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From Tales of Old Romance to Wormy Circumstance: Aesthetic Tradition,
Metamorphosis and Legacy of Keats's Medievalism

Od bájných romancí k prohnilé skutečnosti: estetická tradice, proměny a odkaz
Keatsova medievalismu

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):
Mgr. Miroslava Horová, Ph.D

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Zpracovala (author):
Bc. Anna Hupcejová

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.”¹ — Keats to George and Tom Keats, 22 December 1818

My thesis aims to provide an aesthetic reading of Keats’s medieval poems and their legacy. The selected poems illustrate Keats’s developing treatment of medieval topoi, beginning with a discussion of “Calidore, A Fragment” and “Specimen of an Induction to a Poem” from his 1817 debut collection *Poems* and then the more widely known narratives written between 1818 and 1821: “Isabella, Or A Pot of Basil”, “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. The thesis researches the directions Keats’s aesthetics takes, showing the progression from tales of “chivalry”² and “Old Romance”³ to those of “wormy circumstance” (“Isabella”, 385). These later romances are interpreted visually by a number of nineteenth-century artists who contribute to the popularisation and eternalisation of his poetry, most significantly the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The two questions that I wish to answer in this thesis are 1. What is the aesthetic evolution of Keats’s medievalism? and 2. How is Keats’s later medievalism adapted in Pre-Raphaelite visual art, and to what extent these visual interpretations are loyal to their sources?

The five chapters will address the nineteenth-century aesthetics that affect Keats’s work, showing his gradual departure from influences such as Spenser and Hunt that culminate in his romances, gaining mass popularity through the Pre-Raphaelites’ visual interpretations. The first chapter opens with Keats’s debut 1817 collection *Poems*, where the influence of Spenser and Hunt is evident. We can regard “Calidore, A Fragment” and “Specimen” as Keats’s additions to the Romantic medieval revival, which will also be briefly laid out. This chapter will then position my thesis within current academic debate, covering the aims, argument and methodology. Chapter two provides a biographical introduction to three individuals who influence the development of Keats’s cultural education and aesthetic views of visual art and poetry: Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Haydon and William Hazlitt. Here I will also discuss the sources of Keats’s medieval poems and show his creative engagement and reevaluation of the original stories and scenes. The poet evidently revises the Medieval, Renaissance and Romantic tales according to his own modified aesthetics of romance in which one can see a gradual departure from the influence of Hunt.

¹ “To George and Tom Keats”, 22 December 1818, in *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005) 60. This edition of Keats’s correspondence will henceforth be referred to in footnotes as “*Letters*”.

² John Keats, “Specimen of an Induction to a Poem”, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Paul Wright (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2001) 1. All future references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “Specimen” and this edition will be referred to in footnotes as “*The Complete Poems of John Keats*”.

³ John Keats, “Isabella, Or A Pot of Basil”, in *The Poems of John Keats*. 387. All future references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “Isabella”.

The main gist of my argument is in the third and fourth chapters. Chapter three contains the focal point of the thesis, which is an aesthetic reading of selected poems by Keats that convey a medieval theme but also move away from the idealised and optimistic tales of old romance and chivalry presented in the 1817 poetry collection. One sees a developed treatment of romance with the ballad and two narrative poems that often play with synaesthetic imagery, use medieval motifs and emphasise the contrasting realms of dream and reality. Keats also introduces the problematics of beauty that is no longer idealised, but subjected to the “wormy circumstance”. Within my reading, I seek to highlight these poems’ lyrical and imaginative features that are later interpreted by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In chapter four, visual interpretations by the three founding Pre-Raphaelite members (William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti) will be examined in terms of which features of Keats’s poems they adapt and how loyally. While there is a clear correlation between Keats’s belief to ““load every rift” of your subject with ore”⁴ and the Pre-Raphaelites’ emphasis on saturated colours and ornamental details typical of 15th-century Italian art, one can see several diversifications in how the poet and the painters portray not only medievalism, but also certain plot scenes. The fifth concluding chapter summarises my discussion of Keats’s aesthetics and their visual legacy in the Victorian era and also gives an overview of the Pre-Raphaelites’ visual legacy of Keats’s medieval poetry.

Even though Keats’s poems are generally praised for their sensuous descriptions and aesthetic quality, the medieval romances increasingly emphasise the deceptive, destructive and deadly powers of beauty. The viewpoint I therefore take is that Keats’s medieval poems illustrate his development as an aesthetic poet who, however, also shows that beauty is not always synonymous to “joy”.⁵ Instead, in Keats’s medieval world, pleasure is temporary and has dire consequences. The selected paintings, however, have a decorative visual aesthetics that mostly *hides* the horrors, woes and deaths presented in the original sources and instead they eternalise a moment of beauty. Examples of such hidden contextual terrors are the deaths of the Beadsman and Angela that follow the lovers’ union in “The Eve of St. Agnes”.

By exploring the original texts’ lyrical and imaginative qualities, I follow the line of literary criticism led by Harold Bloom who assesses literary works not based on their relation to social, moral and political questions, but their aesthetic qualities. Bloom writes in *The Western Canon* that a work’s aesthetic strength consists in a “mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive

⁴ “To P. B. Shelley”, 16 August 1820, in *Letters*, 464.

⁵ John Keats, “Endymion”, in *The Poems of John Keats*. Book I, line 1. All further references to this poem will be included in footnotes as “Endymion”.

power, knowledge, [and] exuberance of diction”.⁶ In addition to these features, I will consider the range of universal human desires and emotions that add to the poems’ timelessness, despite being set in a rather deliberately idealised and aestheticised literary medieval past. My thesis thus wishes to serve as a contribution to present-day scholarly attention to Keats as one of the pillars of Romantic aesthetics. His poetry remains markedly relevant to our present time, especially in the light of its 200-year jubilee that consists of themed readings, Pre-Raphaelite exhibitions (most recently at the National Gallery in London and the Keats-Shelley House in Rome) and conferences.

1.1 The Romantic Medieval Revival and Keats’s 1817 *Poems*

The sustained rise of the British Romantic medieval revival can be attributed to Walter Scott. Though most famous for his medieval novels, he also wrote medieval poems — these can be divided into two categories: retellings (“The Lord of the Isles”)⁷ and original tales (“The Lady of the Lake”).⁸ Scott’s interest generally lies in resurrecting “general romance of human life, of the world and its activities, and more especially, of the warring, adventurous past”.⁹ Historical retrospectives are all the more relevant during the period of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the “most total wars known in his day”,¹⁰ and the post Act of Union and Jacobite uprising generations in Scotland. Though Scott treats and develops medievalism mainly for patriotic purposes, “Glenfinlas” can be also traced to the popularity of Gothic tales. However, unlike Gothic writers like Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe who use the medieval past “as if they were unreal and unsubstantial”, Scott makes “the past and the remote a credible extension of normal life.”¹¹ His description of Melrose Abbey is a prime example of a “living past”:

If thou wouldst view fair Melrose aright,
Go visit it by the pale moonlight [...]
And, home returning, soothly swear,
Was never seen so sad and fair!¹²

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1994) 29.

⁷ The 1815 “Lord of the Isles” retells the return of Robert Bruce and the Scots’ historical victory against the English in the 1314 Battle of Bannockburn.

⁸ The 1810 “Lady of the Lake” is to this day associated with Loch Katrine in the Trossachs of the Scottish Highlands. This region is also popularised by “Glenfinlas”, a vivid retelling of a Highland myth. Scott’s zeal for Scottish legends and the Highlands helps increase tourism in the region that is often seen as “desolate’, ‘gloomy’, ‘horrible’, ‘hideous’ and ‘melancholy’”. Ian D. Whyte, *Landscape and History since 1500* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002) 109.

⁹ George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970) 514.

¹⁰ Samuel Baker, “Scott’s World of War”, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Fiona Robertson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012) 70-81 at 71.

¹¹ Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, 518.

¹² “The Lay of the Last Minstrel”, in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (London: G. Routledge, 1857) 15. Canto II, i., lines 1-2 and 16-17. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “Melrose Abbey”, as it is also published and available to read as an independent poem.

The moonlit abbey scenery above is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the setting itself is in Johnny Rodger's words "a hymn to the Gothic forms as sprung from nature — a familiar trope with its pedigree in the writings of Goethe and Herder (both of whose writings Scott knew well)",¹³ which shows the interconnection between European Romanticisms. Secondly, the passage conveys the poet's enthusiasm for a medieval ruin or natural landmark that is passed onto the readers who then wish to personally see the place. However, it can be also argued that the sights are over-romanticised. For example, the American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe expresses her "disappointment" with Melrose Abbey thus:

I had been somehow expecting to find the building standing alone in the middle of a great heath, far from all abodes of men, and with no companions more hilarious than the owls.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Scott contributes to the popularisation of medievalism in the early nineteenth century, which literary criticism uniformly endorses. Alice Chandler claims that "a whole century dreamed and philosophised about"¹⁵ the medieval past and according to George Sampson, Scott contributes more than anyone "to a revival of interest in the past".¹⁶ His narratives spread medieval narrative elements like chivalric quests,¹⁷ Arthur's court¹⁸ and battles.¹⁹ While Scott's medievalism has a patriotic level, his vivid descriptions that are "all so peculiar and so remote from polished life, that they excite the strongest curiosity".²⁰ The past therefore becomes a similarly exotic material like non-European cultures, which is a fascination that leads to a wave of Orientalism in the arts.

Besides Scott, another important author of the British medieval revival who influenced Keats's work is S. T. Coleridge. Sampson asserts that Coleridge is "indifferent to the medieval properties dear to [Walter] Scott" and instead, he focuses more on "the subtler, more *spiritual* regions of romance".²¹ The most important example of his approach to medievalism is "Christabel" that conveys the Christian and supernatural. In the poem, otherworldly forces affect the female

¹³ Johnny Rodger, *The Hero Building: An Architecture of Scottish National Identity* (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2016) 92.

¹⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, Volume 1, letter VIII. 1.11.2014 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13945/13945-h/13945-h.htm>> 21.4.2017.

¹⁵ Alice Chandler, "Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival", in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Mar., 1965) 315-332 at 315.

¹⁶ Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, 518.

¹⁷ In "The Battle of Trianman", Sir Roland de Vaux of Triermain goes on a quest for the hand of Gyneth, the daughter of King Arthur and Guendolen who is cursed with eternal slumber until freed by a knight who passes a series of tests. Several knights also appear in "The Lady of the Lake".

¹⁸ King Arthur appears in "The Battle of Trianman" that includes a combat between the Knights of the Round Table.

¹⁹ For example, "Marmion" reimagines the Battle of Flodden Field (1513) where according to Scott "all was lost, but our honour" (letter of February 20, 1807).

²⁰ "Review in *British Critic* 1810", in *Walter Scott: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John O. Hayden (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003) 54.

²¹ Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, 484. My emphasis.

protagonist, who loses full consciousness²² and awakens with the words “Sure I have sinn’d!”²³ The role of the moon as a passage to an otherworldly state is part of Coleridge’s medievalism that is rich in descriptions and medieval motifs like the castle setting. His overt inclusion of female sexuality is also significant and Keats adapts it in “Isabella” and “The Eve of St. Agnes”. Coleridge and Keats use inconclusive endings as the lovers disappear “into the storm”²⁴ and “Sir Leoline / led forth the lady Geraldine!” (“Christabel”, 657). Such a troubled and open-ended finale of a medieval tale is not abnormal. For example, Thomas Malory’s “Le Morte D’Arthur” concludes with King Arthur’s death and the consequent disintegration of his legendary court of knights and ladies, and the finale of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* Book VI suggests that the Blatant Beast is not fully defeated and may return. Keats embraces such ambiguous endings in his own poems, giving the stories a greater sense of mystery and reality that opposes fairytale-like happy endings expected from the romance genre.

Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (which is in itself a “retrospective on medievalism”)²⁵ is an important source of inspiration for the Romantics, namely Wordsworth, Lord Byron and also Keats who refers to Spenser as the “Elfin poet”.²⁶ This following section will briefly focus on the main differences and similarities of the Romantic and Spenserian treatment of medievalism. According to Elizabeth Fay, *The Faerie Queene* is “more than a romance”, as it is a “courtesy book, each section illustrating one of the qualities necessary to the perfect man: Christian faith, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice and courtesy”²⁷ which derive from the medieval chivalric code. The knight is a representation of these values and his role is transferred onto the Romantic poet whose duty, Wordsworth believes, is to be moral and honourable and to acknowledge the “beauty of the universe”.²⁸ In the 1802 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, he depicts this task as

[...] light and easy to him who looks at the world in the *spirit of love* [...] it is a homage paid to the native and naked *dignity* of man, to the grand elementary *principle of pleasure*, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves.²⁹

²² We see a parallel with Keats’s Madeline, who is not fully herself either until “St. Agnes’ moon hath set” (“The Eve of St. Agnes”, 324). More parallels and possible influences of Coleridge’s “Christabel” will be discussed in chapter 2.

²³ S. T. Coleridge, “Christabel”, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) Volume 2. Part II.381. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “Christabel”.

