

## **Synopsis of the Eve of St. Agnes**

The Eve of St. Agnes is a Romantic narrative poem of 42 Spenserian stanzas set in the Middle Ages. It was written by John Keats in 1819 and published in 1820. The poem was considered by many of Keats' contemporaries and the succeeding Victorians to be one of his finest and was influential in 19th-century literature.

The title comes from the day (or evening) before the feast of Saint Agnes (or St. Agnes' Eve). St. Agnes, the patron saint of virgins, died a martyr in 4th century Rome. The eve falls on 20 January; the feast day on the 21st. The divinations referred to by Keats in this poem are referred to by John Aubrey in his *Miscellanies* (1696) as being associated with St. Agnes' night.

Keats based his poem on the folk belief that a girl could see her future husband in a dream if she performed certain rites on the eve of St. Agnes; that is she would go to bed without any supper, undress herself so that she was completely naked and lie on her bed with her hands under the pillow and looking up to the heavens and not to look behind. Then the proposed husband would appear in her dream, kiss her, and feast with her.

On a bitterly chill night, an ancient beadsman performs his penances in the chapel next to the castle of Madeline's warlike family.

Meanwhile, in the castle, an alcohol-fueled revelry has begun among the family. Madeline pines for the love of Porphyro, sworn enemy to her kin. She has heard 'old dames full many times declare' that she may receive sweet dreams of love from her lover Porphyro if, on this night, St. Agnes' Eve, she retires to bed under the proper ritual of silence and supine receptiveness.

Later that night, Porphyro makes his way to the castle and braves entry, seeking out Angela, an elderly woman friendly to his family, and importuning her to lead him to Madeline's room at night, where he may gaze upon her sleeping form. Angela is persuaded only with difficulty, saying she fears damnation if Porphyro does not afterward marry the girl.

Concealed in an ornate, carven closet in Madeline's room, Porphyro watches as Madeline makes ready for bed. Beholding her full beauty in the moonlight, he creeps forth as she sleeps, to prepare a feast of rare delicacies. Madeline wakes and sees before her the same image she has seen in her dream and, thinking Porphyro part of it, receives him into her bed. Waking in full and realizing her mistake, she tells Porphyro she cannot hate him for his deception since her heart is so much in his, but that if he goes now he leaves behind "A dove forlorn and lost / With sick unpruned wing".

Porphyro declares his love for Madeline and promises her a home with him over the southern moors. They flee from the castle, passing insensate, drunken revellers and rush into the night.

Angela's death is revealed in the poem's final stanza and the beadsman, "after thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold".