a blank space at the end of Chaucer's tale 'The Floure and the Leafe'"[1] was written after "Sleep and Poetry" and was Keats's spontaneous reaction to what he thought was Chaucer's poem. The sonnet was written one day when Keats came upon a sleeping friend, Cowden Clarke, who had been reading from a volume of Chaucer. The book had fallen open to the page of "The Floure and the Leafe," and Keats, after reading the poem, wrote his tribute to it (Bate 144). Although the poem, like "Sleep and Poetry," has nothing to do with the Middle Ages by way of theme, imagery, or form, its significance lies in the fact that a Middle English verse was its inspiration.

Keats's other Chaucer-inspired writing comes in the form of pseudo-Middle English. The poem, "He is to weet a melancholy Carle," is a three-stanza portrait of Keats's friend, Charles Brown. The poem, Keats said, was written "in the manner of Spenser" (468), and uses a type of Middle English dialect similar to that which Spenser takes from Chaucer. The language is surely inspired by Chaucer. Stanza two, describing Brown's unimpeachable character, is excerpted fully here:

Ne cared he for wine, or half and half

Ne cared he for fish or flesh or fowl

> And sauces held he worthless as the chaff;
>
> He 'sdeign'd the swine-herd at the wassail bowl
>
> Ne with lewd ribbalds sat he cheek by jowl,
>
> Ne with sly Lemans in the scorner's chair
>
> But after water brooks this Pilgrim's soul
>
> Panted, and all his food was woodland air
>
> Though he would ofttimes feast on gilliflowers rare--
>
> (10-18)

Although there are only a sprinkling of Middle English words throughout the poem, it makes clear that Keats is interested in the language enough to attempt writing it.

Another of Keats's attempts at writing in the Middle English dialect is seen in a short, undated fragment first printed in 1939. The following is the verse in its entirety:

> They weren fully glad of their gude hap
>
> And tasten all the pleasaunces of joy.

Although it is obvious that in writing this short verse, Keats is merely tinkering with the language, that fact in itself is significant.

The Middle English writing that appears in Keats's poetry prior to "The Eve of St. Mark" is the forerunner to the lines of Middle English that appear within and in reference to "St. Mark." In his assessment of Keats's writing, Landor praises Keats in the following manner, offering a high compliment from an obvious admirer of Chaucer: "What a poet would poor Keats have been, if he had lived! He had something of Shakespear [sic] in him, and

(what nobody else ever had) much, very much of Chaucer" (261).

What began as Keats's zealous imitation of Leigh Hunt's, Edmund Spenser's, and Geoffrey Chaucer's writings led to the more substantial and original works of Keats's maturity. Some of Keats's best works, "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," "The Eve of St. Mark," and "La belle dame sans merci," are directly related to his early writing of such poems as "Calidore," "Hadst thou liv'd in days of old," "Sleep and Poetry," and "He is to weet a melancholy Carle." All of these poems are indicative of the power and influence the literature of the Middle Ages held for Keats.

1. All poems are quoted from Elizabeth Cook except "Written on a blank space at the end of Chaucer's tale 'The Floure and the Leafe'" and "They weren fully glad of their gude hap," which are quoted from the Miriam Allot edition.

Chapter Two

Keats's "Isabella"

Although preceded by such medievally inspired poems as
"Specimen of an Induction to a Poem," "Calidore," "Lines on the
Mermaid Tavern," and "Robin Hood: To a Friend," as well as a few
other short but noteworthy poems with medieval themes, the
culmination of the medieval techniques Keats uses in his poetry
up to April, 1818, appear in the more substantial "Isabella; or
The Pot of Basil."

The criticism surrounding "Isabella," after its publication
in Keats's 1820 volume of poetry, shows that the poem was
alternately loved and hated by the number of critics reviewing
it. More recent assessments of the work concentrate on the
proposal that "Isabella" is a purely political work (Watkins,
Wolfson). This recent criticism takes its cue from Bernard Shaw,
who declared, "[I]f Karl Marx can be imagined as writing a poem
instead of a treatise on Capital, he would have written
"Isabella" (qtd. in Watkins 33). Evan Radcliffe, on the other
hand, says in his 1986 article, "Keats, Ideals, and 'Isabella,'"
that the work is the epitome of Keats's use of ideals in his
poetry--he makes the lovers ideal, he makes the brothers the
ideal villains, etc. But, although most critics recognize the
connection to one of Boccaccio's stories (Day four, fifth story

of The Decameron), and some spend time pointing out the ways in which Keats changes and embellishes the story, none of the criticism touches on the fact that the poem is written with many of the characteristics of original medieval poetry, and, in fact, adds medieval aspects to the story.

Boccaccio's tale from The Decameron, a prose piece written during the mid-1300's (probably 1348-1352) is short, only two to three pages in length, and tells the story in a straightforward manner. The heroine, Isabetta, is the sister of two wealthy men and, although attractive and accomplished in a number of areas, is unmarried. She falls in love with Lorenzo, who works for her brothers. The brothers become aware of the secret love affair when one of them sees Isabetta sneaking into Lorenzo's room one night. He says nothing at the time, but tells his brother of this new development, and they promptly decide that he should be killed, since they do not want to be shamed by the revelation of their sister's love. One day they ask Lorenzo to come on a business-related errand with them and, in the course of the trip, kill and bury him in the woods. They return home and tell everyone, although not Isabetta directly, that they have sent Lorenzo on to another location to take care of some business for them. Isabetta learns of the delay and waits for Lorenzo; she cries for him night and day when he does not return. One night Lorenzo appears to her in a dream and tells her of the crime her brothers have committed and of where he is buried. She goes into the woods with a girl who knows of her relationship with Lorenzo,

searches for his body, and finds it. Because she cannot carry the body back to town for a proper burial, she cuts off the head and takes it home with her. She then cleanses it with her tears, wraps it in a fine cloth, buries it in a vase, and plants over it the "finest basil from Salerno." She spends all her time with the pot of basil, watering it with her tears, and, consequently, the plant thrives. Her beauty fades and she begins to waste away before the brothers, prompted by their neighbors to do something about Isabetta's strange behavior, steal her pot of basil. Isabetta is heartbroken over the loss of her beloved Lorenzo's remains, and her weeping, which they assume is over the loss of the pot of basil, causes the brothers to empty the vase to see why she wants it back. They discover Lorenzo's head, recognizable by its golden curls, bury it at once, and leave town forever. Isabetta continues weeping until she withers away from sorrow (274-278).

"Isabella; or the Pot of Basil" is Keats's poetic version of the tale, and the basic story is true to Boccaccio's prose narrative. The main differences, however, are the additions to the tale that expand its treatment of the courtly love theme, elaborate on the dream vision scene, and, overall, change significant details in such a way as to cause the tale to reflect the characteristic poetry of the Middle Ages more fully.

The reader of course expects to find the poem medieval in content if only for the fact that it is based on a tale by Boccaccio. But Keats does embellish the poem, as some of his

accusers who are more appreciative of Boccaccio's traditional romantic tale have made adamantly clear, and, in doing so, medievalizes it even more. The original tale is written in one of the popular medieval genres, romance, and includes the courtly love theme and the dream vision; these three attributes alone qualify the tale as one with medieval aspects. Keats's version, however, experiments further with elements of medieval literature by including such characteristics as the highlighting of the romance genre and the courtly love theme through the addition of many details to Isabella and Lorenzo's relationship, and the allegorical treatment of hope, winter, selfishness, love, fate, and death as personifications of abstractions. Also notable are Keats's emphasis on the decaying body of Lorenzo, reminiscent of the late-medieval fascination with death, and the worship of Lorenzo's head by Isabella, suggestive of medieval relic veneration. Also important is the rhyme scheme chosen by Keats, ottava rima, a popular one among many poets of the Middle Ages.

Boccaccio's tale, though a romance in the traditional sense of the genre, is still not as characteristic of medieval romance as Keats's "Isabella" turns out to be. Boccaccio's Isabetta is the distressed lady common to the romantic tale, as is Keats's Isabella, and the actions of both are motivated by love, also characteristic of the medieval romance. But Keats's heroine is far more distressed. The lady is emotionally distraught throughout most of the poem; before she learns of Lorenzo's love, she "[f]ell sick within the rose's just domain" (34) because she

is unsure whether her own immense love for Lorenzo will be returned. When the lovers finally profess everlasting love to one another, however, their happiness is short lived--only about four stanza's worth. They are again separated, Lorenzo dies, and Isabella is plunged, once again, into despair. The despair she feels now, though, is worse than when she was unsure of Lorenzo's love, because she knows she will be without him forever. The character of Isabella in Keats's version of the tale is more than a little distressed; she is almost demented by the time the poem comes to an end. All she can do up until the time of her death is "[ask] for her lost Basil amorously" (490). Boccaccio's tale follows the same basic plot, but Keats expands the depiction of his characters with vivid details, like the desperation of the lovers for one another, that add medieval elements to the story. Another significant change in Keats's version of the story is a specific characteristic of the woman Isabella takes with her to find Lorenzo's grave. In Boccaccio's tale, Isabetta "[receives] permission from her brothers to leave the city for a while to amuse herself in the company of a woman who had on other occasions been with her and who knew all about her . . ." (280). But in Keats's version of the story, "she took with her an aged nurse, / And went into that dismal forest-hearse" (343-44). And, as they search for the Lorenzo's grave, Isabella whispers to "that aged Dame" (346). The fact that Keats makes the woman friend an old lady is significantly medieval. She fits the mold of the Duenna found in other medieval romances.

The Duenna, or La Veillese, as in the <u>Roman de la Rose</u>, is traditionally an old woman who is the confidante of illicit lovers and secretly helps them in any way she is able. The fact that Keats gives the woman the characteristic of old age, where Boccaccio does not specify age, and, really, almost implies that the "woman" he speaks of is Isabella's peer, is another instance of Keats medievalizing Boccaccio's story. Overall, the characteristics of Keats's tale fit more accurately the description of the medieval romance than do those of Boccaccio's; these adjustments to the original story seem to have been a conscious effort on the part of Keats when one considers the rest of the alterations he makes to the story.

Just as popular in medieval writing as the romance genre, in fact, a common component of it, was the courtly love theme, one of the most dominating and well-known devices used by authors of the Middle Ages. Boccaccio's tale of Isabetta and Lorenzo, however, only suggests the presence of the theme. Keats's version of the tale goes much further. He expresses the common medieval idolatry of women by men, caused, many believe, by "[t]he conditions of feudal society and the veneration of the Virgin Mary, both of which tended to give a new dignity and independence to women" (Holman 114). Keats afflicts especially Lorenzo, but also Isabella, with a few of the problems associated with this kind of love and tells the reader how

> "[Isabella and Lorenzo] could not in the self-same
>
> mansion dwell

> Without some stir of heart, some malady;
>
> They could not sit at meals but feel how well
>
> It soothed each to be the other by;
>
> They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
>
> But to each other dream, and nightly weep. (3-8)

Keats's lovers take on truly medieval characteristics when compared with the common characteristics of the courtly love theme.