²⁴ John Keats, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, in *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. 371. All future references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “Agnes”.

²⁵ Elizabeth Fay, *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002) 67.

²⁶ John Keats, “Sonnet to Spenser”, in *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. 5. This reference conveys Keats’s perception of Spenser as a poet who writes narratives of a world that is marked by the magical presence and powers of supernatural beings like fairies and elves.

²⁷ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, 66-7.

²⁸ William Wordsworth, “1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) Volume 2, 270. All further references to this essay will be included in footnotes as “1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”.

²⁹ Ibid. My emphasis.

Wordsworth parallels the poet to a kind of modern-day knight in *The Prelude*, which is a spiritual *bildungsroman* in poetic form that follows Wordsworth's development as a poet with a "sense of personal knighthood, influenced certainly by his near engagement in battle in the French Revolution under Beaupuy".³⁰ It can be therefore said that Wordsworth plays a dual role of a visionary poet as well as a protector of national/social values. The opposite of Wordsworth's autobiographical questing hero is Lord Byron's antiheroic protagonist Childe Harold, who is essentially lost in the world — to quote Stuart Curran, "his quest is away from, not for, a stable centre" and he is "existentially disengaged in a world whose superstitions he sees through and whose magic is chimerical."³¹ The original definition of the protagonist's name (Childe) is "a title from medieval times, designating a young noble who is not yet knighted".³² Byron goes against Spenser's and Wordsworth's notions of the dignified knight/poet who are protectors and models of morality by introducing his Childe Harold, a Byronic hero (a new cultural and literary icon), who pursues introspection but also pleasure. However, Harold becomes disillusioned on his international journey that emphasises "the disparity between *romantic ideals* and the *realities* of the world".³³ In this way, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* shares with *The Prelude* a protagonist who travels in a politically unstable reality and undergoes personal growth. Keats's characters, on the other hand, are shown to travel between realms of dream/fantasy and reality, mainly in a personal quest for love. The poems not only evoke their distress from dealing with reality that cannot match the colours and pleasures of their otherworldly experience, but also show character development — the knight is weak from heartbreak, Madeline is "forlorn" ("Agnes", 333) and Isabella's grief from "pleasures not to be" ("Isabella", 233) leads to insanity. All three attempt to escape reality through memory and the dream realm, but in the process they become psychological and social outcasts.

Spenserian language, a construct per se, becomes part of Romantic medievalism. The Romantic poets (namely Coleridge, Byron and Keats) spread a "deliberate and widespread revival of Spenserian (and pseudo-Spenserian) words and spellings",³⁴ especially based on the famous epic. At its very beginning, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is Byron's satirical take on "the new romance of Southey and Scott"³⁵ and a major part of his deliberate satirical inversion of the genre is the Spenserian language he (re)adapts. Martin Procházka lists a few examples:

³⁰ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, 88.

³¹ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: OUP, 1986) 151.

³² "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", in *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1995) 237.

³³ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

³⁴ Noel Osselton, "archaism", in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2003) 138.

³⁵ Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 151.

Stanza 24 [in the MS of Canto I in “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”] is a bizarre medley of Spenserian poetic denominations and inversions (dwarfy demon... Urchin... high... foiled... I wot’... Blatant Beast... etc) and no less grotesque imitations of Spenserian allegorical metaphors (‘With diadem high foolscap, lo, a fiend’). Alongside them is however a kaleidoscope of the journalist jargon of the time, namely the winged phrases (‘And Policy regain’d what arms had lost’; ‘dome displeasing unto British eye’; ‘Enquiry should be held about the thing’ II, 20).³⁶

The striking contrast between adaptations of Spenser’s poetic diction and contemporary vernacular shows the mixing of the high literary and modern journalese, therefore recasting and modernising the genre. This “pastiche blending of the archaic style of *The Faerie Queene* [...] and journalist clichés”³⁷ shows the inability of escaping reality, even in dreamy romance. The blending of poetic and journalist language in lines like “Such Paeans teemed for our triumphant host / In Courier, Chronicle and eke in Morning Post”³⁸ results in a parody. The ironic treatment of the epic’s “stylistic characters”³⁹ is part of Byron’s revision of the genre, which he uses also in *Don Juan*.

Another Spenserian legacy is the treatment of the past and its relation to the present and its immediate reality. The Renaissance epic has features of other genres, as its sources include the Italian epics *Orlando Furioso* (1516) and *Jerusalem Delivered* (1575), as well as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s pseudo-historical chronicle *History of the Kings of Britain* from 1136. Fay claims that under the influence of these sources that deal with history, “Spenser elevates Arthurian romance and re-establishes its historical authority in the construction of nation”.⁴⁰ His epic has a double historical function, as the Arthurian setting is allegorical for present Renaissance politics. Spenser’s figure of Gloriana is often read as a parallel to Elisabeth I. Both reigns are substantial for the stability of the kingdom — in Fay’s words, the Faerie Queene character “reverses the traumatic wound of the Arthurian landscape, Guinevere’s planned execution and disappearance that [...] causes the collapse of Camelot”.⁴¹ The use of the Arthurian past to allegorise the Renaissance political reality creates the notion of a double-time, a “compound of medieval/Renaissance, past/present that to his Romantic readers seems entirely plausible as a depiction of ‘pastness’”.⁴² One can even argue that the period placement is a critique of “the archaic remnants of medieval chivalry that characterised the court of Henry VII”⁴³ as well as of the “conservative, even medieval, conception of his

³⁶ Martin Procházka, *Romantismus a osobnost [Romanticism and Personality]* (Prague: Kruh moderních filologů, 1996) 138.

³⁷ Zdeněk Hrbata and Martin Procházka, *Romantismus a romantismy: pojmy, proudy, kontexty [Romanticism and Romanticisms: terms, trends, contexts]* (Prague: Karolinum, 2005) 326-7. My translation from Czech.

³⁸ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (Paris: Baudry’s Foreign Library, 1832) 38, I, xxiv. These lines appear only in the manuscript.

³⁹ Procházka, *Romanticism and Personality*, 138.

⁴⁰ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

[Spenser's] own society."⁴⁴ One can deduce that the poem's allegorical double-history can be both a praise and critique of Spenser's own time, emphasising the "pastness" of various values as well as the positives of a female ruler who both shows progress from the Arthurian matter and promises a secure future. An influential work that is Spenserian in its use of dual reality is James Thomson's "The Castle of Indolence" (1748). In Paul Alpers's summary, Thomson's protagonist (the Knight of Industry) "realises that Britain, now represented by the Castle of Indolence, must be released from spiritual decay"⁴⁵ and the poem then follows his quest. Thomson adapts three features from *The Faerie Queene*: the Spenserian stanza, allegorical social commentary and the questing dimension. Indeed, Alpers claims that Thomson recognises "the potential openness of Spenserian allegory in presenting the phenomena of cultural life and their relation to human desires and values."⁴⁶ Fay believes that his "appropriation and transformation of stylistic and thematic properties that began to equate with a vague medievalism"⁴⁷ helps modernise Spenser's legacy as well as brings the Renaissance poet into the mind of the Romantics, which leads to the Spenserian revival.

Wordsworth continues the legacy of eighteenth-century Spenserianism from which he adapts

[...] the idea of Spenser as an **English patriot** (therefore providing a voice in which to attack the betrayal of national ideals), landscapes which reflect **spiritual states** (not only the traveller's and woman's suffering, but also the pastoral scenes which relieve them at the end), and the **primitive past** from which the present emerges (the ruins of Stonehenge and the druid rites thought to occur them). In its diction and its use of the Spenserian stanza, indeed, the poem seems more like [James Thomson's 1748] *The Castle of Indolence* and [James Beattie's 1771] *The Mistrel* than like *The Faerie Queene* itself.⁴⁸

While Wordsworth appreciates Spenser for giving his characters "attributes and emblems that belong to the highest moral truths and the purest sensations",⁴⁹ it is plausible to argue the Romantic poet imitates him in a manner that more reflects his own interests and notions. For example, the questing figure in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" is a social outcast, a "discharged sailor who is guilty of murder", and the suffering woman he meets and whose story he hears is "like Arthur's meeting with Una [in *The Faerie Queene*, Book I.viii]".⁵⁰ The shift of the heroine's status from the throne to the streets⁵¹ returns "the female figure to the role of victim and redemptive vessel (in the

⁴⁴ James W. Broaddus, *Spenser's Allegory of Love: Social Vision in Books III, IV, and V of The Faerie Queene* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995) 36.

⁴⁵ Paul Alpers, "Spenser's influence", in *The Cambridge Companion to Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) 252-278 at 260.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, 66.

⁴⁸ Alpers, "Spenser's influence", 264. My bold emphasis.

⁴⁹ William Wordsworth, "Preface to the [*Lyrical Ballads*] edition of 1815", in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (London: Derrick Warne and Co., 1872) 513.

⁵⁰ Alpers, "Spenser's influence", 264.

⁵¹ A woman of the streets is presented in "The Female Vagrant" in *Lyrical Ballads*, who is the victim of greed and pride of Britain that undergoes industrialisation and urbanisation (which affects her family's rural life) and also fights in the American War of Independence.

sense of the sympathetic object)".⁵² Altogether Wordsworth borrows Spenser's stanzaic form, emphasis on historical events and sympathetic characters who reflect ethos, while Byron's Harold in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is flawed, ambiguous and sometimes cynically portrayed. Despite being considered part of the English literary canon, Spenser's epic is outdated in terms of language, length and complex plot. Keats does not attempt to compete with Spenser, but instead weaves Spenserian features into his own poetry. In Kelley's words, these features include

[...] participial forms that verbalise nouns or nominalise verbs; metrical pauses and rhymes that loosen or demolish the closed neoclassical couplet; and a mannered blend of sensuous details and abstract figures.⁵³

These elements are part of Keats's attempt to modernise Spenser in a tribute-like fashion as well as part of his trademark medievalism that leads to his celebrated status among the great English poets.

For Keats, a medical apprentice come trained surgeon, poetry provides refuge from "the noise and smell of his everyday life", constructing "for himself another world more free and more beautiful than that of Guy's Hospital and the lecture theatre".⁵⁴ His negative opinion of reality is expressed in his early poem "Sleep and Poetry" where it is compared to a "muddy stream [that] would bear along / [the] soul to nothingness".⁵⁵ The two worlds that spoke most to him were those of classical antiquity and the middle ages. Both of these periods can be idealised for their relative simplicity and a sense of spirituality and beauty in light of the growing empiricism of modern society and emphasis on technology, industry and science that began during the Industrial Revolution, which also brought poorer living conditions. These circumstances affect Keats's work that reimagines the past in a way that is not historically factual, but aesthetically idealised, without being entirely derivative. The early poems "Calidore" and "Specimen" from Keats's 1817 debut collection *Poems* attempt to escape into the past with high vividness and irresistible compulsion exemplified by the opening line: "Lo! I *must* tell a tale of chivalry" ("Specimen", 1, my emphasis) and the young Calidore's burning excitement. Indeed, these Spenserian poems are in William A. Read's words "striking examples of the youthful poet's efforts to depict scenes from the days of chivalry",⁵⁶ hence continuing the poetic tradition of reviving the medieval past. However, the

⁵² Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, 90.

⁵³ Theresa M. Kelley, "Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'", in *John Keats*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007) 67-96 at 68. These features, considered as Cockney "faults" by critics, are summarised from Jack Stillinger's *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) xxiv.

⁵⁴ Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967) 117.

⁵⁵ John Keats, "Sleep and Poetry", in *The Poems of John Keats*. 158-59.

⁵⁶ William A. Read, "Keats and Spenser", in *Modern Language Notes* (18.7, Nov. 1903) 204-206 at 206.

collection in general has “poor reception and sales”⁵⁷ and the manner in which Keats recreates the past is not entirely unique as one can see clear echoes and trace the influence of Spenser and Hunt.

Following the example of “The Story of Rimini” where Hunt refashions the Paolo and Francesca episode from Canto V of Dante’s *Inferno* to reflect his own beliefs, Keats rewrites Spenser’s mature Knight of Courtesy from Book VI of *The Faerie Queene*. There is an unarguable parallel between the reinterpreted young Calidore and Keats in 1817, as both are yet inexperienced in their fields (chivalry, poetry and also romance) and need guidance. Karel Štěpáník sees the following parallels between Calidore and the young poet and also Sir Gondibert and Hunt:

[...] Calidore’s desire to do deeds of knightly valour in aid of the weak and oppressed as well as his admiration for heroes obviously reflects Keats’s own ambitions, social and poetical, and his well-known reverence for the fighters for liberty and the great poets of the past and present. In this respect, Calidore is a self-portrait of Keats; and in Sir Gondibert, no doubt, we may discern an idealised portrait of Keats’s patron Leigh Hunt, whom, at the time, Keats adored as the living ideal of a patriotic poet.⁵⁸

If Gondibert is analogous to Hunt and Calidore to Keats, then Gondibert/Hunt’s role is to help Calidore/Keats improve their skills. Like Keats the starting poet, the immature Calidore definitely has a long way to go until he reaches the level of Spenser’s “full stout and tall, / And well approv’d in batteilous affray”⁵⁹ knight with “much renowme” (*Faerie Queene*, Book VI.I.2.9) and Sir Gondibert’s “elegance and stature tall” (“Calidore”, 112). There is an evident mentor-pupil relationship at play between Calidore/Gondibert and Keats/Hunt, which highlights the autobiographical dimension of the poem.⁶⁰ Keats’s high regard for Hunt is also evident in “Specimen”, where he is referred to as Spenser’s “lov’d Libertas” (“Specimen”, 61) — implying that Hunt is the follower of Spenser’s poetic legacy and together with Keats they will “revive the dying tones of minstrelsy” (“Specimen”, 32).

