

Medievalism in Keats' The Eve of St. Agnes

The Eve of St. Agnes is a medieval poem in background, motive and atmosphere. Its story is based upon a medieval superstition according to which a maiden, by observing certain rituals on St. Agnes' Eve could win sight of her husband in a dream:

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
If ceremonies due they did aright.

Keats was a great lover of the Middle Ages. He responded more than any other poet to the spell of medieval romance. He was not interested in the political or social conditions of his age nor did he dream of the Golden Age of man. He was more or less a poet of escape, an idealist. The Middle Ages have always exercised a special charm on poets by virtue of their chivalry, romance, knighterrantry, supernatural beliefs, etc. Keats, who was chiefly a poet of pure imagination without much contact with reality, was naturally fascinated by the charm of the Middle Ages. Keats pays his tribute to the Middle Ages in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *The Eve of St. Mark*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, and *Isabella*.

Keats wove into this superstition the motive of a love-passion between the son and the daughter of hostile families. The love motive brings into play the gallantry of Porphyro who enters the castle of his enemies to meet his beloved at the risk of his life. A hundred swords would have pierced his body, had his presence in the castle become known.

Other Medieval Touches in That Poem

In addition to a medieval superstition serving as the basis of the poem and medieval chivalry serving as its motive, the medieval atmosphere is built up by many other touches. There is the Beadsman telling his rosary and saying his prayer: there is the revelry in the hall with plume, 'tiara and trumpets; there is the reference to the medieval story of Merlin's death by treachery; there is the wonderful picture of a thousand heraldries, dim emblazonings, and a shielded scutcheon blushing with the blood of queens and kings; there is finally the Baron who dreamt that night of witch and demon and many a woe. Each of these touches has some medieval association; the Beadsman praying before the Virgin in the chapel calls up the devotional character of the times; the plume and tiara and the stained-glass window recall medieval art; the heraldries take us back to the chivalrous character of the period; the mention of Merlin touches the medieval folk-lore, while the witch and the demon reflect the superstition of the Middle Ages.

The Medieval Elements in "La Belle Dame"

La Belle Dame Sans Merci deals with the love of a knight-at-arms for a fairy. The knight-at-arms immediately reminds us of the Middle Ages when there used to be many knights wandering about in search of adventure for the fun of it or for money. The knight here suggests the chivalry and the spirit of adventure of the Middle Ages. The supernaturalism of this poem is also a medieval quality. The beautiful lady here is not an earthly woman. She is a witch who appears in

the shape of a beautiful woman to entangle unsuspecting men who fall in love with her. Another supernatural element is the horrible dream in which the knight learns the real nature of the witch to whose deceptive charms he has fallen a victim.

Yet Another Medieval Poem

The Eve of St. Mark again deals with a medieval superstition. This superstition was that a person stationed near a church-porch at twilight on the Eve of St. Mark would see the apparitions of those about to die, or be brought near death, in the ensuing year. However, this poem was not completed and remains a fragment.

Passion and the Romantic Background of Passion

An important point about Keats's medievalism is its stress upon passion and the romantic background of that passion rather than upon action and thrilling adventure. If Sir Walter Scott had written *The Eve of St. Agnes*, he would have made Porphyro fight with his enemies in order to thrill us. But Keats shows his hero entering stealthily into the castle with his heart on fire for Madeline, feasting his eyes upon her physical charms and playing on a lute for her till she wakes up and the two "melt" into each other. The note of passion, indeed, is emphasised. When the moon throws its beautiful light on Madeline's breast, Porphyro grows faint with love and desire. On seeing Madeline undressing herself in order to go to bed, Porphyro feels that he is in Paradise. His soul aches with love. When she opens her eyes, he sinks upon her knees. She heaves many sighs and speaks in voluptuous tones, while he keeps gazing on her in an appealing manner. Addressing her passionately, he says, "My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!" Indeed the whole poem throbs with passion. The same is the case in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. There is hardly a story or a plot in this poem. Keats sets before us, with imagery drawn from the medieval world of enchantment and knighterrantry, a type of the wasting power of love. The imagery powerfully expresses the passion of the knight.

Two Vivid Pictures in "The Eve of St. Mark"

The interest of *The Eve of St. Mark*, again, lies not in narrative but in pictorial brilliance and charm or workmanship. There are two vivid pictures in the poem: the out-door picture of the city streets, and the indoor picture of the maiden reading a book in her fire-lit chamber.