These elements of courtly love are cataloged in this anonymous medieval lyric, "Love for a Beautiful Lady," a traditional lover's complaint:

> For hire love I carke and care,
>
> For hire love I droupne and dare,
>
> For hire love my blisse is bare,
>
> And all ich waxe won.
>
> For hire love in slep I slake,
>
> For hire love all night ich wake,
>
> For hire love mourning I make,
>
> More then eny mon. (61-68)

As is the lover in the preceding lyric, Lorenzo and Isabella are full of grief and sorrow, Isabella grows sick and pale and both become weak, pine for one another, and lose sleep over their unrequited love. Because of their fear of losing even the chance for the others' love by confessing their own, the lovers cannot express to one another their deep feelings; Lorenzo tells himself he will "bow to [his] delight . . . [and] ask [his] lady's boon"

each night, but questions his motives and Isabella's reaction, and so their "sad plight" lasts the "whole long month of May" (25-28). When Isabella finally begins to grow sick with longing, Lorenzo realizes he must take his chances and express his feelings to her. This will, he believes, cause one of two things to happen. She will either accept him as her lover or his profession of love will "startle off her cares," and she will at least overcome her illness (40). Of course Isabella accepts his love, and returns hers to him joyously. Many critics also believe that a traditional part of courtly love is the fact that it is "illicit and sensual" or otherwise it is not true courtly love. This belief is strongly supported by C. S. Lewis, one of the most influential writers on the subject of courtly love. For example, if Isabella and Lorenzo had married, there would no longer be the element of courtly love in their relationship, at least according to this line of reasoning. All of these things, as Keats must have known, are elements present in the courtly love theme. The lovers question themselves as well as the true meaning of love relentlessly, which results in great emotional distress and grief. When the love is accepted and returned by the lady in question, everything is wonderful, and the lovers may seem, like Isabella and Lorenzo, to "tread upon the air" (73). Another aspect of the theme is the promise of secrecy between the lovers, which Keats's, as well as Boccaccio's lovers, share. However, Boccaccio does not take as much time to set up his story, and merely tells the readers in plain language that the

two find each other very attractive and decide to put any other lovers aside; soon the two are sleeping together. In fact, this is how their secret love is discovered by the brothers, in Boccaccio's story, at least. As far as the action in the story goes, everything takes longer in Keats's version, and the details added are decidedly medieval. For example, Keats mentions only once, seemingly in passing, that Isabella and Lorenzo suffer the entire month of May. It is a common characteristic of the poetry of the Middle Ages, especially in England, to designate the summer months, usually May, as the season most conducive for lovers to meet and come together. Nevertheless, Boccaccio's tale does not designate May as the time of year Isabetta and Lorenzo fall in love; in fact, he does not mention a time at all. So even Keats's small inclusion of the "long month of May" is significant because it adds another touch of medievalism, and of courtly love, to the tale.

Also characteristic in medieval poetry is allegory. The allegory of the Middle Ages was an intricate process which grew into a four-fold type of reading. There were the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical levels in the reading of scripture; these readings were also sometimes applied to secular literature. Such readings were often given to stories like the <u>Roman de la Rose</u>, the <u>Pearl</u>, and Dante's <u>Divine Comedy</u>. The writers using the tool of allegory occasionally took it to its extreme in the form of a psychomachia, or "soul-war," an invention of Prudentius that was "a battle between personified

Virtues and Vices" (Robison 198). Boccaccio, however, uses no allegorical touches in his story; it is simple and goes straight through from start to finish. Keats, though, continually adds extra touches to his version, including the personification of abstract qualities. The omniscient narrator, addressing Isabella, implores her to "put on thy stifling widow's weed / And 'scape at once from Hope's accursed bands" when she is waiting for Lorenzo to return from the supposed business trip her brothers sent him on (229-230). Hope, in this instance, is portrayed as a jailer who has captured Isabella and trapped her in her sorrow. Winter is another personification presented; it is characterized as a breathing creature who can even play a roundelay--the roundelay, as it happens, being a popular medieval song form. As Isabella's hope fades, the season turns to autumn, and "[t]he breath of Winter comes from far away / . . . and plays a roundelay / of death among the bushes and the leaves" as Isabella continues to pine, night and day, for Lorenzo (250-253). The departure of Hope and the introduction of Winter signify death, foreshadowing Isabella's knowledge of Lorenzo's demise.

Isabella's anger at Lorenzo's apparent lack of concern for her, symbolized by the personification of Selfishness, turns into the abstraction of Love personified, which returns to take over and bring sorrow to her longing: "Selfishness, Love's cousin, held not long / Its fiery vigil in her single breast; / She fretted for the golden hour, and hung / Upon the time with feverish unrest" (241-143). In this case, there is even a

portrayal of a family relationship; Love and Selfishness are
cousins with specific personalities and actions who vie for
control of Isabella's emotions. Significant too is the fact that
Isabella blames Fortune for the loss of Lorenzo until after the
dream vision, from which she learns of her brothers' crime: "I
thought some Fate with pleasure or with strife / Portion'd us --
happy days, or else to die" (331-332). It was common practice in
the works of the Middle Ages to blame Fortune for any problems
that might arise in one's life, as well as to characterize it as
a living being, usually female. Also personified is Death. When
Isabella goes to Lorenzo's grave to see if her vision has been
truthful, Death is shown as "hungry" and marring human forms.
This treatment is medieval not only in its portrayal of Death as
a concrete, human image, but also in its fascination with
grotesquery, a common image in the poetry of the Middle Ages
(357). Where Boccaccio uses no allegory at all, but simply tells
the story in realistic language, Keats embellishes his version of
the tale by adding numerous personifications to paint an
ultimately more medieval picture of the story.

As mentioned earlier, the Middle Ages often used the
practice of allegory almost to an extreme, pushing the
personifications into actual battle, a condition known as the
psychomachia. Each abstraction was attired in the uniform of a
knight, and the characters, armed with shields and spears,
actually played out their war on a field. A fitting example of
allegory pushed to its extreme, and of the kind of medieval

tradition embraced by Keats in <u>Isabella,</u> is the following excerpt

from a medieval English lyric, "Love for a Beautiful Lady":

> To Love, that leflich is in londe,
>
> I tolde him, as ich understonde,
>
> How this hende hath hent in honde
>
> On herte that mine wes:
>
> And hire knightes me han so soght,
>
> Siking, Sorewing and Thoght,
>
> Tho thre me han in bale broght
>
> Ayein the poer of Pees.
>
> To Love I putte pleintes mo,
>
> How Siking me hath siwed so;
>
> And eke Thoght me thrat to slo
>
> With maistry yef he mighte;
>
> And Sorewe sore in balful bende
>
> That he wold for this hende
>
> Me lede to my lives ende
>
> Unlahfulliche in lighte.   (37-52)

The depiction of Love, Sighing, Sorrowing, and Thought as knights

in a battle is one commonly found in the psychomachias of the

literature of the Middle Ages.

Present in both Boccaccio's and Keats's versions of the tale

is the vision Isabella has of Lorenzo in a dream. The dream

vision provided a popular narrative frame employed by many

important authors during the Middle Ages. Chaucer used the dream

allegory in <u>The Book of the Duchess</u>, <u>The House of Fame</u>, <u>The</u>

Legend of Good Women, and The Parliament of Fowls, and other
writers practiced the art of the dream vision until it became
almost a genre in its own right. In a true dream vision, the
narrator falls asleep and his dream becomes the author's story.
Keats's "Isabella" is not a dream vision, but uses the dream as a
conveyor of knowledge. In the Middle Ages, the dream was
considered highly important because it was believed to be
revelatory of a truth or truths, and was especially important to
the romance genre. In fact, Chaucer used the dream in this way
to reveal truth in the Nun's Priest's Tale. Although the dream
is present in Boccaccio's tale, he uses it only summarily:

> One night after [Isabetta] had wept so much over
>
> Lorenzo's absence that she finally cried herself to
>
> sleep, Lorenzo appeared to her in a dream, pale and all
>
> unkempt, with his clothes torn and rotting on his body,
>
> and it seemed to her that he spoke:
>
> "Oh, Lisabetta, you do nothing but cry out to me
>
> and lament my long absence and bitterly accuse me with
>
> your tears; therefore, I want you to know that I can
>
> never return to you, for on the last day you saw me I
>
> was killed by your brothers."
>
> He told her the spot where they had buried him and
>
> asked her not to call him any longer or to wait for
>
> him; then he disappeared. (280)

In striking contrast to this brief passage, Keats's version takes
fully seven stanzas to relate his version of Isabella's dream.

Keats develops the additional length with the extensive medieval
embellishment he gives the scene. Lorenzo's ghost is described
in vivid detail, so that the reader can almost see the decaying
form speaking to his love:

>   . . . the forest tomb
>
>   Had marr'd his glossy hair which once could shoot
>
>   Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom
>
>   Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute
>
>   From his lorn voice, and past his loamed ears
>
>   Had made a miry channel for his tears.   (275-280)

The corpse's eyes, though, "were still all dewy bright/ With
love, and kept all phantom fear aloof/ From the poor girl by
magic of their light" (289-291). Lorenzo, speaking, tells
Isabella where to find his grave, and implores her to go and shed
one tear upon it, so he may be comforted. He tells her of his
great love for her, then "mourn[s] 'Adieu!'" and leaves her.
Keats's version focuses on the emotions of the two lovers,
whereas Boccaccio's concentrates primarily on action. Keats's
emphasis on the dream scene is a possible indication of his
knowledge of the importance of dreams to the medieval romance,
and of his attempt to highlight the medieval qualities of the
story.

Yet another characteristic Keats employs that was extremely
common in the art of the Middle Ages is the concentration on and
fascination with death. Johan Huizinga, in his book The Waning
of the Middle Ages, tells of the late-medieval preoccupation with

death, and claims that no other period in history has "laid so
much stress . . . on the thought of death" (124). Huizinga
delineates three distinct areas of the death motif commonly seen:

> The first is expressed by the question: where are now
> all those who once filled the world with their
> splendour? The second motif dwells on the frightful
> spectacle of human beauty gone to decay. The third is
> the death-dance: death dragging along men of all
> conditions and ages. (124-125)

At least two of these "death motifs" may be seen in the poetry of
Keats--the first type, known as the ubi sunt topos, and the
second type, which is the one he employs in "Isabella." Instead
of just a sigh for those who have passed, as is the norm for ubi
sunt poetry, the people of the late Middle Ages developed a taste
for a much more graphic description of death, hence the second
death motif, which shows the decay of the body. Death and decay
were very real things to people of the late Middle Ages. The
Bubonic Plague caused death to be an unusually common occurrence
during the medieval period. The people of the Middle Ages
regarded relics, objects associated with saints (especially their
bodies), as physical links between the supernatural and natural
worlds (Head 296). The relics represented the physical presence,
as well as the power of the saints, in the mortal world, and
served as indicators that a better, longer life was to come.
Relic trade became an extremely common practice in the religious
world, and, during the late medieval period, different religious

communities began to bargain for the relics of saints even before they were dead. Some commonly found relics were blood, hair, body parts, bones, hairshirts, and, basically, almost anything worn or used by a saint or an important religious figure. So desirable were relics to churches that fake relics abounded, since churches with important relics were considered to be very important themselves, and often became objects of pilgrimage because of the relics in their possession. Both the medieval fascination with death and the veneration of relics are present in Keats's version of "Isabella." Neither plays an extensive role in Boccaccio's original tale, but by vividly describing the state of Lorenzo's body and the way Isabella cuts off his head, "[w]ith duller steel than the Persean sword," Keats medievalizes still further Boccaccio's story. Later Isabella worships the head: "[S]till she comb'd, and kept / Sighing all day--and still she kiss'd, and wept [over the head of Lorenzo]." By including this interest in relics, Keats is alluding to the belief that Isabella can hope to join Lorenzo in another, more desirable place, an idea similar to the beliefs of those who worshipped the relics of saints and thought they would benefit from that veneration.

Significant, too, is the form of Keats's version of the tale. Boccaccio tells his story in a short, prose form. Keats's verse takes the form of ottava rima. The ottava rima pattern is one consisting of eight lines of iambic pentameter with the rhyme pattern abababcc. The originator of this pattern is none other

than Boccaccio himself, although he did not choose the form for
his version of the tale of Isabetta and Lorenzo. By choosing
this form for his poem, Keats is drawing medieval characteristics
from Boccaccio to medievalize further Boccaccio's own story.
Even though in Keats's time poetry was considered a higher form
of expression than prose, he could also have known that the
earliest medieval romances were written in verse rather than
prose, and he almost certainly was aware of the ottava rima
pattern used by Boccaccio. These two seemingly slight
alterations to Boccaccio's tale are significant for the mere
reason that because of their use, the tale is made still more
medieval.