Keats adopts several Huntian notions in his Spenserian poems. One of them is the concept of luxury in “Calidore”, where the sensation of the ladies who nestle “in his arms” (“Calidore”, 93) is depicted as “soft luxury” (“Calidore”, 92). The knight’s lack of romantic experience is evident as he is in “thrall” (“Calidore”, 103)⁶¹ of the women who are “fair as some wonder out of fairy land” (“Calidore”, 94) and whose presence he blesses “with lips that tremble, and with glistening eye” (“Calidore”, 91). The knight’s high sensibility and lack of romantic experience convey his youthful immaturity that is even more underscored by the descriptions “aspiring *boy*” (“Calidore”,

⁵⁷ John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 8.

⁵⁸ Karel Štěpáník, “The problem of Spenserian inspiration in Keats’s poetry”, in *Brno Studies in English* (Vol. 2, 1960) 7-54 at 18.

⁵⁹ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin, 1987) Book VI.2.7-8. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “*Faerie Queene*”.

⁶⁰ It is possible to argue that since it is *Clerimond* who introduces Calidore to Gondibert, one can see a greater parallel between *Clerimond* and Hunt that acquaints Keats with the contemporary literary circle in London.

⁶¹ The state of being in “thrall” (“Calidore”, 103) to a woman reappears in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”.

128, my emphasis) and “large-eyed wonder with ambitious heat” (“Calidore”, 127-8). This results in opinions like that Keats’s “sentiments [are] sometimes bordering childishness”.⁶² Calidore’s focus seems generally more inclined to keep “off dismay, and terror, and alarm / from lovely woman” (“Calidore”, 145-6) than to fight for justice and honour. In both “Specimen” and “Calidore”, Keats also follows the Huntian portrayal of nature as an equally “busy social environment”⁶³ as human society. Animals add movement and colour to the landscape, such as the fish “whose silken fins, and *golden scales’ light / cast upward [...] a ruby glow*” (“Imitation”, 11-13, my emphasis), and in “Calidore” the black-winged swallow who dips “so refreshingly its wings, and breast / ‘gainst the smooth surface” (16-7) of the lake. The lake connects Keats’s knights, but while the resting knight in “Specimen” is “reflected” in the water, together “with the young ashen boughs [...] / And th’ half seen mossiness of linnets’ nests” (“Specimen”, 20-22), the fragment shows the knight “paddling o’er the lake” (“Calidore”, 1) in a “little boat” (19). Therefore the knight in “Specimen” is more integrated into the natural scene through his reflection than Calidore who is more an observer of “the beauty of a silent eve” (3) while moving across the lake’s surface. Though he imitates a Spenserian scene, Keats does not use the Spenserian stanza nor include as many archaisms. However, both poems present a series of visual motifs that are central to the recreation of a chivalric scene (e.g. knights, armours, ladies, lances and castles). The rewriting of Spenser’s experienced knight who is “in travell on his way, / Uppon an hard adventure sore bestad”⁶⁴ into a sensitive, paddling knight is not only anti-climactic, but also changes the story’s atmosphere and rhythm from an exciting start of an epic quest to a lyrical, slow-paced poem.

Ruins are a popular and important motif in Romantic poetry⁶⁵ and visual art⁶⁶ as they invite the audience to reflect on the past, the brevity of life and decay. Keats joins the Romantic fascination by actively seeking and visiting ruins during his travels. For example, on his tour of the Isle of Wight, Keats visits Carisbrooke Castle where “the trench is o’ergrown with the smoothest turf” and the walls and the “Keep within side is one Bower of ivy.”⁶⁷ Though this specific sight is witnessed months after the publication of *Poems*, the imagery of nature taking over abandoned man-made structures appears in “Calidore” where there is a chapel with a “crow above / upholding

⁶² Unsigned review, *The Eclectic Review*, (September 1817), n.s. viii, 267–7, in *John Keats: A Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge, 2005) 64.

⁶³ Eberle-Sinatra, 65.

⁶⁴ Edmund Spenser. *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin, 1987) Book VI.4.1-2. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “*Faerie Queene*”.

⁶⁵ Immediate examples are Walter Scott’s “Melrose Abbey” and William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”.

⁶⁶ Ruins are an international artistic phenomenon (Caspar David Friedrich, Arnold Böcklin), but within British Romantic context, notable works include John Constable’s 1828 ‘Ruins of Hadleigh Castle’ and William Turner’s 1831 ‘Melrose Abbey’.

⁶⁷ “To J. H. Reynolds”, 17 April 1817, in *Letters*, 16.

wreaths of ivy” (42-3). Another ruin depicted in the fragment is a “lonely turret, shatter’d, and outworn” (38) that is described to be “too proud to mourn / Its long lost grandeur” (39-40).⁶⁸ The turret obviously originate from an even earlier history than the chivalric age where “Calidore” is set. The fragment travels further into the past also with mythological references that close the poem. Allusions to “the song from Philomel’s far bower” (“Calidore”, 154)⁶⁹ and Hesperus (161) who brings the evening-star and “sweet” (162) sleep to the characters widen the poem’s cultural scope that until this point is limited mainly to the British Spenserian tradition. Furthermore, the diction takes the reader on a journey across time. On the one hand, there are Spenserian archaisms like “athwart” (“Specimen”, 12) and “anon” (“Calidore”, 17, 36, 71), and on the other, more modern Huntian adjectives like “lawny” (“Specimen”, 66, my emphasis), “bowery” (“Calidore”, 26, my emphasis) and “silvery” (“Calidore”, 50, my emphasis). In these two early poems alone we already see the foundation of Keats’s aesthetics that hybridises cultural references, established medieval imagery and language registers and this experimentation pinnacles in his later medievalism.

Keats’s early medievalism attempts to capture romance with the “revisionary strategies of recent Spenserianism”,⁷⁰ but there is evident awareness that the genre is “dying” (“Specimen”, 32). In comparison to the lively and colourful nature, the castle — the “seat of chivalric or, following the allegory, poetic knowledge”⁷¹ — is “grand”, but “*gloomy*” (“Calidore”, 65, my emphasis), which suggests the approaching dawn of the chivalric world. The peaceful atmosphere that concludes the poem differentiates it from Spenser’s eventful and occasionally violent epic, making it more lyrical and romantic. The scene serves as the climax of Keats’s unattainable chivalric dream. Keats obviously does not include the allegorical and epic dimensions of *The Faerie Queene* since there is greater emphasis on established imagery from romance than plot. Indeed, the action in “Calidore” is based on the protagonist’s inner sensations concerning his surroundings: aesthetic stimulation provided by nature, physical excitement by being in contact with ladies and admiration of his knight seniors, Sir Gondibert and Clerimond. The very fact that Gondibert’s chivalric deeds remain unmentioned emphasises the poem’s greater focus on lyrical aesthetics and the protagonist’s emotions than on the plot. “Specimen” is a group of images that lead to the arrival of a proud and

⁶⁸ Nostalgia for long-gone days are a repeating motif in Keats’s poems: lines 1-5 of “Dedication, To Leigh Hunt Esq.”, “Lines on the Mermaid Tavern” (1-4) and “Robin Hood, To a friend” (1-5).

⁶⁹ The mythological Philomel is a reoccurring reference also in Keats’s later medieval poems: in “The Eve of St. Agnes”, Madeline’s silence when performing the ritual is compared to a “tongueless nightingale” (206) and in “Isabella, A Pot of Basil”, the heroine’s name and status as a family tool alludes to Philomel’s lack of decision over her situation.

⁷⁰ Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) 158.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 144.

“gentle knight” (47) that is a potential beginning of a “tale of chivalry” (1, 11, 45) that the voice keeps on promising. However, this promise is not reached as the poem

[...] evaporates in visions of pure loveliness; ‘large white plumes’; sweet ladies on the worn tops of old battlements; light-footed damsels standing in sixes and sevens about the hall in courtly talk.⁷²

“Calidore” can be regarded as a similarly disappointing (albeit highly visually stimulating) story, as the heightening sentiments of young Calidore lead to an abrupt ending. In this view, both poems are experimental poetic recreation of a chivalric scene that lacks narrative structure. Additionally, the characterisation of courteous knights and charming ladies lacks depth that according to Štěpáník is due to Keats’s lack of “experience and sound knowledge of human character”.⁷³ Hence we can deduce that in the early Spenserian poems, the young poet is mainly echoing medieval scenes and topoi, though there is an evident onset of reconsideration of the romance genre that does not fully solidify until the later medieval poems. Between the two phases of his medieval poetry, Keats directs his attention to Greek mythology (“Endymion”, “Hyperion”, “Lamia” etc.) and goes on to write odes and sonnets. Keats’s later return to medievalism with “Isabella”, “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “La Belle Dame sans Merci” shows a more mature and even challenging approach to Spenserian chivalry. The attention to nature, social rituals and characters’ internal world are present, but there also is a sense of insecurity, danger and disillusion. Beauty, like love, is still highly important and relevant, yet it is affected and diminished by disagreeable human characteristics like greed and pride and also by the “wormy circumstance” of reality.

This thesis focuses on poems from the latter world of medieval imagination that revise the legacy of literary medievalism. Keats’s medieval poems gain an almost surgical precision in their visual descriptions and put his notion of “Negative Capability”⁷⁴ into practice. The best example of this concept is “La Belle Dame sans Merci” where the indeterminacies of the knight’s experience with the lady make the reader dwell in unexplained mysteries that create questions and space for the imagination. However, the three romances are essentially *anti*-romances due to their tragic content. Therefore the genre no longer provides an escape from everyday hardships such as heartbreak, woe and death as it did in the idealised chivalric world presented in *Poems* that promises social, poetic and romantic success. The pursuit and experience of love lie in the centre of all three narratives and we see downfalls in all cases: the knight is abandoned, Isabella dies from grief and despite

⁷² Henry A. Beers, *A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2015) 129.

⁷³ Štěpáník, 21. Interestingly, Keats believes that in “Isabella” (written one year after the publication of *Poems*), there is “too much inexperience of life and simplicity of knowledge in it”, hence still a certain degree of naiveness and lack of world understanding. “To Richard Woodhouse”, 21 September 1819, in *Letters*, 351.

⁷⁴ “To George and Tom Keats”, 21, 27 December 1817, in *Letters*, 60.

Madeline and Porphyro's successful union, they are social outcasts with an insecure future. In addition, these relationships are portrayed as causing families to fall apart: Isabella's brothers flee the city and it is most probable that Madeline and Porphyro's family feud will only intensify after their escape. Keats therefore reconsiders the sense of romance as an all-positive, magic-imbued, determinate genre, highlighting also the consequences that universal human characteristics such as jealousy, pride and desire for financial success can bring.

Keats's medievalism includes characteristic thematic concerns such as courtly love, chivalry and religious and social rituals, all of which can be connected to class/social status, gender politics and sexuality. However, because this thesis wishes to address the features that give the poems their beauty and poetic effect, these themes will not be assessed as social issues, but as ageless universal themes of mankind. Keats portrays artistic aspects of medieval culture such as tapestry, architecture, stained glass, religious paintings, statues, decorated furniture and even musical instruments — these arts are especially present in castle interiors, described in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Calidore". The exterior is often associated with animals (horses, lances) and nature that is either English in the Arthurian/Spenserian tradition (lakes, forests, landscapes, meads, ivy) or Italian in "Isabella". However, Walter H. Evert notes that Keats also incorporates some elements (evening, night, sun, gold, nature sounds, nightingale) which he "habitually associated with both Apollo and poetic composition".⁷⁵ The technique of pathetic fallacy is at play in several poems, showing nature and the weather as a reflection of high human spirit ("Calidore") as well as mental instability, sexual awakening and sadness ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "Isabella"). The combination of exterior and interior descriptions adds a spatial dimension to the poems, painting together with the medieval imagery vivid scenes that the Pre-Raphaelites selectively recreate. The setting and atmosphere associated with the medieval period are wonderfully captured by Keats, but in his later medieval poems, they become subjected to increasing scepticism fuelled by the poet who is immersed "fully into the feeling",⁷⁶ which John Barnard relates to the notion of expressing "psychological truth".⁷⁷ In contrast to his earlier emphasis on poetry as an escapist force, a part of Keats's developed philosophy by 1819 is that he believes that it is his responsibility to express emotions in his poetry as "Propria Persona"⁷⁸ — hence based on his personal experience, not mediated through a pre-existing aesthetic agenda. However, I will show through an aesthetic reading that Keats's poems

⁷⁵ Walter H. Evert, *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1965) 94.