Further support for the proposal that Keats was most
probably medievalizing further Boccaccio's story of Isabetta and
Lorenzo is the fact that his narrator addresses both Boccaccio
and the reader in the course of his poem. To Boccaccio, he is
apologetic, and says that "Of [Boccaccio] we now should ask
forgiving boon" (146). His statement that now the world can no
longer hear the tune of Boccaccio's "ghittern" implies that Keats
is purposely making the tale more medieval so those unfamiliar
with the period will be able to understand and gain a better
feeling of the time, a time, incidentally, that Keats and others
felt was for various reasons infinitely more desirable than their
own (149). He goes on to ask Boccaccio to grant him a pardon so
the tale can move on:

There is no other crime, no mad assail

> To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:
>
> But it is done--succeed the verse or fail--
>
> To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet;
>
> To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,
>
> An echo of thee in the north-wind sung. (153-160)

After this aside to the original author, Keats goes on with his
narrative of Isabella and Lorenzo, but interrupts it again later,
this time to address the reader. This stanza comes during the
description of Isabella at Lorenzo's grave, and Keats seems to be
defending the grotesque descriptions he has added here:

> Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
>
> Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?
>
> O for the gentleness of old Romance,
>
> The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!
>
> Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance. . . .
>
> (385-389)

This aside is an affirmation from Keats that he is aware that he
is embellishing the story line of Boccaccio's original romantic
tale, but this time, he does not apologize. He simply admits
what he has done, and advises the "fair reader" to go back to
Boccaccio if, indeed, the reader is unable to stomach the
medieval realism he inserts into his own verse. The alterations
to Boccaccio's story are of such an exact nature that one can
only assume that Keats's purpose for thus embellishing and
expanding the story is to heighten its medieval tone and set it
more firmly in the Middle Ages, a time he felt was possibly more

stable and accommodating than his own.

Chapter Three

"The Eve of St. Agnes"

After "The Eve of St. Agnes," Keats's next major medievally

themed work is the poem he wrote in January of 1819, after a

visit to Chichester and Bedhampton. According to an article by

J. C. E. Bowen, Keats's friend, Isabella Jones, reminded him that

he was to arrive in Chichester on January 20, which was St.

Agnes's Eve. She reminded him of the legend surrounding the

date--that if they adhere to the superstitions surrounding the

legend, virgins will learn the identity of their future husbands

(208). Bowen also contends that Keats' inspiration for the poem

came from the "pure Gothic of Chichester Cathedral together with

the strikingly beautiful new Regency Gothic decoration of the

chapel at Stansted (the dedication of which Keats attended on the

25th of January). . ." (208).

In his article, "John Keats' Self-Reflexive Narrative: 'The

Eve of St. Agnes,'" James Wilson says that, traditionally, the

critics of the poem tend to fall into one of three categories:

those who agree with the poet himself that the poem is "weak-

sided" and lacks true substance; metaphysical critics led by Earl

Wasserman, who believe the poem is "a dramatization of the soul's

ascent to the liberating conditions of immortality through erotic

love"; and skeptics led by Jack Stillinger, who believe the

depiction of Porphyro represents that of a villainous rapist who
takes advantage of the young and innocent Madeline (44).
Wilson's own view is that "the union of Porphyro and Madeline in
'The Eve of St. Agnes' represents the culmination of the
aesthetic process. Its product (the poem) is the finished,
perfectly realized artifact. . ." (50). Keats himself says in a
letter dated November 1819 that he wrote the poem in order "to
untether Fancy and let her manage for herself [and] to diffuse
the colouring of St. Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which
Character and Sentiment would be the figures of such drapery."
Significant to the purpose of this examination, though, is his
next comment regarding the intentions of this writing: "I and
myself cannot agree about this at all. Wonders are no wonders to
me. I am more at home amongst men and women. I would rather
read Chaucer than Ariosto. . ." (520).[1] And if he tried to
imitate Chaucer, even subconsciously, he succeeded. Hunt says
the following about "The Eve of St. Agnes": "'Its little smoke,
in pallid moonshine, died,' is a verse in the taste of Chaucer,
full of minute grace and truth. The smoke of the waxen taper
seems almost as ethereal and fair as the moonlight, and both suit
each other and the heroine" (Hunt 278). In his review of the
poem, Lamb calls it an "almost Chaucer-like painting, with which
this poet illumes every subject he touches. We scarcely have
anything like it in modern description. It brings us back to
ancient days, and 'Beauty making-beautiful old rhymes'" (Lamb
157).

Also attributed to the influence of Chaucer, by at least one critic, is the scene in which Porphyro hides in the closet in order to catch a glimpse of Madeline. In his article, "Keats and Chaucer," F. E. L. Priestley shows how Keats must have taken his subject matter, and even his description of this scene, from Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, trying to prove at the same time that the earlier hypotheses attributing the scene to Boccaccio's Filocolo are improbable:

> MacCracken's early advocacy of the Italian Filocolo is
> obviously impossible, since Keats . . . at the end of
> April [1818] was planning to learn "Greek, and very
> likely Italian," and by the end of September, a year
> later, was not able to manage more than six or eight
> stanzas of Ariosto at a time. . . . As it is, we do
> know that Keats had access to, and had read, Chaucer's
> Troilus; and parallels with it are more significant
> than those with Filocolo. (443)

Priestley goes on to compare the two works and shows how, through style as well as content, Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" does indeed echo Chaucer's Troilus. Henry MacCracken, in his advocacy of Boccaccio's Filocolo as Keats's source for "The Eve of St. Agnes," points out the following: "That [the episode of the concealment and awakening in the Filocolo], one of the few bright spots in a long and dull narrative, was in itself attractive enough to arrest the attention of a narrative poet is evident from Chaucer's use of it in Troilus and Criseyde" (MacCracken

148). Regardless of whose influence is felt most in "The Eve of St. Agnes," the fact remains the influence at least originates from a piece of literature from the Middle Ages; Porphyro's "closet scene" goes from Boccaccio to Chaucer, and then to Keats. The wholly medieval character of "The Eve of St. Agnes" far transcends Keats's earlier writing in this realm, and his love of Chaucer and, presumably, things medieval, at least partially explains the subject matter and tone of more and more of Keats's poems as the years pass.

There are many elements of "The Eve of St. Agnes" that are medievally inspired. The genre, like that of "Isabella," is romance, and the setting and tone are characteristically medieval. The poem, too, is based on the tradition of the superstitions surrounding St. Agnes's eve, which is medieval in theme only partly because it involves the worship of a saint. Religious allusions and imagery color the poem in a significantly medieval manner, and Madeline also is referred to in the religiously connotative language frequently found in the address of a man to his beloved in the courtly love poetry of the Middle Ages. This language is in addition, of course, to the courtly love theme present in the poem, which is represented altogether differently than the same theme in "Isabella." Also as before, the fascination with death so prevalent in writings of the Middle Ages makes its way into Keats's writing, as does the previously mentioned personification of abstractions in the form of psychomachia. In addition, there are numerous details,

including the use of the Spenserian rhyme scheme and allusions to heraldry, iconography, and even medieval food, that make this poem the most obvious attempt at medievalism among Keats's works up to this time.

The traditional medieval romance genre involved the rather loose plot of a man on a quest for one of a number of things: his lady, in a courtly love poem; a religious object, such as the holy grail; or some other object either indicative of his worth as a man or important in that it is something he cannot live without. "The Eve of Saint Agnes" involves the obvious quest of Porphyro for Madeline, his one true love. The lovers are kept apart because of family differences, a kind of Romeo and Juliet-like theme, so the courageous Porphyro is forced to sneak into the castle of Madeline's family in order to see her:

> For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,
>
> Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,
>
> Whose very dogs would execrations howl
>
> Against his lineage. . . . (84-87)

The only person Keats gives the lovers to rely on is the old beldame: "[Y]oung Porphyro . . . learns [of Madeline's] purpose [to see her future husband] from her Duenna, [and] resolves to fulfil the legend in propria persona" (Conder 235). Even as we have seen its employment in "Isabella," the addition of the Duenna in "The Eve of St. Agnes" becomes a significant factor in Keats's romance because of its medieval origins. The Roman de la Rose, a medieval romance that influenced almost all medieval

writing that followed it, includes the narrative device of the
dream vision as well as an elaborate allegory of Love's turmoil,
and includes, also, a form of the Duenna. The name of the
personification for Old Age is La Vieillesse, the French name for
the Spanish-titled Duenna. In both instances, the old woman acts
as an influential keeper and advisor for the younger, more
passionate lady.

Small details, like Keats's inclusion of a Duenna, all add
to the medieval tone and setting of "The Eve of St. Agnes." The
medieval tone is infused into the poem through the use of
extremely subtle language and details. In his 1857 article,
Alexander Smith says,

> ['The Eve of St. Agnes'] is rich in colour as the
>
> stained windows of a Gothic cathedral, and every verse
>
> bursts into picturesque and graceful fantasies; yet all
>
> this abundance is . . . subdued and harmonized in such
>
> wonderful keeping with the story and the medieval
>
> period. . . . (367)

The poem's language is indeed colorful and picturesque, as is
evidenced when Porphyro finally reaches Madeline's room:

> Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
>
> And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,
>
> As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
>
> Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
>
> And on her silver cross soft amethyst. . . . (217-221)

This colorfully medieval verse inspired the Pre-Raphaelites to

render their views of Madeline's castle. In fact, the Pre-Raphaelites, led by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, were initially inspired by Keats to pursue what they considered a "Gothic" quality in their works, both written texts and paintings. The color and the medieval imagery prevalent in the works of these Victorian artists are well known, although the influential part played by Keats in their aesthetic development is less acknowledged. Keats's fame was not well spread until the 1848 biography of him--the first--by Richard Monckton Milnes, which coincided with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's introduction of Keats to his Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Altick 4-5). The Pre-Raphaelite movement, says Altick, "was much indebted to Keats . . . whose poetic subjects [many] borrowed for their canvases. Keats was pre-eminently the painter's poet among the romantics; of them, he had the most pronounced aesthetic, as opposed to philosophical, bent" (290). Altick also acknowledges that of the many revivals during the Victorian period, "by far the most important, and the only one which had a marked effect on literature, was the Gothic or, more generally, the medieval. Here again, the Victorians were the romantic age's heirs" (102). The main reason for the Victorians' fascination with the world of the Middle Ages was the hope that they would find in it a more stable, better atmosphere than they currently felt. This is very likely what Keats felt when he wrote his medievally-inspired poetry. The Middle Ages, they believed, had provided for those who lived then a spiritual life more stable than what their age provided. The language

chosen by Keats in the above passage describing Madeline at prayer is evidence also of his knowledge of another colorful area of medieval life, heraldry. The word "gules" in the line, "And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast," is the heraldic term for red. As Leigh Hunt says in his 1821 review of the poem, "How proper, as well as pretty, the heraldic term gules, considering the occasion. Red would not have been a fiftieth part so good" (278). In addition, the narrator speaks of the "argent revelry" (37), and of Madeline's "azure-lidded sleep" (262). Although he could have made the revelry silver or white and Madeline's eyelids blue, Keats chose to use the specific language of heraldry. He has given even the casement a characteristic of heraldry in describing it as "[a] shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings" (216). And once Porphyro secures Madeline's love, he wonders if he might be "[her] beauty's shield, heart-shaped and vermeil dyed" (336). This language is significantly medieval in that heraldry was an important part of life in the Middle Ages. Initially, the shield was intended to be used for identification of a particular person and his family connections. But because of the common practice during the Middle Ages of attaching deep meaning to everyday objects, the shield came to represent many things. Even the so-called tinctures of the shield were assigned specific names and meanings in order to give depth of meaning to the composition of the shield itself. For example, the color red, "gules," represented the gem ruby and the god Mars, and symbolized valor (Nickel 172-

177). Thus Keats's use of the word "gules" in "The Eve of St.
Agnes" is symbolically loaded, simply because it is a heraldic
term. The fact that Keats chose to use the specific language of
heraldry indicates his intent to enrich the meaning of his poem.

One indication that Keats purposely employed medieval
characteristics in his writings is his inclusion of fairies and
other allusions to a world of fantasy or enchantment, especially
in "The Eve of St. Agnes." Indeed, in her article, "The Trouble
About Merlin: Enchantment in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Karen
Harvey states that "[e]nchantment is a major theme in the
medieval realm of 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' in which Keats portrays
a world of sorcery, charm, and spell" (83). The mere fact that
the setting of the poem is a castle medievalizes it, but,
additionally, the shadows of the castle "[haunt] fairily" (39),
and Madeline is "[h]oodwink'd with faery fancy" (70) in the
beginning of the poem. These allusions to fantasy play a part in
establishing the medieval tone of the poem. As Porphyro
describes to the beldame his plan to sneak into Madeline's room
and hide in the closet so as to watch her and possibly win her
love,

> legion'd fairies [pace] the coverlet,
> And pale enchantment [holds Madeline] sleep-eyed.
> Never on such a night have two lovers met,
> Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.
> (168-171)

Harvey contends that Keats's inclusion of the reference to Merlin

is more than just an attempt to add to the tone of enchantment in the poem: ". . . Keats was generally too careful a craftsman to use such an allusion to no discernible end; indeed, he appears to be deliberately drawing attention to it" (84). On the basis of her careful study of this poem and other of Keats's works, and in addition to the demonic tradition associated with fairies and fays, Harvey suggests that the "monstrous debt" paid by Merlin was "the debt of his entrapment and perpetual imprisonment paid, through the working of one of his own spells, to the demonic fay Vivien as a result of his enthrallment to her" (89). In fact, Harvey asserts that Keats has purposely drawn a parallel between Porphyro and Merlin through the similarities of their respective "entrapments":

> Porphyro has become entrapped, as has Merlin, through his own "strategem." Madeline is obviously a mortal woman, not a fay--although she is surrounded with an aura of enchantment through her adherence to the ritual of the eve which becomes, in a sense, spell-binding. However, Porphyro, through his intense desire and passion for her, has endowed her with fay-like qualities. By his participation in the ritual, through his "stratagem" or his attempt at weaving a spell over her, he has become enchanted by the image or illusion of her he has created. He has finally become "entoil'd in woofed phantasies" (line 288). As Merlin's magic produced an unexpected result harmful to himself, so

has Porphyro's. Both have paid the debt of their

enthrallment, trapped by their fantasies and illusions

--literally in Merlin's case, figuratively in

Porphyro's. (92)

Harvey contends that Merlin and Porphyro's parallel connections

continue through to the end of the poem, where it is unclear

whether or not Porphyro and Madeline actually escape from the

castle or are caught up in the faery storm, never to be seen

again (343). As Porphyro is attempting to wake Madeline, he

says, "'Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm in faery land'" (343), and as

they are leaving the castle, "there [are] sleeping dragons all

around," (353) while "witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm"

invade the dreams of her father's guests (374). Harvey suggests

that these stanzas provide at least a clue, however

insubstantial, to the question of whether or not Madeline and

Porphyro really escape from the castle or whether they are

somehow captured by the fairies and taken to the underworld:

"Keats's allusion to Merlin and the persistent images of fairy-

land surely relate to this question. The allusion and imagery

may simply reflect the [reader's] difficulties in reconciling--

both literally and figuratively--the opposites of fantasy and

reality" (93). Like Merlin, trapped by his love for Vivien,

Porphyro may seem to some readers to be perpetually trapped by

his love for Madeline. Whether Harvey's reasoning is correct or

not, the fact that Keats includes reference to Merlin is

significant for its medieval connections alone; and, if her

suggestions are correct, the parallel connection between Merlin and Porphyro is especially significant. If Keats was indeed attempting to create a story line in which his hero portrays Merlin-like characteristics, and even follows Merlin's lead as far as actions and consequences are concerned, "The Eve of St. Agnes" is another example of Keats's reliance on medieval themes and techniques as a part of his writing. And in this instance, it is especially important that Keats uses the Arthurian legend, a significant part of literature in the Middle Ages. Regardless, the language of the poem is the language of the world of fantasy, and significantly adds to the medieval quality of the tone.

In yet another instance of Keats's medievalism, even the combination of food Porphyro lays out for Madeline while she is sleeping is medieval in its makeup. Porphyro produces a small, wholly medieval spread for Madeline's enjoyment when he leaves the closet during the safety of her slumber. It includes the following:

> . . . 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. (265-270)

In the introduction to her cookbook of medieval recipes, To the King's Taste, Lorna Sass comments on various foods, including fruits, spices, and the like:

> The fruits most frequently mentioned in the recipes are
> warden pears, bullace and damson plums, medlars,
> quinces, blaunderelles, apples, grapes, cherries,
> mulberries, strawberries, and pomegranates. . . .
> [L]arge quantities of dried fruits such as raisins,
> currants. . ., prunes, dates, and figs [were also
> consumed]. (26)

The plums, quinces, apples, and dates mentioned here are
important in that they are a large part of the feast prepared by
Lorenzo for Madeline. In addition, Sass mentions that "most
fruits were cooked in sugary syrups," and confectioned spices
were served with raw fruits in order to aid digestion (26). She
also makes clear that spices, including cinnamon, were very
important to medieval cooking, and no noble household went
without them. Still, "[t]he vast array of spices that grew in
China, Java, and along the Malabar Coast of India" had to be
shipped to England by Venetian merchants who obtained their
supplies from Alexandria, and "[t]he Arabs monopolized the spice
trade" (22), so the spices were expensive and exclusively for
higher-class households. Lorenzo's spread has been "in argosy
transferr'd" from faraway lands ("Fez," "silken Samarcand," and
"cedar'd Lebanon," are characteristic of the kinds of exotic
places from which medieval cooks obtained their spices) and
includes "lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon" (267). Gourd soup
was also a popular dish, and in a sample feast taken from the
menus of King Richard, there is "a dissh of gely" served in the

third course (32). These items correspond with the gourd and jellies in Keats's poem. Taken separately, of course, apples, cinnamon, gourds, jellies, and dates are common enough. But the fact that Keats chose to use these particular foods for Porphyro's preparation of his modest, yet rich, feast for Madeline is significant because, taken in their specific combination, the dishes and the meal are appropriately medieval.

Another significant element of the poem is the personification of abstractions. Although there are fewer instances found in "The Eve of St. Agnes" than are found in "Isabella," the technique of allegory is present. As the monk is walking through the castle from the chapel he hears the music of the St. Agnes' eve party: "Music's golden tongue / Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor" (20-21). The passage is beautiful and striking; the man of religion is deprived by his vocation of the celebrations of society, yet still touched by the "tongue" of Music, which reaches out to him in an almost human-like manner; he has to walk another route to avoid its enticements. Keats employs even the psychomachia in his poem when Porphyro sneaks into the castle to attempt contact with Madeline: "All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords / Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel" (82-83). The passage is a combination of realism and personification, and the image of the soldiers of the castle, representing hate or deprivation, storming the heart to take on Love, the feeling sheltered by Porphyro's heart, demonstrates the effective use of the psychomachia. The use of

psychomachia, a battle between personifications of good and evil, is, as discussed earlier, a significantly medieval device. Employed often by authors in the Middle Ages, who commonly used allegory to layer meaning onto their stories, the psychomachia pushed the allegory to its extreme. The fact that Keats employs this medieval technique, however short the length of the battle, indicates that he had knowledge of it.

Madeline's behavior in the poem is explained by the superstitions surrounding the legend of St. Agnes' Eve. On this day, young virgins hoping to learn the identity of their future husbands "[practice] many kinds of divination. . . . It is called fasting St. Agnes' Fast" (Hazlitt 2). Keats is said to have read about the legend in John Brand's <u>The Popular Antiquities of Great Britain</u> after hearing the reminder about the saint's holiday from his beautiful lady friend Isabella Jones. The story of Saint Agnes was first translated into English from <u>The Golden Legend</u> by William Caxton in 1483. The legend itself was already ancient when it appeared in the context of Brand's <u>Popular Antiquities</u>, a book which records the superstitions and legends the author collected and compiled. Keats incorporates the legend into his poem not only through the title, but also through certain passages in the poem which are indicative of the nature of the activities practiced by the young girls:

> They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
>
> Young virgins might have visions of delight,
>
> And soft adorings from their loves receive

> Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
>
> If ceremonies due they did aright;
>
> 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.
>
> (46-54)

Keats's use of the superstitions of St. Agnes's eve shows that he was familiar with the same types of lore common to literature and the life of the Middle Ages.

Keats makes the tone of his St. Agnes's Eve even more medieval by including the iconography common to medieval literature. The traditional emblem of St. Agnes is the snow-white lamb. After her death, Agnes's family went to her tomb and saw there "a vision of angels, among whom was their daughter, and a lamb standing by her was white as snow" (Hazlitt 2). The etymology for "lamb" in the Oxford English Dictionary includes the fact that the word is used to designate Christianity (the Lamb of God, God's lamb, the Lamb). It also gives the Latin translation for "Holy Lamb"--"Agnus Dei" (599-600). The obvious connection between the words "Agnes" and "Agnus" is clearly seen, and points to at least one reason the lamb is St. Agnes's symbol. This story accounts for the iconographic association of the lamb with St. Agnes, and for Keats's inclusion of allusions to the lamb in his poem. His narrator mentions in the first stanza the "silent . . . flock in woolly fold" (4), and speaks of "St. Agnes

and her lambs unshorn" (71). The iconography is also included as part of Porphyro's inquiry concerning Madeline's whereabouts: "When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously'" (117). According to Brand, "It was customary to offer two lambs in remembrance of the legend at the high altar; these were taken by the priest and kept till shearing time, when their fleeces were used for palls" (Hazlitt 2). This subtle reference to the custom of sacrifice of the lambs is also one of the first of the many religious references Keats weaves throughout "The Eve of Saint Agnes."

"The Eve of Saint Agnes" is filled with religious imagery; in fact, the poem begins and ends with significant religious scenes. As the poem opens, the Beadsman is counting his rosary while his "frosted breath" rises past a picture of the Virgin Mary (5-9). The "patient, holy man" is "meagre, barefoot, [and] wan" (10, 12). "[A]lready [has] his death bell rung; / The joys of all his life [are] said and sung: / His [is] harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve" (22-24). This prelude to the introduction of Madeline casts a definite religious gloom over the poem. Religion, we know, had a primary influence in the life of the Middle Ages, even to the extent that it affected the areas of art and literature. The world of art was set up in a hierarchy: God was considered the first artist, and his creation was the world. The works of nature came second, then the works of man. All works of man were intended, at least ideally, to reflect truth, although it was generally acknowledged that, because man's view

of truth and the world was not perfect or complete, the truth, at
least as depicted through the artists' works, was warped. A
preponderance of medieval art, though, was intended to teach
truth, and it was considered bold, and even risky, to create
anything not meant for teaching religious truth or for glorifying
God. The Middle Ages revolved very much around religion, and,
though Keats could have chosen to leave out any reference to a
Beadsman and his chapel without considerably altering his poem,
he includes them. Significantly enough, he chooses to frame the
poem with these very specific images; and the poem ends with the
following lines: "The Beadsman, after thousand aves told, / For
aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold" (377-378).

The religious imagery goes beyond the references to the
Beadsman. It is scattered throughout the poem, most often in
reference to Madeline. It was a common practice to use
religiously connotative language in the courtly love poetry of
the Middle Ages. This technique involved mixing religious and
secular imagery for the purpose of providing different layers of
meaning. Medieval works of art were supposed to be created in
God's honor, or for the purpose of teaching something significant
about religion. The language of the many medieval lyrics was
often varied and vague, however, with interpretation left up to
the reader. Jesus was often referred to in the lyrics as
"lemman," the literal translation of which is "lover," or
"sweetheart." This secular reference to a holy being is an
example of the mixing of secular and religious language that was

common to the Middle Ages. So too, religious imagery was used in reference to a woman, as in the following excerpt of a medieval lyric, "Love for a Beautiful Lady":

> With lossom eye grete and gode,
>
> With browen blisful under hode--
>
> He that resteth him on the Rode
>
> That leflich lif honoure! (17-20)

The language shows the artist's wish that his lovely lady be honored by Christ, a wish which, instead of being considered sacrilegious, seems to have been thought of as an appropriate way for the artist to voice the fact that his love had extremely commendable virtues. However, in his article, "Adam's Dream and Madeline's," A. D. Nuttall states, "As love is exalted through the language of religion the danger of blasphemous parody or even idolatry is increased. That is why the medieval writers again and again conclude their poems and treatises with pious recantations" (135). So, in addition to the treatment of the lady as one with many virtues, the medieval artist must have always tried to remember the primary purpose of art at that time--to teach about and to honor the Lord. The direction of influence is uncertain; however, C. S. Lewis, suggests the following:

> There is no evidence that the quasi-religious tone of
>
> medieval love poetry has been transferred from the
>
> worship of the Blessed Virgin: it is just as likely--
>
> it is even more likely--that the colouring of certain

hymns to the Virgin has been borrowed from the love

poetry. (8)

Lewis agrees with Nuttall, though, on the count that courtly love

poetry--or the "love religion," as he names it--often begins as

almost a parody of the "real religion" (20). Consequently, Lewis

also warns the reader of medieval poetry that he "must be

prepared for a certain ambiguity in all those poems where the

attitude of the lover to his lady or to love looks at first sight

most like the attitude of the worshipper to the Blessed Virgin or

to God" (21). Whatever the reason for or origin of the mix of

secular and religious language and imagery in the poetry of the

Middle Ages, it was a common occurrence.