⁷⁶ "To Richard Woodhouse", 21, 22 September 1819, in *Letters*, 352.

⁷⁷ John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987) 79.

⁷⁸ "To Richard Woodhouse", 21, 22 September 1819, in *Letters*, 352.

convey thoughts and images that characterise the ambitions, desires and experience of *humanity*, not solely his own.

Jonathan Bate refers to Romanticism as the “biographical age”⁷⁹ when the revised notion of authorship assumes that there is always a personal level to poems. This style of critical reading is applied for example in Charles A. Brown’s *Shakespeare’s Autobiographical Poems*, especially in relation to the Bard’s sonnets. There is certainly a biographical level to reading Keats’s sonnets, but also (which is the focal interest of this thesis) his medieval poems. A personal level is surely present in the 1817 “Calidore”, which is a personalised rewriting of Spenser’s Knight of Courtesy of Book VI of *The Faerie Queen* whose romantic and chivalric inexperience reflects Keats’s own optimism as a starting poet and rather naïve over-excitement for the future. The fragment’s landscape is clearly inspired by the scenery where Keats reads Spenser’s epic.⁸⁰ Another biographical detail relevant to our discussion worth mentioning is Keats’s lower middle-class background. Class is a source of anxiety for Keats and it fuels his desire to produce successful romance narratives (an effort that lasts his entire poetic career) to show that he can do so despite being a “Cockney”⁸¹ without a university or indeed any comprehensive classical education as well as without a solid financial and aristocratic status like his contemporaries Lord Byron and P. B. Shelley. This anxiety can also explain his choice of Boccaccio’s tale as his literary source where Lorenzo is from a lower class than Isabella and therefore is regarded as a socially unsuitable partner. According to Diane Hoeveler, the “horror of the decapitated head” embodies Keats’s desire “to bury his grief for his parent’s deaths, *repudiate his middle class origins*, and deny his attraction to ‘Romance’”.⁸² Despite the stimulating debate and variety of interpretation that the biographical background of the poems brings, further discussion of it is not relevant to my consideration of the poems’ aesthetics of narrative style and imagery that I perceive to form the core of Keats’s literary value.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 2008) 39.

⁸⁰ “From the playground stretched a garden one hundred yards in length...and further on was a sweep of greensward, beyond which existed a pond, sometimes dignified as “The Lake” ... At the far end of the pond... beneath the iron railings which divided our premises from the meadow beyond, whence the song of the nightingales in May would reach us in the stillness of night, there stood a rustic arbour, where John Keats and I used to sit and read Spenser’s “Faerie Queene” together, when he had left school, and used to come over from Edmonton, where he was apprenticed to Thomas Hammond the surgeon.” (Dorothy Hewlett, *A Life of John Keats* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1949) 27. My emphasis.)

⁸¹ The nickname “Cockney” originates from the article “On the Cockney School of Poetry” by “Z.” (most likely John Gibson Lockhart), printed in October 1817 in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* which attacks Hunt and his circle of “young poets”, including Keats.

⁸² Diane Long Hoeveler, “Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats’s *Isabella*”, in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49 (December, 1994) 321-338 at 324. My emphasis.

1.2 Thesis Aims and Argument

Keats is often associated with quotations like “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever”⁸³ and “Truth is beauty, beauty truth”.⁸⁴ In my thesis, I will argue that this reputation and the Pre-Raphaelite paintings based on Keats’s texts are not entirely accurate to their sources, as Keats’s aesthetics does not present “beauty” in the traditional way. Instead, Keats’s aesthetics is a mixture of contrasts between the worlds of fantasy and reality, which reconsiders the genre of romance. I will discuss Keats’s revision of the genre by focusing in depth on his later medieval poems (“Isabella”, “The Eve of St. Agnes” and the two versions of “La Belle Dame sans Merci”), analysing their features such as form, diction and imagery that contribute to their powerful aesthetic and visual effect. I will then examine how Keats’s later anti-romances are interpreted by the three founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who have contributed to the popularisation of his poetry. Through a careful study of a selected number of paintings and sketches in terms of scene selection, composition and colour spectrum, I will explain that despite considering Keats their inspiration, the Pre-Raphaelites are not fully loyal to their source. Key reasons for this are that their adaptations are subjected to Victorian conventions concerning painting compositions, sexuality and economy in order to be able to make a living and solid reputation as artists. Ironically, all of these predicaments shared with Keats who also struggled with critics’ unfavourable reviews of his poetry based on his class, education and distancing from and innovation of aesthetic conventions. The frequent presence of (selected) Keats’s stanzas alongside the paintings not only shows the interconnection of text and image, but also opens discussion on which lines they include and leave out and the effect of this selection on their and Keats’s legacy. Personalisation of the poems such as making the female characters (modelled by their wives) an object of the painter’s sexual desire and choosing a less climactic scene for its less overt sexuality meets not only the painter’s, but also the group’s agendas. Their portrayal of beauty with saturated colours and ornamental details exclude the complexities of Keats’s poetry that emphasises the price of love and fealty to social concepts.

Keats’s poetry is the object of communal admiration and inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelites. Though Dante Gabriel Rossetti praises it for showing “astonishingly real medievalism”,⁸⁵ it is important to know that Keats revises his medieval sources and makes alterations that match his personal aesthetics, creating a hybrid of medieval sources, culture and setting as well as Romantic/

⁸³ “Endymion”, I.1.

⁸⁴ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, in *The Complete Poems of John Keats*. 49.

⁸⁵ John Keats, *Keats at Wentworth Place: Poems written December 1818 to September 1820* (London: London Borough of Camden (Libraries & Arts Department), 1971) 3.

personal ideals. Medievalism therefore becomes subjected to the poet's, and later to the Pre-Raphaelites' fascination and revision. Keats's eventual distancing from Spenser and Hunt may be seen as a parallel to what Julie Codell describes as the Pre-Raphaelites' "Oedipal relationship to Old Masters and to older Victorian artists".⁸⁶ The painters do not always reflect scenes from Keats's poetry truthfully, as they include cultural iconography and modify the dynamics based on their personal understanding of the work and also in regard to their target audience. The paintings usually come with a quotation from their source, which makes it easier to determine the ekphrastic loyalty of the Pre-Raphaelites' visual interpretations of Keats's medieval poetry.

1.3 Methodology

This thesis addresses John Keats's medieval poetry and its adaptation in the visual art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As aesthetics is my central theme of interest, the theoretical concept of *ekphrasis* — which denotes "an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary"⁸⁷ — will be relevant to our discussion of Keats's medieval poetry as well as the Pre-Raphaelites who transfer the poems' rich descriptions into their visual medium.

The most renowned example of *ekphrasis* in Keats's poetry is the "Ode on a Grecian Urn". The choice of subject can be traced to the influence of the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon and art critics Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt, Keats's collaboration with the periodical *Annals of the Fine Arts*⁸⁸ and also to the importation of the Elgin Marbles to the British Museum that "reenergised in the early nineteenth century" the vogue of ekphrastic poetry emerging "in eighteenth century England".⁸⁹ The elaborate use of *ekphrasis* and intricate symbolism in the ode are recurring topics in criticism from the mid-twentieth century onwards. References and chapters dedicated to Keats's urn are, for example, in Murray Krieger's 1959 *The Play and the Place of Criticism*, James A. W. Heffernan's 1993 *Museum of Words*, W. J. T. Mitchell's 1994 *Picture Theory*, Grant F. Scott's 1994 *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* and, most recently, Stephan Cheeke's 2008 *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis*. While these studies do not directly address Keats's medieval poems, one can still use several points made in them in our discussion.

⁸⁶ Julie F. Codell, "Painting Keats: Pre-Raphaelite Artists Between Social and Transgressions and Painterly Conventions", in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 33, No. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1995) 341-370 at 341.

⁸⁷ "Ekphrasis", in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: OUP, 1996) 3rd edition, 515.

⁸⁸ Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is published in the January 1820 issue, adding to the periodical's emphasis on the close relation between poetry and art.

⁸⁹ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 108.

All these works are some form of reaction or application of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 literary criticism *Laocoön* that marks the beginning of the discussion on the (in)adequacies of the "sister arts": poetry and visual art. In his essay, the Enlightenment German art critic writes:

In poetry, sister-arts analogy has engendered a mania for *description* and in painting a mania for *allegory*, by attempting to make the former a *speaking picture*, without actually knowing what it could and ought to paint, and the latter a *silent poem*, without having considered to what degree it is able to express general ideas.⁹⁰

Lessing's rule that the "succession in time is the province of the poet, [and] coexistence in space is that of the artist"⁹¹ causes numerous critical reactions and developments of argument. Stephan Cheeke believes that the basis of poetry lies in "the temporal schema of language", putting the image into the "sequential elements of syntax" and the

[...] verbal description returns the picture to the world of narrative and agency, often revealing an ethical dimension — a moral pulse, a turn or decision, an occasion of will — that has been suspended in the still moment of the picture.⁹²

One can argue, however, that the issue of morality related to what decision the portrayed character(s) make is not as central to the Pre-Raphaelite painters who "popularise the notion of 'art for art's sake'" and therefore differentiate themselves from the "utilitarian ethos that formed the dominant ideology of the mid-century".⁹³ Furthermore, Lessing's concept of the "pregnant moment" (in Cheeke's definition a "free frame, a certain point in a known narrative",⁹⁴ such as the moment before Orpheus turns to his wife Eurydice)⁹⁵ is related to Keats's notion of stillness from "Ode on a Grecian Urn".⁹⁶ Both views can be easily connected to the idea of "life-as-art", which becomes more prominent in the latter part of the nineteenth century when it is adopted "as a paradigm for the cultivation of the individual sensibility of the aesthete: life will be ideally composed of a series of exquisite and art-like 'moments'".⁹⁷ The portrayal of such "moments" will be discussed in chapter 4 in relation to the Pre-Raphaelites' visual interpretations of Keats's poetry.

According to Heffernan, the central question of *ekphrasis* is that of "verbal representation of visual representation".⁹⁸ Firstly, however, Keats often describes fictional visual objects that are based on real-life sights such as displayed artefacts in museums and medieval churches. Secondly, the Pre-Raphaelites' approach to Keats's poetry is the converse of Heffernan's *ekphrasis* definition

⁹⁰ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Sampson, Low Marston, Low & Searle, 1957) 5. My emphasis.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹² Stephan Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: MUP, 2008) 5.

⁹³ Dinah Roe, "The Pre-Raphaelites", in *British Library*, 15 May 2014 <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-pre-raphaelites>> 3.1.2018

⁹⁴ Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, 23.

⁹⁵ A specific example of a painting with this "pregnant moment" is Frederic Leighton's 1864 'Orpheus and Eurydice'.

⁹⁶ In "Still unravish'd bride of quietness" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn", 1, my emphasis), the "still" serves as a pun, referring to the dual meaning of the word as a temporal adverb and as an adjective that connotes lack of movement.

⁹⁷ Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, 6.

⁹⁸ Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 3.

as their paintings are *visual* representations of Keats's *verbal* representations of visual objects. Therefore the term "ekphrastic paintings" is in place, as it attempts to capture the *mise-en-abîme* problematics of this particular case. In *Writing for Art*, Cheeke describes "the struggle between word and image"⁹⁹ as the two media that bring the fundamental question of which of them "comes closest to rendering the 'real'".¹⁰⁰ The discussion of which medium is closer to reflecting "reality" and the problem of representation dates back to Plato's *Republic* and his notion of artistic imitation (*mimesis*) as well as goes against the notion of "sister arts". Instead, their relationship can be described as a *paragone*, a hierarchic comparison of image/painting and text/language. Nonetheless, as Morris Eaves remarks, the "sister arts" notion is prominent in Romantic aesthetics that "names 'Vision' in poetry and 'Poetry' (in painting) among its highest ideals"¹⁰¹ without stating which is the better medium. A primary example of the close relationship between the two arts are William Blake's engravings and illustrations of various poetic works, including his own. Like Blake, the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti is also an artist-poet. According to Cheeke, Rossetti

[...] conceptualised the relationship of the sister arts in terms of the complementarity of flesh and spirit (i.e. words as *both* flesh and spirit to the spirit and flesh of the image), and his career as **artist-poet** was spent pursuing that idea of artistic transubstantiation, most often through the **figures of sexual love**.¹⁰²

It is important to note that in its beginnings in 1848, the Brotherhood is formed by three painters (Rossetti, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais) and Rossetti's activity as a poet as well as the eventual admission of critics and sculptors all show an attempt to merge the arts. There is a parallel between the erotisation and muting of a female object in Keats's poems where Madeline and the belle dame are objectified and compared to an aesthetic object of male pleasure, similarly to the models who pose for the Pre-Raphaelites. As I generally wish to distance from gender that opens the ground for socio-political discussion, I will use sources like Kelley's "Poetics and the Politics of Reception" that shows that the belle dame is an allegory, which keeps in line with Bloom's aforementioned assertion of figurative language as an aesthetic feature.