Especially important to this study is the observation that

most of the religious references in "The Eve of St. Agnes" are

found in the passages most resembling courtly love poetry. One

of the early, unsigned reviews of the poem said, "A soft

religious light is shed over the whole story" ("Unsigned" 218).

This "soft light," in contrast to the gloomy religious frame of

the poem, is due for the most part to the treatment of Madeline

as seen through the eyes of Porphyro. As he is watching Madeline

say her prayers before going to sleep, the language used to

describe what Porphyro sees connects her with religious images as

"glory" falls on her hair

like a saint:

She seem[s] a splendid angel, newly drest,

Save wings, for heaven:--Porphyro grew faint:

She [kneels], so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

(222-225)

Later, as he is trying to awaken her without causing any
distress, Porphyro alludes to the hermits of the Middle Ages, a
very medieval image, as he says, "Thou art my heaven, and I thine
eremite" (277). And, as the two are preparing to flee from the
castle, he speaks of Madeline as a "silver shrine [where he] will
take [his] rest / After so many hours of toil and quest, / A
famish'd pilgrim,--saved by miracle" (335-339). This language is
pointedly religious, connotative as it is of the medieval
fascination with relics and pilgrimages, yet addressed to and
about a lover in the manner of a courtly love poem. Keats uses
this literary technique, a highly medieval one, in the very way
that the medieval poets used it.

Beyond the religiously connotative language used to describe
Madeline, there is additional evidence of the use of the courtly
love tradition in "The Eve of Saint Agnes." That Porphyro loves
a woman he is not supposed to have, or, at least, cannot have in
good conscience because of their families' problems, makes his
relationship with Madeline the illicit love affair some believe
to be common to the courtly love theme. Madeline's lover has
come to see her from across the moors, and the stanza describing
his feelings characterizes them as those often portrayed in the
language of courtly love:

Young Porphyro [arrives], with heart on fire

For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,

> Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he, and implores
>
> All saints to give him sight of Madeline,
>
> But for one moment in the tedious hours,
>
> That he might gaze and worship all unseen
>
> Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss--in sooth such things
>
> have been.   (75-81)

Porphyro is waiting for just one chance to make contact with Madeline--any kind of contact will do; he is desperate for her love, a common malady of the courtly lover. Also, when he is watching Madeline pray, Porphyro "[grows] faint," a condition most often seen in the courtly lover. All in all, "The Eve of St. Agnes" is not only a romance, but a tale of courtly love; both characteristics make it a significantly medieval piece.

Also present in the poem is the fascination with death so prevalent in writings of the Middle Ages. The references to death and decay are fewer in "The Eve of St. Agnes" than they are in "Isabella," but they serve to be significant nevertheless, especially in combination with the other medieval elements in the poem. Keats makes even the objects around the castle representative of death:

> The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
>
> Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:
>
> Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,
>
> [The Beadsman] passeth by, and his weak spirit fails
>
> To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.   (14-
>
> 19)

The statues in the chapel are not just sculptures: they are seen through the eyes of at least one character--the Beadsman--as figures of death. And even his own death is hinted at through the stanzas following the Beadsman's actions. He is described in the beginning of the poem as a weak, old man, and by the end, he is sleeping among his ashes after saying his prayers all night. The pair of lovers leave the castle gliding "like phantoms, into the wide hall" (361-362), and the Baron's party guests dream "of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm, / [and are] long be-nightmar'd" (374-375). Finally, Angela, the old beldame dies "palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform" (375-376). Keats's reference to Angela's death is the most significant of those alluding to death and decay because in the original draft of the poem he did not include it. One of Keats's friends, Richard Woodhouse, expressed his dismay at the changes Keats made to the initial draft of "The Eve of St. Agnes." In a letter to John Taylor, another friend of Keats, Woodhouse said the following:

> He has made trifling alterations [to "The Eve of St.
> Agnes"]. . . . [He] has altered the last three lines
> to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust, by
> bringing Old Angela in (only) dead stiff and ugly. He
> says he likes that the poem should leave off with this
> change of Sentiment--it was what he aimed at, and was
> glad to find from my objections to it that he had
> succeeded. (150)

In this instance, Keats revises his own poem to make more

explicit the death and decay and, by his own admission, to leave his readers with a certain feeling at the end of the poem. This addition of grotesque, death-like images adds a decidedly medieval touch to the poem and combines with the rest of the seemingly small details to give "The Eve of St. Agnes" very much the feeling of a medieval work.

Moreover, Keats writes "The Eve of St. Agnes" in the Spenserian stanza form, a form developed by Edmund Spenser for use in the Faerie Queene, which uses medieval subject matter. The formal aspects of the stanza are by now familiar: it has nine lines each, the first eight lines of which are iambic pentameter and the ninth an iambic hexameter. The rhyme pattern is ababbcbcc. Spenser was an acknowledged admirer and imitator of medieval literature, especially that of Chaucer. Keats, in turn, almost worshipped Spenser, having been first introduced to his writing by Cowden Clarke, son of John Clarke, Headmaster at the school in Enfield where the Keats brothers attended grade school. The younger Clarke kept Keats supplied with reading materials when Keats left the school at the age of sixteen to become an apothecary's apprentice. When the young Keats was on a visit to see Clarke in Enfield, Clarke loaned him the first volume of the Faerie Queene. "Keats's reaction," says biographer Walter Jackson Bate, "has passed into legend" (33). Clarke told the story of the speed with which Keats devoured the first volume, and another friend, Charles Brown, says this about Keats's encounter with the poem:

It was the "Faery Queen" that awakened his genius. In
Spenser's fairy land he was enchanted, breathed in a
new world, and became another being; till, enamoured of
the stanza, he attempted to imitate it, and succeeded.
This account of the sudden development of his poetic
powers I received from his brothers, and afterwards
from himself. (Qtd. in Bate 33)

Spenser's influence on Keats is, indeed, well known. Keats ended
up not only imitating the stanza form, but also adopting some of
the medieval themes and characteristics in Spenser's writing.

"The Eve of St. Agnes" is a piece of literature clearly set
in the Middle Ages. It takes many of it literary characteristics
from authors of the medieval period, including Chaucer and
Boccaccio. The use of the romance genre and the poem's subject
matter, inspired by the legend of St. Agnes' eve, have obvious
medieval roots. Also, the inclusion of the courtly love theme,
the setting, the tone, and the many medieval details of the poem
establishes a clear connection with the literature of the Middle
Ages. Additionally indicative of Keats's intent to write a piece
of medievally based verse are his use of religiously connotative
language in reference to Madeline and his brief but clearly
intended concentration on death and decay. Even the form he
chooses for the poem is connected to the Middle Ages through
Edmund Spenser's love of Chaucer and medievalism. The
medievalism of "Isabella" is surpassed by the evidence of the
characteristics of the literature of the Middle Ages in "The Eve

of St. Agnes." The combination and abundance of these elements, found in none of his other poetry up to September 1818, the time during which Keats revised the poem, makes "The Eve of St. Agnes" Keats's most important medievally-themed work yet.

1. Keats's letters are quoted from Elizabeth Cook's anthology.

Chapter Four

"The Eve of St. Mark"

Immediately after finishing "The Eve of St. Agnes," Keats attempted to base another work on a popular superstition--the fragmentary poem "The Eve of St. Mark." Written between February 13 and 17, 1819, and then revised in September of the same year, "St. Mark" has been praised by some critics and readers, most notably the Pre-Raphaelites, as Keats's most perfect poem. In her 1925 biography of Keats, Amy Lowell says the following about the poem:

> St. Mark ranks so high among Keats's works as to be the
> equal of any, be the other what it may. . . . [T]he
> poem exhibits all of Keats's virtues and practically
> none of his faults. Not a tract of his youthful
> sentimentality disfigures it. Story, atmosphere,
> colour, line, imagination, human interest, we have all
> these elements at their best in the hundred and
> nineteen lines of this fragment. It is as nearly
> perfect of its kind as a poem can be. (326)

Another early critic, Francis Jeffrey, claims that, had it ever been completed, "The Eve of St. Mark" would have surpassed even "The Eve of St. Agnes" in quality (209).

Similarly, the Pre-Raphaelites, led by Dante Gabriel

Rossetti, greatly admired the poem. Rossetti, in fact, singled out "The Eve of St. Mark" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as his two favorite Keats poems (Ford 121). In his book <u>Keats and the Victorians</u>, George Ford asks, "[W]hat is the fragmentary <u>Eve of St. Mark</u> if not pure word-painting? . . . As one writer states, 'If Spenser is often referred to as the "poet's poet" it seems that Keats might with good reason be described as the painter's poet'" (36). And one of the qualities the Pre-Raphaelites valued so much in Keats's poetry was the color and rich imagery so commonly used in medieval writings. Similarly, in his biography of Keats, Walter Jackson Bate writes about how "St. Mark" anticipated and "delighted" the Pre-Raphaelites: "[T]he finest prototype of their own ideals of poetic style, chaste, fresh, simple, it had an April-like cleanliness that reminded them of late medieval painting and tapestry and Chaucer's octosyllabic couplets" (Bate 455). And Claude Finney, in his two-volume work, <u>The Evolution of Keats's Poetry</u>, discusses the qualities the Pre-Raphaelites ultimately take for imitation from Keats's metrical romances, that is, works like "St. Mark": "the simple story, the intense passion, the concise and concrete imagery, and the bright color" (571). The Pre-Raphaelite artists, both poets and painters, did, as discussed previously, take the medieval qualities from Keats's poetry and expand on them in their own works. "The Eve of St. Mark," as it turns out, was one of the most influential of Keats's poems in terms of inspiring the "Gothic" quality in these Victorian poets' own works.

Of the poem Keats himself says the following in a letter to
his brother George, dated February 14, 1819: "[I]f I should've
finished it, [I will send] a little thing called the eve of St.
Mark. You see what fine Mother Radcliffe names I have--it is not
my fault--I do not search for them" (452). While Keats says
little more about his poem, through close study of the
characteristics of "The Eve of St. Mark" one can find still more
of the elements of medieval literature we have noted in Keats's
work. As the Pre-Raphaelites liked to point out, the atmosphere
of "St. Mark" is definitely medieval, predominately because of
the medieval details with which Keats infuses the poem. Further,
the contrasts present in the poem are those between the life of
Keats's modern day and the life of the Middle Ages. Keats's use
of Middle English in the last lines of the poem, and then in the
sixteen lines he composed on the back of a copy of the poem,
possibly with the intention of inserting them into "St. Mark,"
are obvious mimicry of linguistic characteristics of Middle
English literature. The poem significantly takes the form of the
Chaucerian octosyllabic couplet.

As it stands, "The Eve of St. Mark" offers barely more than
the beginning of a story. The poem describes a quiet town on a
Sunday where "[t]he silent streets were crowded well / With staid
and pious companies / Warm from their fireside orat'ries / And
moving with demurest air / To even song and vesper prayer" (14-
18). In contrast to the crowds of people occupying the streets,
a young woman, Bertha, sits alone in her room reading from "[a]

curious volume patch'd and torn," which has occupied her day thus far, and she is still "not yet half done" (25, 24). Bertha, a "maiden fair" (39), is sitting by the fireside reading.[1] Once in a while she looks out into the old Minster Square as she stays near the window pane to have light on her book. Finally, she is forced by the dusk to light a lamp. In the silence that surrounds Bertha, she continues to read; the narrator describes the room she sits in:

> Her shadow in uneasy guize
>
> Hover'd about a giant size
>
> On ceiling beam and old oak chair,
>
> The Parrot's cage and pannel square
>
> And the warm angled winter screen
>
> On which were many monsters seen
>
> Call'd Doves of Siam, Lima Mice
>
> And legless birds of Paradise,
>
> Macaw and tender av'davat
>
> And silken furr'd angora cat--   (73-82)

Bertha's shadow "[g]lower'd about" (84) and the other shadows in the room "mock behind her back" (87). The maiden continues to read about the legend "[o]f holy Mark from youth to age / On Land, on Seas, in pagan-chains, / Rejoicing for his many pains--" (90-92). The volume from which Bertha reads, we are told, includes sixteen lines of Middle English "[w]ritten in smallest crowquill size / Beneath the text" (96). The poem then cites those sixteen lines and closes with the following:

> At length her constant eyelids come
>
> Upon the fervent Martyrdom;
>
> Then lastly to his holy shrine
>
> Exalt amid the tapers' shine
>
> At Venice--   (115-119)

"The Eve of St. Mark" ends at this point, and although the fragment has little plot as Keats leaves it, there has been much discussion concerning the intentions Keats had for the content of his poem.

The circumstances surrounding the writing of "The Eve of St. Mark" are described by many, including Rossetti and Finney, as the following: in February 1819, Keats was physically unwell, and his spirit was dampened by the fact that his true love, Fanny Brawne, was attending balls and, consequently, meeting and dancing with a variety of men, while he was ill. Both Rossetti and Finney, among others, contend that Keats's jealousy was the reason for the writing of the poem. The support for this contention comes from Rossetti's discovery of one of Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne, in which he says, "I could write a Poem which I have in my head, which would be a consolation for people in such a situation as mine. I would show some one in Love as I am with a person living in such Liberty as you do" (qtd. in Houghton 65). Even though there was nothing in the letter to Fanny indicating which poem Keats speaks of, Rossetti assumes the passage refers to "The Eve of St. Mark." Rossetti took this passage, together with Keats's knowledge of the superstitions of

St. Mark's eve, to offer what he felt must be Keats's intention

for the plot of "St. Mark" once the poem was complete.

Rossetti's argument is based largely on the ensuing speculation.

First, according to Rossetti's reading of Brand's collection of

"antiquities," as well as according to most interpretations of

the medieval superstition, the following occurs on the night of

April 24, St. Mark's eve:

> It was believed that if a person, on St. Mark's Eve,
>
> placed himself near the church-porch when twilight was
>
> thickening, he would behold the apparition of those
>
> persons in the parish who were to be seized with any
>
> severe disease that year, go into the church. If they
>
> remained there it signified their death; if they came
>
> out again it portended their recovery. (Rossetti qtd.
>
> in Houghton 65)

Rossetti notes that Keats must have known about the superstition

because of the sixteen Middle English lines mentioned earlier,

not those in the poem, but those appended to the poem and

describing the legend. And second, although these lines were

never actually written into the poem, Rossetti assumed they were

related and speculated that "'[b]y the light of the extract . . .

I judge that the heroine [of "The Eve of St. Mark"]--remorseful

after trifling with a sick and now absent lover--might make her

way to the minster-porch to learn his fate by the spell, and

perhaps see his figure enter but not return'" (qtd. in Houghton

65-66). And so Rossetti's conjecture about Keats's intentions

regarding the completion of the poem was born. Houghton, on the other hand, argues that the poem, which may have been originally intended to concern itself with the superstition surrounding the date--as "The Eve of St. Agnes" had--turned into a poem about the legend of St. Mark's life: "[Bertha] is fascinated by a legend, but it is not the legend of St. Mark's Eve; it is the legend 'Of Sainte Markis life and dethe'" (Houghton 66).

The existing evidence weighs heavily on the side of Houghton. There is no definite evidence for the assumption that Keats intended to include in "The Eve of St. Mark" the sixteen lines composed in Middle English concerning the superstitions of St. Mark's eve. Some scholars, however, have actually printed versions of "St. Mark" with these lines inserted between lines 98 and 99 of the original version, a positioning which puts the lines describing the legend before the sixteen lines of Middle English already in the poem. Houghton strongly argues that these lines should not be inserted. He feels an editor takes too great a liberty to insert the lines when even Keats himself had not chosen to do so. Houghton concedes only the following:

> All that the evidence warrants, I think, is that Keats knew the legend and probably intended to work it into the poem; and--though this is more doubtful--that at one time he considered inserting the sixteen lines describing it after line 98, to be followed by lines 99-114, but thought better of it . . . and reserved the lines for possible insertion later on. (67-68)

Houghton's opinion is that Keats eventually came to consider the
superstition for use in the poem, as he had the St. Agnes eve
superstition for "St. Agnes," but that this use was not his
original intention. Consequently, Houghton chooses to analyze
the poem in what he calls "its 'wholeness,'" that is, the version
without the interpolated Middle English lines, which he
interprets to be Keats's intention for the poem (70).

Even without the medieval superstition of the eve of St.
Mark, the poem stands as one clearly influenced by the Middle
Ages, and in fact, it seems almost to be the poem of Keats's most
imbued with characteristics of the Middle Ages. More important
to the poem than the superstition of St. Mark's eve are the
illustrations of St. Mark's life, which hold the poem together:

> The important thing to grasp is not merely that the
> theme of sainthood and martyrdom runs right through the
> poem, reaching its high point in the final lines, but
> also that Bertha's reaction is almost ecstatic.
> (Houghton 74-75)

The martyrdom of St. Mark was a particularly gory one--one that
perfectly fit the late Middle Ages' fascination with death and
decay. According to The Golden Legend, "[W]hen S. Mark sang
mass, they assembled all and put a cord about his neck, and
after, drew him throughout the city. . . . And the blood ran
upon the stones, and his flesh was torn piecemeal [so] that it
lay upon the pavement all bebled" (qtd. in Houghton 74). The

medieval gloom cast over parts of the poem is intensified by the
fact that Bertha reacts the way she does to the horrible details
of St. Mark's life and death as they are related in the "curious
volume" (25).

The atmosphere of "The Eve of St. Mark" is filled with
subtle medieval imagery and objects that make themselves apparent
only through careful scrutiny. Rossetti, in a letter to H. B.
Forman, wrote that "<u>The Eve of St. Mark</u> is perhaps, with <u>La Belle</u>
<u>Dame sans Merci</u>, the chastest and choicest example of [Keats's]
maturing manner and shows astonishingly real mediaevalism for one
not bred as an artist" (qtd. in Finney 567). Claude Finney,
among others, notes that, by means of "a few deft touches," Keats
puts medievalism into the modern, small-town setting of the poem
(568). Finney believes that the setting comes from Keats's visit
to Canterbury in May of 1817. The "orat'ries," "evensong," (16)
and "vesper prayer" (18) of the first stanza, says Finney,
transform Keats's impression of Canterbury into "the mediaeval
and Catholic atmosphere of the Canterbury of the fourteenth or
the fifteenth century" (569). Additionally, the "golden
broideries" of the book Bertha is reading bring to mind the
illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages: "The volume is
brilliant with medieval illumination of 'a thousand things' far-
away and mysterious--saints and martyrs, the breastplate of
Moses, a winged lion, and so on" (Houghton 71). Jack Stillinger
notes that the medieval objects mentioned in Bertha's book "are
increasingly reminiscent of the relics carried by Chaucer's

Pardoner" (195).

Throughout more than a year-long period of Keats's life during 1818 and 1819, he wrote poems representing the colorful side of medieval life and literature. The depiction of saints' lives and legends, the stained glass, the heraldic colors, and the illuminated manuscripts, as well as many other medieval details present in Keats's poetry from February 1818 through April 1819, are representative of the familiarity Keats had with characteristics of the Middle Ages and of the influence the period had on him.

The content of the poem is a good example of the ubi sunt topos, a theme, as we have seen, commonly found in the poetry of the Middle Ages. In "The Eve of St. Mark," Keats uses contrast to build his story. There are two settings in the poem, as is apparent from the first two stanzas. Outside Bertha's window, there is the modern-day world of Keats's nineteenth century. But inside, Bertha, dressed in black and white, the distinction between which reflects contrasts between her world and the modern world, is looking out on the crowds of people, reading her book, and content to dwell in the world of the Middle Ages. Keats brings the two worlds together, though, in the lines "[a]ll was silent, all was gloom, / Abroad and in the homely room" (67-68): "This is the juxtaposition, so dear to the romantics, of the near and familiar, the conventional and commonplace, with the strange, curious, and far-off, the visionary and the exotic" (Houghton 71). Bertha's reading about the life and death of St. Mark is

the vehicle through which Keats brings color and excitement into the poem. Once again, as in the other medievally inspired poetry of Keats, there is the feeling that he found the Middle Ages to be a time preferable to his own. Houghton notes that the only things in the poem that are not modern-day objects are the book Bertha reads and the oriental screen in the background (71). Keats insinuates into the poem the medieval details and imagery discussed earlier and "all have a brilliance and warmth, and a touch of unreal exaggeration, in comparison with which the quieter, cooler hues of green valleys and chill faint sunset outside, and within, the gloomy chamber . . . and Bertha's black dress, suggest the known and familiar life of a nineteenth-century town" (71).

Another aspect adding to the medievalism of the poem is the passage written in Middle English. The fact that Keats uses Middle English in this poem, and, as we have seen, elsewhere in his poetry, is in itself significant. But the Middle English passage in "The Eve of St. Mark" is especially important when one considers the specific language of the lines. I include them here in their entirety because they are indeed so distinctive:

--'Als writith he of swevenis

Men han beforne they wake in bliss,

Whanne thate hir friendes thinke hem bound

In crimpid shroude farre under grounde;

And how a litling child mote be

A sainte er its nativitie;

Gif that the modre (god her blesse)

Kepen in solitarinesse,

And kissen devoute the holy croce.

Of Goddis love and Sathan's force

He writith; and thinges many mo:

Of swiche thinges I may not shew;

Bot I must tellen verilie

Somdel of Sainte Cicilie;

And chieflie whate he auctorethe

Of Sainte Markis life and dethe.' (99-114)

The passage is unquestionably Middle English in form, and the
lines bear a very close resemblance to the language of Chaucer.
In fact, F. E. L. Priestley's close study of the Middle English
lines in "The Eve of St. Mark" prove that Keats was greatly
influenced by Chaucer. Note that Priestley is one of the critics
who believe the sixteen superstition lines belong with the poem:

> The whole passage, including the sixteen lines recently
> found, contains thirty-two lines, and in these thirty-
> two lines only ten non-Chaucerian words are used. What
> is perhaps more interesting still is that many of the
> forms occur predominantly or solely in Chaucer's short-
> couplet poems. . . . While Keats confuses the singular
> and plural of the second person pronoun, he uses the
> third person plural in correct Chaucerian
> fashion. . . . (446)

Keats's comments on his use of Middle English in "St. Mark"

appear in a letter to his brother George, dated September 20,
1819: "What follows is an imitation of the Authors in Chaucer's
time--'tis more ancient than Chaucer himself and perhaps between
him and Gower" (509). As Priestley demonstrates, however,
Keats's pseudo-Middle English is much closer to Chaucer's writing
than to that of any other medieval author. Regardless of who
provided the influence for Keats's Middle English, his interest
in it is proven by the existing passage in "The Eve of St. Mark"
and by the related passage.