Cheeke further writes that painting is a "natural sign" that is "closer to the object to-be-represented than the arbitrary or non-natural sign system of the language".¹⁰³ For example, the viewer can notice a "complex iconographical code, a language of signs and symbols to suggest things that will happen in the future".¹⁰⁴ The main argument here is that the painting can sufficiently

⁹⁹ Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 4-5.

¹⁰¹ Morris Eaves, "The sister arts in British Romanticism", in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (New York: CUP, 2010) 229-261 at 230.

¹⁰² Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, 75. My bold emphasis.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 25.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 61-2.

convey more than the captured moment of a story — Leonardo da Vinci’s well-known fresco “The Last Supper” serves as a good example of this point.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to Cheeke, Mitchell considers *visible language*, “a form that combines sight and sound, picture and speech — that “makes us see” with vivid examples, theatrical gestures, clear descriptions and striking figures — the devices associated in classical rhetoric with *enargeia*”.¹⁰⁶ This thought is comparable to Mitchell’s “linguistics of the image”.¹⁰⁷ When discussing an image or text, one can definitely agree with Cheeke’s claim that there are “overlapping acts of perception”¹⁰⁸ of the poet, painter and their audience (the viewer/reader). In his study on the differences between the text, image and their “linkages to issues of power, value, and human interest”, Mitchell further differentiates between the poet/painter and text/image:

[...] (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; between “hearsay” and “eyewitness” testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience. We might adopt Michel de Certeau’s terminology and call the attempt to describe these differences a “heterology of representation”.¹⁰⁹

Parts of Mitchell’s list can certainly be linked to Keats’s poetry — the use of first as well as third person narratives; ambiguities caused by personal, subjective testimonies and uncertain circumstances caused by the real world; modes of experience in mortal/human and ethereal/supernatural life and wide spectrum of characters’ sensations such as passion, loss and woe.

The second key topic of my thesis is the Pre-Raphaelites’ visual representation of Keats’s poetry. The discussion is limited to selected works by the three founding members of the Brotherhood: William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Significant criticism on this topic that will be used in our discussion is Julie F. Codell’s 1995 article “Painting Keats”, Grant F. Scott’s 1999 “Language Strange: A Visual History of Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’”¹¹⁰ and Sarah Wootton’s 2006 *Consuming Keats*.¹¹¹ The following section will summarise these critical works and highlight arguments and concepts that are relevant to my thesis.

¹⁰⁵ The mural painting shows Jesus Christ at a meal table with company the moment after he says that one of the present apostles will betray him. The scene alone provides forecasts of the future: Christ’s outstretched arms and open palms are reminiscent of his crucifixion posture, the bread and wine are future representations of his body and blood and the apostles’ body language (leaning towards, sideways or back to Christ) gives hints of each man’s intentions.

¹⁰⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 114.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 112.

¹⁰⁸ Cheeke, *Writing for Art*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 5. Michel de Certeau’s quotation is from *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

¹¹⁰ Grant F. Scott, “Language Strange: A Visual History of Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci”, *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter, 1999) 503-535 at 505.

¹¹¹ Sarah Wootton, *Consuming Keats: Nineteenth-Century Representations in Art and Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Sarah Wootton begins her book with the statement that “fine art is a frequently overlooked, yet vital part of Keats’s posthumous development.”¹¹² There is no doubt that the Pre-Raphaelites play a huge role in the popularisation of Keats’s work, the medieval setting of which is in line with their emulations of

[...] the art of late medieval and early Renaissance Europe until the time of Raphael, an art characterised by minute description of detail, a luminous palette of bright colours that recalls the tempera paint used by medieval artists.¹¹³

However, considering that the aforementioned articles by Scott and Codell deal with the Pre-Raphaelites, it cannot be said to be an “overlooked” area. Furthermore, Wootton remarks that Keats’s poetry has a “creative indeterminacy”¹¹⁴ and is an “indefinite and indefinable subject”,¹¹⁵ which refers to the heavily interpretable nature of Keats’s poems that is subjected to a wide range of readings (such as aesthetic, feminist, social, ecological etc) since it offers a range of ambivalences and contradictions. The second and third chapters¹¹⁶ in which Wootton discusses selected works by the Brotherhood are most relevant to my thesis. The first listed chapter covers the debut works of the Brotherhood: Holman Hunt’s 1848 ‘The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro’ and ‘Lorenzo at His Desk at the Warehouse’ sketch and Millais’s 1849 painting ‘Isabella and Lorenzo’. Wootton considers their commentary on class, sexuality and interpersonal dynamics and the way the painters portray the figures. The chapter also moves forward in time and analyses Millais’s 1863 ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ and Holman Hunt’s 1868 ‘Isabella’, both of which convey a more developed interpretive approach to the source — in summary, personal emphases on rich decadence, the male gaze and nocturnal atmosphere outshine the poems’ sense of loss and fatality. Wootton’s fourth chapter includes Rossetti’s poetic and artistic relationship with Keats, but my main area of interest is Wootton’s explanation of Rossetti’s 1855 ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ sketch. Like Grant F. Scott, Wootton emphasises the sexual qualities of the illustration. She also sees the sketches as a sign of Rossetti’s “inability to interact creatively with Keats”¹¹⁷ due to the lack of any completed full-scale painting like Holman Hunt and Millais. It is indeed intriguing that the ballad does not receive a finished visual tribute until Arthur Hughes in 1863.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, one can agree with Wootton and Jerome McGann’s parallels between Keats and Rossetti’s ability to provide “multiple perspectives

¹¹² Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 9.

¹¹³ Jennifer Meagher, “The Pre-Raphaelites”, in *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, October 2014 <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/praf/hd_praf.htm> 3.1.2018.

¹¹⁴ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁶ “Pre-Raphaelite Visions of Keats’s Poetry” and “Rossetti’s Influence on Keats’s Posthumous Reputation”.

¹¹⁷ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 107.

¹¹⁸ Hughes’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ is one of the last to showcase a more victimised belle dame as the male “trophy”, as the reading of the figure as a *femme fatale* spreads by the 1890s.

in a single picture”¹¹⁹ and shared “indefiniteness” and “resistance to finality”.¹²⁰ In essence, Wootton’s remarks on body language and portrayal and choice of scene will be especially relevant to my aesthetic discussion.

Codell’s essay is a comparative study of Holman Hunt’s and Millais’s adaptations of “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “Isabella” that conflate the poems’ “events to heighten moral, social and psychological dichotomies”.¹²¹ Her focus is on the biographical and social backgrounds that influence the paintings. Evaluations by contemporary critics as well as Victorian art reviewers and Codell’s own comparative overview of the main themes of the painters’ and Keats’s works form a compact review of five paintings that are relevant to my thesis: Millais’s ‘Lorenzo and Isabella’, ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ and Holman Hunt’s ‘The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro’ and ‘Isabella and the Pot of Basil’. Codell makes a number of very good points that are worth including here. One of them is the presence of *intertextuality*: Millais’s Lorenzo is a “composite”¹²² of himself and Keats (therefore emphasising his self-identification with the poet), Victorian “iconography”¹²³ like mistletoe and embellishing elements such as the greyhound that appears both in Holman Hunt’s ‘The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro’ as well as Millais’s ‘Lorenzo and Isabella’, but not in the original poems. Another point is the clash of the *private* (sexual desires, grief, madness) and *public* (social class, economic responsibilities, family pride) space that causes a crisis. For example, Codell believes that Millais’s ‘Isabella and Lorenzo’ embraces “the conflicting themes of love and duty” and “fuses dramatic themes woven throughout the poem: the revelation of desire, the deferral of sexual consummation, and the threat of death”.¹²⁴ I will consider and discuss these points in chapter 4 when providing my own reading of the paintings. Even though this thesis wishes to marginalise biographical and historical details as much as possible in order to make space for aesthetic analyses and close reading, Codell’s inclusion of information as to which Keats’s stanzas (if any) accompanied the paintings are important for my discussion of how *ekphrastically* successful the paintings are. The last area of interest that I wish to address is what Codell refers to as “fetishized pastiches of art history and literature”¹²⁵ — in my summary, *artistic interpretation over historical accuracy*. In a similar way that Keats compiles topoi from (both original and imitations of) medieval art and literature, the Pre-Raphaelite medieval paintings experiment with different periods. As a result, their work (similarly to Keats’s poems) lack a temporal setting. They both

¹¹⁹ Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must be Lost* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 106.

¹²⁰ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 184.

¹²¹ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 362.

¹²² *Ibid*, 347.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 352.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 348.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 350.

present a fictional narrative “pregnant moment” in a historical past that is re-imagined and portrayed in a way that can still reflect current-day issues such as social order, sexuality and mental health while being acceptable to the reading/viewing public. By “cocooning” contemporary and personal concerns into past settings, both Holman Hunt and Millais increase their chances of economic success, though as Codell notes, their treatment of the medieval past (or their rendition of it) lacks “nostalgia, idealism, nationalism, or heroicizing”.¹²⁶ Instead, the Pre-Raphaelites seem to recast Keats’s medievalism in a way that accentuates or at the very least hints at sexuality and the artist’s unstable position in Victorian society. In this light, it truly sounds more like the Brotherhood does not really act in Keats’s interest but rather in their own, shaping the literary material in a way that conveys their social, economic, artistic and personal agendas such as rebelling against the conventions established by the Royal Academy.

Scott’s article covers the visual history of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” interpretations by nineteenth-century artists, examining “how they interpreted the rich set of ambiguities offered by one of the most haunting and spare of all romantic texts.”¹²⁷ Though the paper provides a clear overview of the changed approach towards the source in relation to developing gender codes, influenced namely by the suffragette movement and Darwinian theories¹²⁸ that are engaging discourses, it is mainly Scott’s examination of Rossetti’s 1855 sketch that I will be referring to. Scott notices among Rossetti’s four sketches a pattern of “full-length portraits that depict the knight and lady close up against blank backdrops, an effect that heightens the psychological tension between the figures”.¹²⁹ The relation between psychology and interpersonal relationships is shown through the figures’ body language and the drawing’s visual features (composition, level of detail, etc) between the public and the private spheres. My analysis will address all three available sketches (1848, 1850 and 1855) that not only exemplify the numerous visual approaches to a single poetic source, but also Rossetti’s general long-term fascination with Keats. Holman Hunt and Millais also repeatedly return to his poems as material for serving their particular aesthetic and political ends.

¹²⁶ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 350.

¹²⁷ Scott, “Language Strange”, 505.

¹²⁸ Darwinian theories following the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species* lead to the haunting 1926 oil painting by Frank Cadogan Cowper, where the knight-dame relationship is paralleled to that of a lethal spider and its victim.

¹²⁹ Scott, “Language Strange”, 506.

Chapter 2: Aesthetics of Keats and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

“[...] it is no mean gratification to become acquainted with Men who in their admiration do not jumble together Shakespeare and Darwin.”¹³⁰ — Keats to C. C. Clarke

2.1 Keats’s Mentors: Hunt, Haydon and Hazlitt

The visual qualities of Keats’s medieval poems can be traced to the influence and mentorship of three people: the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, and the art critics Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt. While pointing out autobiographical details will not be the basis of our reading here, it is important to establish what kind of education in the visual arts and poetry Keats gains from these men. This section therefore addresses the specific roles Hunt, Haydon and Hazlitt play in Keats’s aesthetic development, which can be traced both in Keats’s letters and subsequent critical studies.

Leigh Hunt is described by Jeffrey N. Cox as “the intellectual and political leader of the Cockney School and thus, more generally speaking, of ‘second generation’ English Romanticism”.¹³¹ An important figure of the London literary circles, Hunt plays a significant role in the launch of Keats’s career. Most importantly, he publishes Keats’s “O Solitude” in the 1816 issue of *The Examiner* and quotes Keats’s sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”¹³² in his essay “Young Poets”. In this manifesto, Hunt promotes a new “school of poetry” that returns to more earnest and traditional values, aiming “to restore the same love of Nature, and of thinking instead of mere talking, which formerly rendered us real poets, and not merely versifying wits, and bead rollers of couplets.”¹³³ However, Hunt and his circle of “young poets”, including Keats and Haydon, are repeatedly attacked in Z.’s¹³⁴ “On the Cockney School of Poetry” series published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* between October 1817 and August 1818. The anonymous reviewer criticises mainly Hunt for being “a man certainly of some talents, of extravagant pretensions both in wit, poetry, and politics, and withal of exquisitely bad taste, and extremely vulgar modes of thinking and manners in all respects”,¹³⁵ especially in his criticism of English poetry (namely Pope and the Lake Poets). The group is attacked for their “extreme moral depravity”

¹³⁰ “To C. C. Clarke”, 9 October 1816, in *Letters*, 7.

¹³¹ Jeffrey N. Cox, “Leigh Hunt’s *Foliage*: a Cockney manifesto” in *Leigh Hunt: Life, poetics, politics*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London: Routledge, 2004) 58-77 at 59.

¹³² Keats’s reference to (and reverence of) Chapman’s Elizabethan translation of Homer instead of Pope’s Augustan, and more recent, translation serves as a demonstration of Hunt’s literary preference.

¹³³ John Kandler, “The politics of Keats’s early poetry”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) 1-19 at 1.