Also indicative of Chaucer's influence is the manner in
which Keats writes the poem. Both Finney and Priestley note that
the fragment is written in the same octosyllabic couplet form
most characteristic of Chaucer's own poetry. Finney says that
"Keats's knowledge of the mediaeval metrical romance was not very
extensive. His negatively capable imagination required very
little knowledge, however, to reproduce the cultural atmosphere
of a past age in vivid, authentic form" (546). Finney goes on to
note the many medieval metrical romances Keats was familiar with,
including Chaucer's Knight's Tale and Malory's Morte d'Arthur,
and, of course, Spenser's Faerie Queene. Priestley, however,
draws specific attention to the fact that in "The Eve of St.
Mark," Keats "is attempting a further Chaucerian experiment.
This time he is abandoning the stanzaic narrative form for the
Chaucerian short couplet" (445). Priestley assumes Keats finally
learned what Chaucer had known--that the short couplet form
provided to the poet the freedom of developing a narrative that

would carry the reader along (445). Whatever his reasons for choosing the Chaucerian couplet form to write "The Eve of St. Mark," Keats's use of it is yet another indication that the literature of the Middle Ages had a special influence on him.

Through the use of a variety of elements, Keats created, then, yet another poem with a medieval theme--"The Eve of St. Mark." His work with the life and death of a saint makes the poem one with possible medieval intentions clear from the start. Also included in the verse is the unmistakable use of medieval color and imagery, which work together to provide a setting and atmosphere reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Keats's use of contrast and the ubi sunt topos in "St. Mark" also add to the feeling that he, as well as his heroine, was looking to times past for a better life. The use of Middle English language and the Chaucerian couplet form make clear that this poem, like "Isabella" and "The Eve of St. Agnes," is meant to be one that takes the literature of the Middle Ages as its model.

1. The character of Bertha is the one that Keats himself satirizes in his later poem, "The Cap and the Bells; Or, The Jealousies."

Chapter Five

"La belle dame sans merci"

The last of Keats's medievally themed works of note is the
short ballad "La belle dame sans merci." The poem was written
into a journal letter to Keats's brother George dated April 21,
1819.[1] Apparently the work of one afternoon or evening, "La
Belle Dame sans Merci" seems to have come to Keats in a burst of
creativity and was apparently inspired by a number of different
sources. The critics have given much praise to the poem, printed
in two different versions. An early review by Coventry Patmore
ranks "La belle dame" as "among the most mark-worthy of the
productions of Keats; besides being good and original in metre,
it is simple, passionate, sensuous, and, above all, truly
musical" (338). Albert Guerard notes the ballad especially for
its beauty and medievally inspired atmosphere:

> Art for art's sake, as a creative impulse, not as a
> doctrine, had no more perfect exponent [than Keats].
> Not once, but at least half a dozen times, he gave us a
> vision of unsurpassable beauty. And his greatest poems
> are wholly free from partisan blight. La Belle Dame
> sans Merci is the very essence of Romantic
> mediaevalism, but without a hint of Tory
> sentimentality. (Qtd. in Ford 63)

Ford also notes, in his book <u>Keats and the Victorians</u>, that "La belle dame" is "Keats's other strictly mediaeval poem," "The Eve of St. Agnes" being the other (133). Along the same lines, Janice Sinson, in her short work <u>John Keats and The Anatomy of Melancholy</u>, calls "La belle dame sans merci" "a near perfect creation of romantic phantasy, [and notes that] it conjures up images of another era. . ." (17).

The fact that Keats was indeed using some of the same images and techniques of the poetry of the Middle Ages that he had used in "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and "The Eve of St. Mark," is clear to most students of Keats. With "La belle dame sans merci," though, Keats uses these elements for the last significant time. Keats's "old love," says Amy Lowell, is "the age of chivalry" (226). Accordingly, she claims that even though "La Belle Dame" should be considered an "experimental poem" because of the "new modes and methods" Keats was trying out, he still drew upon the Middle Ages for many of the images and details of his poem (226). Even though he uses some of the elements of medieval literature once again, Keats's use of these elements in "La belle dame" is markedly different from his use of them in his earlier medievally themed poems. Keats builds the content of "La belle dame" from a number of sources, most notably those that either originate in the Middle Ages or are deeply influenced by the era. The two versions of the ballad are also significant in their differences; most critics claim that the version originally printed in Leigh Hunt's <u>Indicator</u> is an

inferior poem because of the prepublication influence Hunt must
have had on Keats's revisions during his illness. The first
version, appearing in the letter to his brother, which most
critics deem the better of the two, is also the more medieval in
the areas of character, theme, and atmosphere. The chivalric
traditions of courtly love play a part in "La belle dame," as
does the imagery of death common to literature of the late Middle
Ages particularly. And, as previously noted, the poem is written
as a ballad, a stanza form new to Keats but widely practiced in
the early days of English literature.

Critics have found many varied sources that resemble the
elements of Keats's "Belle dame." Most believe Alain Chartier's
French ballad, "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy," written in 1424, to
have provided at least the idea for the poem. Keats, however, is
likely to have thought Chaucer the author of the version he knew.
Significantly enough, the poem was once attributed to Chaucer and
was even included in an edition of Chaucer's works--the 1782
London edition (Cook 601n273). According to a note from Leigh
Hunt in the Indicator, Keats read this poem, supposedly written
by Chaucer, in an English version written in rhyme royal
(601n273). Eleanor Hammond's book, Chaucer: A Bibliographical
Manual, confirms that "La belle dame," was attributed to Chaucer
in John Bell's 1782 Edinburgh edition,"The Poets of Great Britain
Complete from Chaucer to Churchill, vols. 1 to 14" (132). This
edition was in fact, the same edition in Keats's library (Rollins
254). Chaucer's writings, we have seen, have a marked influence

on Keats's poetry.   Claude Finney gives a rough summary of

Chartier's medieval ballad:

> Chartier feigned that he rode into the country at an
>
> easy pace to muse over the death of his mistress, that
>
> he met a group of friends who tried to divert him from
>
> his grief, and that he overheard a dialogue between an
>
> amorous gentleman and a gentlewoman without mercy.
>
> (595)

Finney, in agreement with most other critics, including Amy

Lowell and Sidney Colvin, goes on to say that Keats takes nothing

from Chartier's "medieval erotic dialogue" except, maybe, the

"pacing steed" and, of course, the title (595).   In fact, Sidney

Colvin, who has nothing but praise for Keats's "La belle dame,"

goes as far as to describe Chartier's "Belle dame" as "a cold

allegoric dialogue" (qtd. in Lowell 220).

Walter Jackson Bate, in agreement with such critics as

Lowell and Finney, says the "principal source is Spenser: the

seduction of the Red Cross Knight by Duessa in the Faerie Queene

and Arthur's vision (I.ii and I.ix), combined with details from

the story of Cymochles and Phaedria (ii.vi) and that of the false

Florimel (III-IV)" (478).   Finney notes the major similarities

between Spenser's Cymochles, "a knight of fierce and fickle

passion," and Keats's knight, as well as the similarities between

"Phaedra [sic], a wicked faery who enchanted [Cymochles] with

sensual pleasures" and Keats's belle dame (595).   The characters

of the ballad are inspired to a certain degree by Spenser's

characters in the <u>Faerie Queene</u>. The settings of the two works

offer another similarity. Finney discusses the manner in which

Keats retains the lake setting of Spenser's story and points out

that Keats includes the chivalric detail of the "pacing steed"

(21). In Spenser's story, though, Phaedria is on a "gondelay."

Additionally, unlike Phaedria, Keats's belle dame is a faery with

"supernatural powers" and "unsurpassed beauty" (Finney 596).

Another possible source, suggested by both Bate and Sinson,

is Robert Burton's <u>Anatomy of Melancholy</u>. Sinson claims Keats's

source for "La belle dame" "comes straight from" a section in the

<u>Anatomy</u> in which Burton describes the symptoms of those suffering

from melancholy (18).[2] Another possible source mentioned by

Claude Finney is Shakespeare. Amy Lowell finds the atmosphere

and coloring of the poem in the even earlier <u>Palmerin of</u>

<u>England</u>.[3] The widely divergent sources all have one thing in

common--their ties to medieval English literature. Each, with

the exception of Shakespeare, was either written during the

Middle Ages or written to imitate the elements of the literature

of that time.

The revision of "La belle dame sans merci" occurred around

the time of its publication, May 10, 1820, in Leigh Hunt's

<u>Indicator</u>. Amy Lowell seems to voice the opinion of many critics

when she says, "There is no doubt that the best version is the

one sent in the letter to George. . . . It is a thousand pities

that the <u>Indicator</u> version was ever resurrected; it ruins a

perfect work of art" (228). The changes Keats made to the poem

tend to take out some of the details and images most indicative
of the influence of the medieval period.

The early version's "knight at arms" is changed to a
"wretched wight" in the Indicator version, obviously changing the
identification of the character at the outset (1). In the early
draft, stanzas five through seven indicate a definite chivalric
influence. The knight "made a garland for her head, / And
bracelets too, and fragrant zone"; then the belle dame "look'd at
[him] as she did love; / And made sweet moan"; and, finally, the
knight "set her on [his] pacing steed / And nothing else saw all
day long" (17-22). The order of the stanzas shows that the
knight first gives the lady gifts, then the belle dame shows she
is enamoured of him, and then he puts her on his steed. He does
not leave with the belle dame before she has fallen in love with
him. In her article "Poetics and the Politics of Reception:
Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci,'" Theresa Kelley explains,

> In the early draft the 'pacing steed,' which waits none
> too patiently for his owner to cease dallying,
> signifies the knight's chivalric identity. Thus by
> putting the belle dame on the horse after she loves
> him, he implies that her enthrallment has led him to
> abandon chivalric responsibilities. (337)

There are similar differences in the belle dame's actions. The
early draft has the belle dame weeping and sighing "full sore"
(30), true indications of courtly love. The Indicator version,
on the other hand, pictures the belle dame gazing at the wight

and sighing deeply, thus showing an emotion not quite as dramatic as courtly lovers usually seem to experience, and as the belle dame and the knight appear to experience in the early draft of the poem. Kelley also points out that the character of the belle dame in the early version is an alien, supernatural one, who, because of this identity, is set apart from the knight and from the kings, princes, and warriors in the eyes of the narrator (337). She is, says Kelley, "an object of worship whose supernatural power over them . . . inspires dread and fascination" (337). The belle dame in the early version of the poem differs significantly from the belle dame of the revised poem. She is foreign and unfamiliar and holds an uncertain but tangible power over the knight and the reader.

Theresa Kelley believes the revisions of the original version make the belle dame more human and vulnerable to sadness and cause the knight, or wight, to be more masculine, "[kissing] her to sleep" and falling asleep with her, as opposed to the belle dame's lulling the knight to sleep in the early version (32-33). In the Indicator version of Keats's "Belle dame," stanzas five through seven of the original version are reordered. First, the wight "set her on [his] pacing steed"; then he made a garland for her head; and finally, she gave him "roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna dew; / And sure in language strange she said, / I love thee true" (17-28). Theresa Kelley says the following about this ordering:

This new sequence presents a different view of the

protagonist's role in his own enthrallment. Rather

than simply succumbing to the belle dame, he now seems

to invite her to enthrall him. Keats's reversal of

these stanzas also changes the figurative significance

of the steed. Now the sexual implications of a horse

and female rider overtake the chivalric emphasis of the

earlier version. (337)

Additionally, the Indicator belle dame, is different, as is

demonstrated by the way the wight reacts to her. The wight seems

to be playing up his charms in this version. He "shut her wild

sad eyes-- / So kiss'd to sleep. / And there [they] slumber'd on

the moss" (30-33). These actions, in which the wight takes the

lead, are in contrast to the earlier version, where the knight is

almost overcome by the belle dame--the belle dame lulls him to

sleep. In the Indicator version, she is no longer alien and

bewitching, but plays a more sympathetic role and becomes a much

less powerful figure in turn. Possibly because of the change in

her character, Keats changed the title of the ballad when it was

published in the Indicator to "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy." The

change from "merci" to "mercy" is significant because, Kelley

says, it emphasizes the "human emphasis" of the new version

(336).

The French merci may mean pity, compassion or thanks.

In the chivalric context of Chartier's ballad, the

"beautiful lady without pity" is she who refuses a

lover--in effect, she shows no chivalric politesse, or

says "no thanks." The English "mercy" of the Indicator

text abandons the implied chivalric pun.