¹³⁴ The same anonymous reviewer, most probably the conservative John Gibson Lockhart, criticises Keats’s publication of “Endymion” in the identical journal in August 1818.

¹³⁵ Z., “On the Cockney School of Poetry. No. I.”, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* 2 (October 1817) 38-40. Online: <<http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=36071>> 4.1.2017

and preference of “ITALIAN”¹³⁶ over Latin and Greek, a preference due to their “low birth and low habits”.¹³⁷ Keats admires Hunt (“Libertas”),¹³⁸ but this changes by the end of 1818 when he becomes increasingly irritated by Hunt’s strong opinions and self-promoting individualism:

It is a great Pity that People should be associating themselves with the finest things, spoil them - Hunt has damned Hampstead and Masks and Sonnets and *Italian tales*.¹³⁹

[Hunt] understands many a beautiful thing, but then, instead of giving other minds credit for the same degree of perception as he himself possesses, he begins an explanation of such a curious manner that our taste and self love is offended continually.¹⁴⁰

Aware of his harmful reputation as “Hunt’s elev ”,¹⁴¹ Keats gradually distances himself from him in order to gain greater poetic autonomy. Turning from medieval to more Classical themes, Keats perceives his first long romance “Endymion” as “a test, a trial of *my* Powers of Imagination and chiefly of *my* invention”¹⁴² and therefore as a means to show poetic independence.

Despite this growing dissociation with Hunt, it cannot be said that Keats does not benefit from his friendship and collaboration with Hunt. On the level of poetry, Keats is inspired by Hunt to try his hand on medievalism following Hunt’s publication of “The Story of Rimini” in February 1816, resulting in his Spenserian poems. There is also a topical socio-political level of reading to consider with regard to “The Story of Rimini”. Hunt presents a liberal message in his retelling of Dante’s *Inferno*, as Francesca “serves to illustrate the absence of freedom experienced by wives, as well as non-conformist liberal writers”¹⁴³ like Hunt himself who is imprisoned at Surrey Gaol from 1813 to 1815 for attacking the Prince Regent in print. We do not see Keats make such social commentaries in his early work just yet, but instead he rewrites Spenser’s Knight of Courtesy to reflect his own inexperience and aspirations. In Kucich’s opinion, such reformulations by Keats and Hunt are aimed to “demonstrate a calculated, intrusive familiarity, or casual intimacy, with sources of cultural authority hitherto considered off-limits for plebians who make rhymes in Cockney accents.”¹⁴⁴ Hunt’s “Rimini” is essentially a manifesto of the literary circle’s beliefs. The language is colloquial, using controversial Cockney rhymes¹⁴⁵ and abundant heroic couplets that serve as “a

¹³⁶ Z., “On the Cockney School of Poetry. No. I.”. Original capitalisation.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Hunt is referred to as *Libertas* in “Specimen” (61), “To My Brother George (24) and “To Charles Cowden Clarke” (44). The nickname conveys Keats’s perspective of Hunt as a figure of liberty and individual thought.

¹³⁹ “To Haydon”, 21 March 1818. Keats’s choice of Boccaccio’s “Decameron” as the main source for his “Isabella, or A Pot of Basil” can be seen as a reaction to Hunt’s low opinion of Italian literary sources.

¹⁴⁰ “To George and Georgiana”, 17 December 1818, in *Letters*, 220.

¹⁴¹ “To Benjamin Bailey”, 8 October 1817, in *Letters*, 42.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* My emphasis.

¹⁴³ Michael Eberle-Sinatra, *Leigh Hunt and the London Literary Scene* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 63.

¹⁴⁴ Greg Kucich, “Cockney Chivalry: Hunt, Keats and the Aesthetics of Excess”, in *Leigh Hunt: Life, poetics, politics*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London: Routledge, 2004) 118-134 at 129.

¹⁴⁵ Examples of Cockney rhymes from Hunt’s “The Story of Rimini”: “eye/gravity” (I: 333-4), “eye/sensibility” (III: 48-9), “eye/ tenderly” (III: 178-9). In *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*. London: Edward Moxon, 1844. All further references to this poem will be included in footnotes as “The Story of Rimini”.

departure from the ostentatiously learned Latinate poetry of Dryden and Pope”.¹⁴⁶ Kucich claims that this combination extends “the radical linguistic theory of his [Hunt and Keats’s] time, inserting ‘low’ speech into the register of high culture.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Hunt’s high opinion of Spenser also transfers to Keats, who applies Spenser’s dreamy elements and pictorial qualities in his own poetry that Hunt equates to “walls glowing with life and colour”.¹⁴⁸ Hunt’s significant role in London intellectual circles proves valuable for Keats’s further development as a “passionate student of pictures”,¹⁴⁹ as it is through Hunt that he meets Haydon in October 1816 and becomes more familiar with Hazlitt and his criticism in September 1817. In summary, Keats learns from Hunt to appreciate authors from before the Enlightenment period (namely Renaissance) and to confidently add Cockney rhymes into his poetry (though this was repeatedly mocked in more reviews than only Z’s). Hunt essentially begins Keats’s aesthetic education and fuels his enthusiasm for beauty and poetry that together provide “bowers fair”.¹⁵⁰ However, the refuge offered by poetry and its perception as a form of “leafy luxury”¹⁵¹ are notions that Keats challenges, especially in “Isabella”.

The painter and (like Hunt) opinionated Benjamin Robert Haydon shares Keats’s appreciation of beauty. The painter is, in Ian Jack’s words, “always urging Keats to nourish his imagination on paintings, works of sculpture, faces and attitudes, and above all on the scenes of external nature.”¹⁵² The Hunt circle believes that English art is “poised on the threshold of a great new era”¹⁵³ and even though Haydon criticises the Royal Academy (established in 1768), he agrees that its establishment marks “the beginning of this revival.”¹⁵⁴ A museum companion¹⁵⁵ and frequent visitor to Haydon’s studio, Keats’s admiration is conveyed by including the painter among the “Great Spirits”¹⁵⁶ (together with Wordsworth and Hunt) and his art among the “three things superior in the modern world”.¹⁵⁷ Haydon’s advice includes being “alone to improve”¹⁵⁸ (therefore supporting his solitary travels) as well as gaining independence from Hunt: “Keats don’t show your Lines [*Endymion*] to Hunt on any account or he will have done half for you”.¹⁵⁹ Haydon expresses

¹⁴⁶ Eberle-Sinatra, *Leigh Hunt and the London Literary Scene*, 68.

¹⁴⁷ Kucich, “Cockney Chivalry: Hunt, Keats and the Aesthetics of Excess”, 129.

¹⁴⁸ Leigh Hunt, “Imagination and Fancy”, in *Leigh Hunt’s Literary Criticism*, ed. L. H. and C. W. Houtchens (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956) 445.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵⁰ John Keats, “Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison”, in *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, 9.

¹⁵¹ Ayumi Mizukoshi, “The Cockney Politics of Gender—the Cases of Hunt and Keats”, in *Romanticism on the Net* 14 (May, 1999) <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005851ar>> 1.5.2017

¹⁵² Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 42.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁵⁵ It is with Haydon that Keats visits the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum in March 1817, an experience that inspires the eponymous sonnets.

¹⁵⁶ “To B. R. Haydon”, 20 November 1816, in *Letters*, 9.

¹⁵⁷ “To George and Tom Keats”, 13 January 1818, in *Letters*, 70.

¹⁵⁸ “To J. H. Reynolds”, 17 March 1817, in *Letters*, 12.

¹⁵⁹ “To Benjamin Bailey”, 8 October 1817, in *Letters*, 42.

admiration of Keats by including the poet's face (together with Wordsworth's, Hazlitt's and others') in his 1820 'Christ's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem'. Despite this complimentary camaraderie and general respect for each other's work, Keats grows tired of the painter's "worn out discourses of poetry and painting" in addition to Hunt's "many times heard puns and music"¹⁶⁰ until he "never see[s] Haydon or Co."¹⁶¹ anymore. Haydon's quarrels with Hunt and Reynolds by mid-January 1818, together with his financial irresponsibility (namely unreturned loans), lead to the painter and poet's falling out in 1820. Until then, Haydon cultivates Keats's artistic ambition and self-reliance, contributing to his growing dissociation from the Cockney school and especially Hunt.¹⁶²

In January 1818, Keats names William Hazlitt's "depth of taste" among the "three things superior in the modern world".¹⁶³ Hunt's absence from this list conveys the growing importance of other figures and their art: Wordsworth's poetry, Haydon's painting and Hazlitt's criticism like *Lectures on the English Poets*.¹⁶⁴ Jack considers Hazlitt as a combination of Hunt and Haydon, functioning as Keats's "mentor who understood painting, as well as literature".¹⁶⁵ Hazlitt's lectures add Shakespeare¹⁶⁶ as well as Chaucer¹⁶⁷ to Keats's list of literary idols and it is certain from Hazlitt's numerous allusions to paintings as well as foundational literature that Keats learns to see nature as well as read literary works with "a painter's eye"¹⁶⁸ and consequently write poetry "with the creative eye of a lover of art."¹⁶⁹ Essentially, Keats's letters reflect on Hazlitt's lectures, and his poetry becomes even more descriptively visual, namely the medieval poems like "The Eve of St. Agnes" that is compared to a "drapery" with its "colouring" of "Character and Sentiment".¹⁷⁰ Keats's return to Italian material that Hunt "cheapened by his advocacy of them"¹⁷¹ can be ascribed to the following remark made in Hazlitt's fourth lecture:

[...] a translation of some of the [...] serious tales in Boccaccio [...] as that of Isabella [...] if executed with taste and spirit, could not fail to succeed in the present day.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁰ "To Georgiana Wylie Keats", 15 January 1820, in *Letters*, 407.

¹⁶¹ "To Georgiana Wylie Keats", 13 January 1820, in *Letters*, 405.

¹⁶² The evolution of Keats's and Haydon's friendship is covered in more detail, for example, in Clarke Olney's "John Keats and Benjamin Robert Haydon", in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 49 (1934) 258–275.

¹⁶³ "To George and Tom Keats", 13, 19 January 1818, in *Letters*, 70.

¹⁶⁴ Hunt's appreciation of Spenser could also be a product of Hazlitt's influence.

¹⁶⁵ Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 59.

¹⁶⁶ There is an increase in Shakespearean allusions in Keats's letters which slowly replace Spenserian phrases. This new fascination inspires the writing of the sonnet "On Sitting Down to King Lear Once Again" in January 1818.

¹⁶⁷ Hazlitt's lectures on Chaucerean strengths, such as narrative powers, psychic interiority and deep pathos, influence Keats's adaptation of Boccaccio. In Kucich's words, "Isabella" is Keats's "first well-condensed narrative and his first successful portrait of pathos" and includes "narrative devices such as the dream vision and descriptive elements (Isabella's collapse in grief)" which derive from passages in Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Knight's Tale" that Hazlitt admires. "Keats and English Poetry", in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, 186–202 at 188.

¹⁶⁸ Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 73.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ "To John Taylor", 17 November 1819, in *Letters*, 395.

¹⁷¹ Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 71–2.

¹⁷² William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845) 98. My emphasis.

Keats does not exactly translate, but *retells* Boccaccio's story in "Isabella, or A Pot of Basil", which marks both his return to medievalism and departure from Huntian influences. However, it is undeniable that Keats's aesthetic development, artistic ambition and infinitely appreciative approach towards poetry and art are traceable to the mentorship of Hunt, Haydon and Hazlitt. Keats gains from them the belief that the visual arts and poetry are interrelated and the next section will focus on the ways in which Keats treats his medieval(ist) sources in terms of thematic concerns, visual qualities and form in attempt to convey his own personal aesthetic take on medievalism.

*"I wish the Italian would supersede french in every School throughout the Country, for that is full of real Poetry and Romance of a kind more fitted for the Pleasure of Ladies than perhaps our own."*¹⁷³
— Keats to Fanny Keats

2.2 Keats's Revision of *Decameron's* Lisabetta in "Isabella, Or A Pot of Basil"

The opening quotation may be seen as ironic, considering that Keats chooses to rewrite Boccaccio's tragic and gruesome tale of Isabella from the fifth novel in Day/Book 4 of *Decameron*.¹⁷⁴ Since the original source is a short piece of prose, it is all the more significant which parts Keats extends in his 504-line narrative poem. Structurally, the poem is composed of 63 stanzas and the three main themes in accordance to the length in which they are discussed are: the lovers (13 stanzas), Isabella's planning and unearthing of Lorenzo's body (8 stanzas) and the vision of Lorenzo (7 stanzas). This statistic shows that the lovers and Lorenzo's supernatural and horrendous physical rebirth are in the centre of Keats's interest. The latter is not usually associated with romance and is actually unsuitable for female readership, which goes against Keats's quotation above. The poet adds to the irony by enlarging and adding "more realistic such details as the physical decay of Lorenzo's corpse, the exhuming and severing of Lorenzo's head, and Isabella's madness" and so in the tale, "romance is put down by "wormy circumstance.""¹⁷⁵ The reader is meant to be shocked by Isabella's necrophilia that is brought by her mental instability and sexual frustration.