So, in yet another subtle way, Keats's later version of "La belle

dame" succeeds in changing the context of the ballad from one

rich in medieval connotations to one more modern in nature.

The images in "La belle dame sans merci" are medieval in

nature. They suggest, says Claude Finney, "an atmosphere that is

sad, sombre, chivalric, and weird" (597). The chivalric

implications of the "pacing steed" and the knight, discussed

earlier, are easy to see. The poem is also, however, one steeped

in romance--it even includes a dream, the implications of which

have been discussed in earlier chapters. The contents of the

dream provide yet another medieval picture. The knight relates

the dream he had as he slept on the hillside:

> I saw pale kings and Princes too
>
> Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
>
> They cried 'La belle dame sans merci
>
> Thee hath in thrall.'
>
> I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
>
> With horrid warning gaped wide
>
> And I awoke and found me here
>
> On the cold hill's side. (37-44)

The warriors, kings, and princes, in addition to being characters

commonly found not only in the literature of the Middle Ages but

in the everyday life of the period itself, are also "death pale"

(38) with "starv'd lips" (41). Additionally, the knight himself

does not fare too well in the narrator's description of him: he is "haggard and . . . woe begone" (6), and the narrator sees "a lilly [sic] on [his] brow / With anguish moist and fever dew, / And on [his] cheeks a fading rose / Fast withereth too" (9-12). Both the description of the knight and of the knights, princes, and warriors in the knight's dream have the characteristics of death-masks. Theresa Kelley says, "[T]hey have the look a face assumes just before death or in a death-like state of exhaustion. . . . [T]hey signify death or its approach much as the cheshire cat's smile is a lingering, residual sign of the cheshire cat" (343). Mario Praz, in his book The Romantic Agony, notes that "[p]leasure and death are intertwined in Keats's poems . . ." (285). Death, as noted earlier, was a much-used subject matter in the literature of the late Middle Ages, and, together with the fact that the characters colored with the imagery of death are themselves medieval characters, this touch of Keats's signifies a link to the Middle Ages.

Claude Finney, comparing Keats's "Belle dame" with the passages most like it in Spenser's Faerie Queene, notes that "Keats suffused his ballad in an atmosphere which is far more weird and sinister than that of Spenser's episode. . . . He presented the destructive effects of love by means of the knight's dream" (596). Dante Gabriel Rossetti, an avid admirer of Keats and "La belle dame," referred to the atmosphere as a "weird Celtic twilight" (qtd. in Ford 110). Matthew Arnold comments on the "Celtic twilight," calling it "the magical style"

(qtd. in Finney 597). This style is "the contribution of the Celts to English poetry. It was introduced into mediaeval English poetry, it is probable, from Breton lays through the medium of Norman-French lays and romances" (Finney 597). This same style is found in such medieval works as <u>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</u> and makes its strong appearance in the romantic period through, most notably, Keats and Coleridge in "La belle dame," <u>Christabel</u>, and "Kubla Khan."

Once again, we find in Keats's poetry the pictorial qualities characteristic of the literature of the Middle Ages and adored by Pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti, qualities which we have seen in other of Keats's poetry, most notably "The Eve of St. Agnes." "La belle dame sans merci" provided a subject for Rossetti, who painted a picture entitled "La belle dame sans merci," and for other, later painters because of the abundant color and painterly elements present in it. "La belle dame" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" were the two Keats poems most revered by Rossetti because of their inclusion of the two qualities he valued and sought most, "intensity and highly-finished pictorial power (whether rich or simple)" (Ford 116). The theme of the poem--that of the "bewitching siren"--also adds to the medievalism of the poem. Ford notes that "Keats, in <u>The Eve of St. Agnes</u>, had pictured the colour of the Middle Ages and in <u>La Belle Dame sans Merci</u> opened up a world of mystery" (157). The many characteristics of medievalism in "La belle dame" are seen most clearly through its "weird" atmosphere, the aspect of the

poem most commented upon.

Another of the qualities of "La belle dame sans merci" that receives much attention from the critics is the ballad form in which Keats chose to write it. Coventry Patmore calls "La belle dame" "[t]he only striking proof of the existence of true metrical power in Keats. . . " (338). Many others remark on the beautifully musical quality of the poem. Most comment, though, is made on the fact that the ballad stanza is a new form for Keats and that this form accomplishes Keats's mission, "the typical romantic association of the Middle Ages with clean simplicity and brevity" (Bate 478). Finney feels the ballad stanza form helps produce the effect Keats is trying to achieve in "La belle dame"--that "weirdness":

> He presented the bare dramatic outlines of the story, giving each detail a weird significance. He told the story as a dialogue, representing the knight as the poet saw him and as he saw himself. He used the device of repetition, making the last stanza repeat and enforce the tone of weird tragedy which the first stanza had sounded. He shortened the fourth verse of the ballad stanza, producing a rhythm of haunting and ominous slowness. (598)

So by choosing the ballad form, one he had never used before, Keats also chose the particular effect he wanted readers to glean from the poem. The "weird" effect, in this instance, happens to be in keeping with the imagery and characteristics of literature

of the Middle Ages.

The reasons critics give for Keats's writing of "La belle dame" are varied. Some simply assume that in writing the ballad, Keats was expressing his poetic imagination. "Keats' knight at arms, it is said, is a symbol for the poet; the knight's experience with the lady of the poem is a symbolic expression of Keats' ambiguous attitude towards the poet's visionary imagination" (Moler 539). Others have different explanations. Amy Lowell believes there is nothing autobiographical about the poem and that it is connected in only "the most general way to Keats himself and Fanny Brawne" (225). Lowell's interpretation, which is usually that of the assuming reader who knows about Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne, refers to the identification of Keats with the knight and Fanny Brawne with the belle dame sans merci. Still another theory, recently proposed by Janice Sinson, is that Keats's knight is meant to represent his brother Tom, who had died not long before, and the belle dame a cruel friend who had played a joke on the ailing Tom. The friend, Charles Wells, pretended to be an interested female, "Amena Bellefila," who wrote love notes to Tom; Tom believed there was such a girl and even considered traveling across the English Channel to see her. Keats may have believed that his brother Tom's realization of the truth played a part in his death (Sinson 18).

I would suggest that another view of the poem, yet not one heretofore proposed, could be that "La belle dame sans merci" is

another of Keats's experiments with the <u>ubi</u> <u>sunt</u> <u>topos</u>. It is
possible the knight in "La belle dame sans merci" does symbolize
Keats himself, but that the belle dame is representative of the
elusive Middle Ages. The imagery of the knight's deathly face
could well have described Keats's own appearance at the time of
the poem's composition; he was very sick with tuberculosis, the
same disease that killed his brother, with the ravages of which
he was thus doubly familiar. The medieval imagery throughout the
poem signifies the setting of the Middle Ages, but the knight's
dream especially connotes the medieval period. The description
of the dream is given by the knight himself:

> And there I dream'd--Ah Woe betide!
>
> The latest dream I ever dreamt
>
> On the cold hill side.
>
> I saw pale kings and Princes too
>
> Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
>
> They cried 'La belle dame sans merci
>
> Thee hath in thrall.'
>
> I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
>
> With horrid warning gaped wide
>
> And I awoke and found me here
>
> On the cold hill's side. (33-44)

We might thus infer that Keats, represented by the knight,
unhappy with his life and the common beliefs and attitudes of the
nineteenth century, has looked back to the Middle Ages for
comfort and the impression of a better life. The medieval period

had held Keats "in thrall" for over a year of his life, and from
the critical standpoint of Keats's own nineteenth century, the
muse had done him no real good--the critics had not yet been
wholly appreciative of his poetry. The indication that the
knight plainly feels that his dream is becoming a lost cause is
seen in the final stanza:

>   . . . this is why I sojourn here
>
>   Alone and palely loitering;
>
>   Though the sedge is wither'd from the Lake
>
>   And no birds sing--   (45-48)

This stanza, a close rendering of the opening stanza, which
begins "O what can ail thee knight at arms / Alone and palely
loitering," offers the viewpoint of the knight, or Keats, the
poet, acknowledging the fact that "the sedge is wither'd from the
Lake," or that the Middle Ages is a time he can not profitably
rely on for inspiration. The belle dame sans merci, the Middle
Ages, is what Keats has been attempting to capture, at least in
his poetry, for more than a year, but, with "La belle dame,"
Keats seems to give up the fight to look for a different muse.

There are a variety of reasons Keats may have come to feel
evocation of the Middle Ages in his poetry had failed him. His
second volume of poems, recently published, had already stopped
selling. Walter Jackson Bate notes that Keats "was certainly
disturbed by the fact that his second volume had by now as
effectively died as the first" (460). Bate also mentions that
when Keats visited John Taylor, his publisher, "the sight of the

unsold copies of the poem[s] shook him again" (461). The majority of the reviewers of his work had made mostly critical comments, and the public, Keats felt, was unable to accept a book that had not been embraced by the critics. His brother Tom had also died very recently, and Keats's health was moving steadily downhill. His relationship with Fanny Brawne was new, and its future uncertain. But the biggest factor in the change Keats put his poetic direction through during this time was his now increasing contempt of Leigh Hunt and everything he stood for. Bate relates an incident that effectively reveals Keats's feelings for Hunt:

> [I]n an impulsive gesture of indifference, [Keats]
> himself presented [Fanny Brawne] with his copy of
> Hunt's <u>Literary Pocket Book</u>, which had become a kind of
> symbol of the union of affectation and sentimentality
> that so repelled him now. Within a few weeks, if not
> before, she probably discovered Keats's low opinion of
> it, though she still continued to use it a little for
> memoranda. (454)

Keats was clearly attempting to put distance between himself and Hunt, and one of the ways he had found to do this was to distance himself from the main element in his poetry that had been inspired by and linked to Hunt's own poems--the use of the Middle Ages as a poetic muse. As Keats told his sister Fanny in a letter dated April 12, 1819, ". . . I must turn over a new leaf. . ." (446). And this, as it turns out, was exactly what he did;

Keats never seriously employed the characteristics of medieval literature in his poems again.

Although he does touch on medievalism in two later poems, "The Cap and Bells; Or, the Jealousies," written in November or December 1819, and "In aftertime a Sage, of mickle lore," written close to the end of his life, the poems are not important enough to be counted among the major medieval poems. "The Cap and Bells" is a poem in which Keats actually pokes fun at the Middle Ages, partially through allusions to his own poem, "The Eve of St. Mark." On the other hand, the poem "In aftertime, a Sage of mickle lore" written in Rome when he was with Charles Brown, was, Brown says, "the last stanza of any kind that [Keats] . . . wrote before his lamented death" (qtd. in Cook 612n331). It is significant that Keats would have turned to his medieval muse on his deathbed, while he was reading, once again, Spenser's <u>Faerie Queene</u>. (The poem was written at the end of a copy of the <u>Faerie Queene</u> that Keats gave to Fanny Brawne.)

So "La belle dame sans merci" is the last of Keats's major poems to draw upon the characteristics of the literature of the Middle Ages. The manner in which he uses the characteristics of medieval writing in "La belle dame" is different from what appears in his earlier poetry, and the characteristics upon which he draws are fewer. The use of medieval imagery to capture a certain atmosphere, the inclusion of some chivalric elements of courtly love, the employment of the imagery of death common to late medieval literature, and the utilization of a certain poetic

form, in this case the ballad stanza, are all elements that Keats used in his earlier poems to bring to mind the literature of the Middle Ages. That these elements are used more sparingly in "La belle dame," and in some cases even expunged from the revised version, indicates that Keats is finished with his attempt to recall an earlier, better time. After writing "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," "The Eve of St. Mark," and "La belle dame sans merci," Keats was never again in the remainder of his life to turn to the Middle Ages for the inspiration that had infused his earlier works with such passion and color.

1.Although some critics, among them Amy Lowell and Claude Finney, document the letter to George as one written on April 28, 1819 (rather than April 21), more recent critics, including Walter Jackson Bate and Janice Sinson, seems to have settled on the earlier date.

2. For a complete discussion of Burton's influence on Keats, see Janice Sinson.

3. A full comparison of the two works appears in Lowell, 222-225.

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