Sexuality is not as intense a concern in Boccaccio where Lorenzo is implied to be experienced and confident. He chooses Isabella "over all other beauties in the City, which might allure any affection from him" (*Decameron*, 325) and there seems to be a more emotional and

¹⁷³ "To Fanny Keats", 10 September 1817, in *Letters*, 33.

¹⁷⁴ It is most probable that Keats read John Florio's 1620 translation of *Decameron* (published by Iaggard in London). A similar translation is available in *Decameron*, trans. Ivone C. Benedetti (Porto Alegre: L&PM Editores, 2013). All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as "*Decameron*".

¹⁷⁵ Jack Stillinger, "Keats and Romance", in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1968) 593-605 at 593.

innocent physical attachment as their “love grew to a mutual embracing, both equally respecting one another, and entertaining kindnesses, as occasion gave leave” (*Decameron*, 325). In contrast, Keats’s lovers share a passion that is “both meek and wild” (“Isabella”, 48) and their “honeyless days and days” (“Isabella”, 32)¹⁷⁶ lead to love-sickness. We see great physical and mental improvement after they confess to their feelings for each other, as their happiness grows “like a lusty flower in June’s caress” (“Isabella”, 72). Therefore sexuality at this stage is not demoralising, but liberating. Keats often parallels Lorenzo and Isabella to flowers and animals, which accentuates their pureness and naturalness in comparison to Isabella’s brothers who are connected to negative human emotions like jealousy and deceit that are triggered by their desire for wealth. All of their innocence is lost when their love is subjected to the Lorenzo’s murder, reburial, decapitation and Isabella’s insanity. Though these gruesome elements are unsettling, they satisfy the readership of the Gothic genre. Keats warns that it is not his intention to rewrite an “old prose in modern rhyme more sweet” (“Isabella”, 155), but Stillinger considers this claim to be an “understatement”,¹⁷⁷ considering the number of macabre details that correspond to Keats’s tactic to show distance from Hunt’s aesthetics of luxury, beauty and pleasure.

It is especially Herbert G. Wright¹⁷⁸ who notes the plot correlations between Keats’s “Isabella” and Boccaccio’s *Lisabetta*. Keats mostly follows Boccaccio’s example, except for a few instances where he either expands or slightly modifies the circumstances. A noticeable difference between the two versions is the strong narrative voice in Keats’s poem, who provides interjections,¹⁷⁹ a dedication to the “eloquent and famed Boccaccio” (“Isabella”, 145) and warnings of the nearing turn from the “gentleness of old Romance” (“Isabella”, 387) to “wormy circumstance” (“Isabella”, 385). The narrator is aware of his source and the direction the story must take as well as feels insecure about doing the Italian poet justice with his verse retelling “in [the] English tongue / An echo of thee in the north-wind sung” (“Isabella”, 159-60). Keats is evidently aware that the rewriting from Italian to English will give the tale a different rhythm, melody and overall take away from the impression of being in an Italian setting.

Both Keats and Boccaccio portray pathos of love, deceit and grief, which are emotions that fall into the romance and tragedy traditions. Though Keats’s focus in the opening is on the lovers (“Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel! / Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love’s eye!”, 1-2), which opposes Boccaccio’s first introduction of the “three young men, Brethren, and Merchants by their common

¹⁷⁶ “Honey” has sexual connotations, as we see in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (26) and “The Eve of St. Agnes” (49).

¹⁷⁷ Stillinger, “Keats and Romance”, 599.

¹⁷⁸ Wright explores the correlations in his paper “Possible Indebtedness of Keats’s ‘Isabella’ to the *Decameron*”, in *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (July 1951) 248-254.

¹⁷⁹ An example of narrative interjection is stanza 16 where the voice criticises the brothers’ pride.

profession" (*Decameron*, 325) that immediately brings forth his focus on issues of class, hierarchy and mercantilism. Keats adapts and *accentuates* this social perspective further by changing the setting from Sicilian Messina to the Tuscan capital of Florence that is "renowned for busy commercial enterprise".¹⁸⁰ While Boccaccio simply states that the brothers are "very rich by the death of their Father" (*Decameron*, 325), Keats accentuates the human and environmental price of their "ancestral merchandize" ("Isabella", 106) in stanzas 14 and 15. Striking imagery includes "many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt / In blood from stinging whip" ("Isabella", 109-10). These depictions are clear references to different forms of social subjugation present in Keats's time, namely colonial slavery and serfdom that represent violence and suffering for the price of managing property and gaining wealth. The emphasis on the efforts, pain and deaths behind the family's wealth functions as part of Keats's criticism of their class, values and personal characteristics like "hungry pride and gainful cowardice" ("Isabella", 130). There is an implied class difference in Boccaccio's tale, but Keats's version makes it all the more prominent through the descriptions of the suffering the brothers' selfish intentions that affect both their immediate family and subjects. Isabella is clearly treated as property, as her fate is sealed by her brothers' plan to marry her to "some high noble and his olive trees" ("Isabella", 168), which will in return secure further family wealth. Both Boccaccio's and Keats's brothers choose family reputation over their sister's happiness: they have "many deliberations" (*Decameron*, 326) and "many a jealous conference" ("Isabella", 169) to get rid of Lorenzo (whose affection is seen as a "crime", 172) in a way that "no scandall might ensue to them, or their Sister" (*Decameron*, 326). The unfavourable brothers are therefore linked to jealousy, intrigue, greed and pride, all of which are negative characteristics that portray them as villains.

Both versions portray Isabella's melodramatic reactions of sighing, moaning and weeping. However, a significant difference is her reaction following the vision: in Boccaccio, she "sighed and wept exceedingly" before resolving to go visit the envisioned place to see if it "should carry any likelihood of truth" (*Decameron*, 327) while Keats's Isabella *laughs*¹⁸¹ and immediately plans a secret outing in order to "find the clay, so dearly prized, / And sing to it one latest lullaby" ("Isabella", 339-40).¹⁸² It is noteworthy that both versions show a similarly subservient Isabella who shows no anger despite discovering that "a brother's bloody knife" ("Isabella", 333) is

¹⁸⁰ Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 280.

¹⁸¹ Her laughter may be a possible hint of Ophelia-like insanity.

¹⁸² Keats associates Isabella with song throughout his romance, which is an aesthetic addition addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.

involved in Lorenzo's murder. Boccaccio's Isabella even has to obtain the "favour of her brethren, to ride a dayes journey ney the City" (*Decameron*, 327) to attest the vision's verity. However, one can understand this behaviour as proof of Isabella's intense emotional dedication to Lorenzo and loyalty to her family. Isabella and the Nurse's unearthing of Lorenzo's body is strongly reminiscent of birth-giving, which corresponds with Keats's repeated suggestions of Isabella's dual role as a lover and mother that is Keats's own creative addition to the original tale. Isabella is in control of the decapitation in both versions: Boccaccio's heroine uses a "keene razor" to divide "the head from the body" (*Decameron*, 328) while Keats's Isabella uses a knife of "duller steel than the *Persian sword*" ("Isabella", 393, my emphasis) to first "dig more fervently than *misers* can" ("Isabella", 368, my emphasis) and then to "cut away" ("Isabella", 394) Lorenzo's head. Keats adds all at once a surgical, biblical and mythological dimension to the beheading, which makes the scene a hybrid of cultures and allusions that are not strictly medieval. Both versions show Isabella kissing and washing the head. Yet Keats's protagonist is depicted to be treating it as a "prize" ("Isabella", 402) and pampering it like a doll which only highlights her mental disturbance (lines 403-408). In contrast to the thriving basil under which Lorenzo's hidden head is decomposing, Isabella's beauty is visibly and publicly decaying — her eyes are "sunke into her head" (*Decameron*, 328) and she even appears "dead" ("Isabella", 453). These oppositions show a reconsideration of romance as well as a clear purpose to unsettle the reader with a woman nurturing and idealising a pot with her lover's buried head as a symbol of lost love and means of escaping reality. Keats's notion of "wormy circumstance" refers to the decaying head that is "(as yet) not so much consumed" and still recognisable by "the lockes of haire" (*Decameron*, 329) and "vile with green and livid spot" ("Isabella", 475). This specific image is a perfect example of the authors' distancing from "gentleness of Romance" (387) and also Hunt's notions of beauty. Isabella's solitude, tragic loss and consequent death is expressed by her words that become the lyrics of an "excellent" (*Decameron*, 329) and "sad" ("Isabella", 501) ditty:

Cruell and unkinde was the Christian?
That robd me of my Basiles blisse, etc. (*Decameron*, 329)

[...] "O cruelty, /
To steal my Basil-pot away from me!" ("Isabella", 503-4)

Boccaccio's version has a religious and ironic level, as Isabella is naïvely loyal towards her brothers who are already once guilty of robbing her of her "blisse". Keats slightly rewrites the lyrics, turning the initial question into an exclamation where "cruelty" is personified, which is a rhetorical device frequently used by the Romantics, namely in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and Keats's own

“Ode to a Grecian Urn”. This dramatic modification creates a more energetic conclusion to the ballad while Boccaccio’s version with the indefinite and also highly subversive “etc” is evocative of Isabella’s echoing grief that continues even after her death.

2.3 Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes” and its Medieval, Renaissance and Romantic Sources

“The Eve of St. Agnes” is often praised for its synaesthetic and visual qualities and is unique among Keats’s poetry as a romance with successful reconciliation, albeit insecure future of the lovers. The backbone of the entire narrative is without doubt the ritual, which is “mentioned by two writers at least with whom Keats was very familiar: by Ben Jonson in his masque *The Satyr* and Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*”, as well as “an eighteenth century book of reference which he may have known also, Brand’s *Popular Antiquities*”.¹⁸³ The full rite is described in stanza 7 as a form of instruction for Madeline. According to Colvin, the feature of the lover who acquires “his mistress after her fasting dream with exquisite viands and music” is not included in any of these sources, and hence “Keats must either have invented it or drawn it from some other authority which criticism has not yet recognised.”¹⁸⁴ The storyline itself is not entirely of Keats’s invention either, as it is suggested by Colvin and Henry Noble MacCracken¹⁸⁵ that the romance’s plot is indebted — much like “Isabella” — to Boccaccio and specifically his less known early work, *Il Filocolo*. According to MacCracken, one can “hardly find a closer parallel”¹⁸⁶ in terms of storyline. Colvin highlights the close similarity between “the old nurse Angela in Keats’s poem [who] echoes pretty closely the part played by Glorizia in the *Filocolo*”¹⁸⁷ and the “*drama, dreaming and awake*, played between Madeline and Porphyro, repeats, though in a far finer strain, that between Biancofiore and Florio”.¹⁸⁸ MacCracken also notes that unlike in Boccaccio story, Keats’s lovers do elope, which “make[s] the episode a complete unit”¹⁸⁹ and Porphyro’s quest is rewarded.

The original tale is brought together by Keats’s “descriptive gift and his warm feeling for romance”,¹⁹⁰ yet Keats criticises the genre by emphasising its dangers through phrases such as Madeline is “hoodwink’d with faery fancy” (“Agnes”, 70). He also adds elements that are part of Romantic aesthetics. The lovers fleeing the castle show individuality, the awakened Madeline’s

¹⁸³ Sidney Colvin, *Life of John Keats* (London: Macmillan and Co Ltd., 1917) 396.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 396-7.

¹⁸⁵ Henry Noble MacCracken, “The Source of Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes””, in *Modern Philology*, Vol.5, No. 2 (Oct., 1907) 145-152.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 151.

¹⁸⁷ Colvin, *Life of John Keats*, 398.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*. My emphasis.

¹⁸⁹ MacCracken, “The Source of Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes””, 151.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*.

shock from Porphyro's paleness and the world's bleakness in comparison to her dream conveys the strong effect of imagination and the storm represents the uncontrollable force of nature. The lovers' insecure future correlates with Keats's notion of negative capability as the reader is left in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts".¹⁹¹ Though the poem has a medieval source and setting, such features that correlate with period aesthetics make the oeuvre appealing and understandable to Romantic readers and also illustrative of Keats's own poetic philosophy and developments.

In "The Eve of St. Agnes", one can also find echos from Romantic poems, namely Coleridge's "Christabel" and Scott's "Melrose Abbey". All three poems are given a nocturnal setting that carry certain importance to the characters: Keats's story happens on "St. Agnes' Eve" when Madeline desires "Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year" ("Agnes", 63), Coleridge's Christabel prays "for the weal of her lover that's far away" ("Christabel", I.30) as it is "a month before the month of May" ("Christabel", I.22) and Scott's tale captures the night with the "fated hour" ("Melrose Abbey", 41) to "win the treasure of the tomb" ("Melrose Abbey", 43). However, the characters' motives vary. Both Madeline and Christabel have romantic hopes (the word "sweetest" denotes sexual pleasure and spring is associated with the time of natural and *sexual* rebirth). In contrast, the night in Scott's story promises material gain. The owl figures in all three stories, but while Keats uses his "a-cold" ("Agnes", 2) owl to emphasise the night's harsh temperatures, both Scott and Coleridge portray loud owls that disrupt the night's peace: Scott's owlet hoots "o'er the dead man's grave" ("Melrose Abbey", 13) and the "scritch" ("Christabel", I. 152) of Coleridge's owl threatens to awaken the sleeping "mastiff bitch" ("Christabel", I.153) and therefore poses danger to Christabel who is guiding Geraldine into her court. While the motif of a praying maiden is found in only "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Christabel", all three poems include a religious male figure: the "Beadsman" ("Agnes", 5), "sacristan" ("Christabel", II.339) and "Monk of St Mary's aisle" ("Melrose Abbey", 39). All of these men are elderly, cold and physically withering, yet Keats's beadsman is the most important as he appears both at the opening and conclusion of the story where he is (like Scott's Monk) found dead. His death therefore adds to the temporal structure of the poem. Lastly, the moon and its light plays an importance role in the plot as it not only accentuates or alters the appearance of the illuminated objects, but also conveys the presence of supernatural power. The dual role of the moon as protector and vile force is suggested when Coleridge's Christabel prays under "the full" ("Christabel", I.18) moon, Geraldine appears in "moonlight" (60), the "mastiff old" (145) remains asleep under the "moonshine cold" (146) and

¹⁹¹ "To George and Tom Keats", 21, 27 December 1817, in *Letters*, 60.

“not a moonbeam enters” (176) Christabel’s bedroom where unspecified sins take place. In Scott’s tale, the first “lovely” (“Melrose Abbey”, 83) moon goes “down” (196) once “the huge stone sunk o’er the tomb” (194), hence it decreases in power like in Coleridge’s poem. Keats uses the same technique, as the moon shines through the casements, but then is described as “faded” (253) when Porphyro prepares sleep charms beside Madeline’s bed. The line that the “St. Agnes’ moon hath set” (“Agnes”, 324) after their intercourse suggests that the evening’s magical powers are realised. The nocturnal setting and its motifs (owl, moon, magic) are reminiscent of the Gothic genre as well as of pagan rituals that oftentimes promise the fulfilment of the characters’ deepest desires.

It is worth noting that though these three poems use the aforementioned topoi that are typical for supernatural medieval poems, “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “Christabel” are romances with quest-like journeys of Porphyro and Geraldine into the heroine’s bedroom while Scott’s “Melrose Abbey” lacks a love narrative — instead, it conveys a deed for which future generations must pray for penance. The sense of punishment also closes the other two poems: Keats’s romance ends with the death of Madeline’s spiritual (the Beadsman) and domestic (Angela) protectors and Christabel is banished by her father who turns “away from his own sweet maid” (“Christabel”, II. 655). The future in all three stories lacks hope and joy, altogether having an unsettling effect. However, such a sense of tragedy and disillusion is often found in Romantic literature and indeed also in the Gothic. Keats shows that he is continuing in the tradition of insecurity and death, but his originality lies in the choice of form¹⁹² that immediately brings to mind Spenser’s medievalism and great attention to its visual aesthetic elements such as tapestries and interior elements. His ornamental and simultaneously sceptical and realistic approach to the genre shows that Keats’s interest lies in making the poem imaginatively rich (hence loaded with “ore”) as well as reflective of universal emotions and desires that are relevant and understandable to this day.

E. C. Pettet¹⁹³ and John C. Jordan¹⁹⁴ are among the few critics who notice echoes of Scott’s “Melrose Abbey” in one of the most famous and effective passages of Keats’s romance: Madeline’s bedroom (stanzas 24 and 25). Jordan spots the shared motif of light shining through stained glass that enriches the visual imagery. The imagery of the “silver light, so pale and faint” (“Melrose Abbey”, 120) and then the “bloody stain” (“Melrose Abbey”, 127) produced when “the moonbeam

¹⁹² Coleridge invents his own form (the “Christabel” metre) and Scott uses basic rhyming couplets in “Melrose Abbey”.

¹⁹³ E. C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats* (Cambridge: CUP, 1957) 18-29.

¹⁹⁴ John Clark Jordan, “*The Eve of St. Agnes and The Lay of the Last Minstrel*”, in *Modern Language Notes*, 43.1 (January 1928) 38-40.

kissed the holy pane” (“Melrose Abbey”, 126) is extended by Keats in stanza 25.¹⁹⁵ Though similar to an extent, it is evident that the moonlit stained glass serves two different purposes: in Scott’s poem, the “bloody stain” heightens the *Gothic* element and suggests violence and sin (the adjective “bloody” appears twice more in the poem, with “cross” (135) and “battle’s bloody plain” (171)) while Keats’s moonlight gives Madeline an otherworldly appearance that adds to the *dreamy* atmosphere as well as heightens Porphyro’s (and also the reader’s) voyeuristic experience. Another notable similarity between the two poems is the play with colours of different warmth. Scott’s silver light is dim in contrast to the pigmented “bloody stain” and Keats’s cold “*wintry* moon” (“Agnes”, 217, my emphasis) throws “*warm* gules” on Madeline’s “breast” (“Agnes”, 218, my emphasis). Jordan also notes several instances where Keats adapts or reverses Scott’s diction, but they are not as significant for this discussion of aesthetics. However, the most notable difference is indeed the treatment of moonlight that is used by both poets to enhance visual aesthetics. Scott uses it to add a chiaroscuro-like effect and refer to the Gothic notion of contrasts, while in “Agnes” it gives Madeline the glow and beauty of a “splendid angel” (“Agnes”, 223). This suggests that Keats is more after a symbolically religious and visually stimulating scene than one with a Gothic effect.

It is also possible to find similarities between the aforementioned stanza 25 from “The Eve of St. Agnes” and Richard Polwhele’s “The Fair Isabel of Cotehele, A Cornish Romance”, published in 1815 by Keats’s acquaintance, “the Bookseller and print virtuoso”,¹⁹⁶ James Cawthorn. While there is no direct proof that Keats reads it, one can still find parallels between the two romances that are poised to prove otherwise, namely in the following stanza from Polwhele’s poem:

Thro’ diamond panes of storied glass
 Scarce could the *light of morning* pass.
 Yet ‘twas enough, through each dim pane
 The room with richer tints to stain;
 Colouring, upon the shrine below,
 The *crucifix with finer glow*,
 And from its *polish’d brilliance* raying,
 And on the Virgin’s image playing,
 But, where an *amber radiance* fell.
Illumining fair Isabel!
 No muse, in sooth, could paint it true—
 So soft it was, and sombrous too!¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ 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*,

And on her hair a *glory*, like a saint [...] (“Agnes”, 217-222, my emphasis)

¹⁹⁶ “To George and Georgiana Keats”, 18 February 1819, in *Letters*, 261.

¹⁹⁷ Richard Polwhele’s “The Fair Isabel of Cotehele, A Cornish Romance” (London: Michell and Co. Truro, 1815). Internet Archive, 2007 <https://archive.org/stream/fairisabelofcote00polwrich/fairisabelofcote00polwrich_djvu.txt> 4.1.2018. Canto I, section xiv. My emphasis. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “Polwhele”.

A major difference between Polwhele's and Keats's descriptions is the source of light: Polwhele's window transfers the "light of morning" (Polwhele, I.xiv.2) while the "wintry moon" ("Agnes", 217) shines through Keats's casement. Yet both lights are emitted on the religious symbol of the "crucifix" (Polwhele, 6) and "silver cross" ("Agnes", 221) and also on a female object — Polwhele's Isabel and Keats's Madeline — instead of on the male figures of "many a prophet, and many a saint" ("Melrose Abbey", 121) as in Scott's poem. The colourful light — "amber radiance" (Polwhele, I.xiv.9) and "warm gules" ("Agnes", 218) — contrast with the coldness suggested by the "diamond panes of storied glass" (Polwhele, I.xiv.1) and the wintry moon. Both women gain an otherworldly beauty: Isabel acquires a "heavenly attitude" (Polwhele, I.xv.4) and the shine around Madeline's hair creates the impression of a halo, "a glory, like a saint" ("Agnes", 222). Additionally, they are paralleled to Christian figures, since Isabel attracts the light that should befall the "Virgin's image" (Polwhele, I.xiv.8) and Madeline is compared to "a splendid angel" ("Agnes", 223). The overwhelming effect of the sight is emphasised through Polwhele's repeated use of exclamation marks and Keats's Porphyro who grows "faint" ("Agnes", 225) from seeing a being who is "so free from mortal taint" ("Agnes", 225) and therefore even more desirable.

In summary, Keats takes his romance from several sources. The ritual most probably comes from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*,¹⁹⁸ the plot and characters from Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo* and the bedroom scene can be paralleled to images and passages in the poems of his contemporaries (Coleridge, Scott and Polwhele). While he adapts Gothic motifs like the nocturnal setting, owls and light shining on religious symbols and female beauty, Keats also adds Romantic notions such as individuality, attention to nature and emphasis on differing colour saturations of reality and imagination/dreams. Synaesthetic imagery that heightens the senses of smell, touch and sound are all part of his aesthetic enhancements that make "The Eve of St. Agnes" one of the pinnacles of his poetic career and the focus of attention in the next chapter.

2.4 Keats's Aesthetic Revision of his Sources for "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

This thesis is using the generally more critically favourable 1819 draft included in Keats's private letter from April 1819¹⁹⁹ rather than the revised version published in *The Indicator* on 10 May 1820 that is in Kelley's words "unduly influenced"²⁰⁰ by Leigh Hunt. Keats's inspiration for his ballad is linked to numerous medieval and Renaissance literary sources that Susan Stewart lists below:

¹⁹⁸ Burton's work also inspires the mental states and rituals depicted in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and "Isabella".

¹⁹⁹ "To George and his wife Georgiana", 21 April 1819, in *Letters*, 283-285.

²⁰⁰ Kelley, "Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'", 69.

The most commonly acknowledged sources for “La Belle Dame” are what was once thought to be Chaucer’s pentameter translation and adaptation of Alain Chartier’s dialogue “La Belle Dame sans Merci”; the Paolo and Francesca episode from the fifth canto of Dante’s *Inferno*; the Cymochles and Phaedria episode and the Rock of Vile Reproach in Book II and the adventure of Britomartis in the Castle of Busirane in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*; a passage in Shakespeare’s *Pericles*; and Keats’s rereading of his own poems *Endymion* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, where the song Porphyro sings to Madeline in stanza 33 is “La belle dame sans mercy.”²⁰¹

Furthermore, Amy Lowell traces the elements of the pondering knight, damsel (seemingly) in distress and closing vision of kings and princes “embalmed in a mortuary temple” to the romance *Palmyrin of England*, and Robert Graves associates the origins of the repeated line “and no birds sing”²⁰² to “Let no birds sing” in William Browne’s *Brittania Pastoralis*.²⁰³ The aforementioned sources seem to be creative stimuli in terms of interpersonal relations, images and themes of sexuality, sin and social condemnation. However, the most effective sources for showing Keats’s aesthetic modifications are Alain Chartier’s medieval poem after which Keats’s ballad takes its name and the medieval ballad “Thomas the Rhymer”. The next section will show how Keats adapts or changes the themes and features of these two sources to create one of his most famous works.

Keats reads Alan Chartier’s poem in a “translation traditionally ascribed to Chaucer”.²⁰⁴ He adapts Chartier’s cross-sectional rhyme scheme, a retrospective first person narrative of a heart-broken, dying man and also several phrases: “syghing wonder sore”²⁰⁵ becomes “sigh’d full sore” (“La Belle Dame”, 30) and the belle dame’s calling of her potential lover as “woful wight” (Chartier, 597) is transformed into “wretched wight” in the opening line of the 1819 draft. Keats also uses the dialogic form of Chartier’s poem where one sees an exchange between the “belle dame sans mercy” and her suitors (the narrator and one more man), but the belle dame’s words are only reported by the knight, adding to her ambiguity and mystery. The states of being asleep and awake are also eminent: Chartier’s protagonist begins the tale “half in a dreame, not fully wel awaked” (Chartier, 1) and Keats’s knight is recovering from his supernatural dream by sojourning “alone and palely loitering” (“La Belle Dame”, 2) in a bleak, autumnal landscape. The male characters in both stories fall victims to the belle dame, a name that becomes, in Natasha Grigorian’s words, “a particularly acute expression to the medieval poetic topos of the inaccessible and implacable beloved”.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 126.

²⁰² John Keats, “La Belle Dame sans Merci”, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) Volume 2. 4 and 48. All further references to this poem shall be included in the main text in parentheses as “La Belle Dame”.

²⁰³ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1961) 430. Browne’s lyric is found in the first song of Book II.

²⁰⁴ Colvin, *Life of John Keats*, 350.

²⁰⁵ Alain Chartier, “La Belle Dame sans Mercy”, originally in *Oxford Chaucer*, ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford, 1897) Vol. VII. May, 12, 2000 <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/litsubs/love_vision/labell.html> 13.2.2018. Line 197. All further references to this poem shall be included in the main text in parentheses as “Chartier”.

²⁰⁶ Natasha Grigorian, *European Symbolism: In Search of Myth (1860-1910)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009) 121.

Nonetheless, there are a few significant variations between the two versions. In contrast to the castle celebration where the plots of Chartier's poem and "The Eve of St. Agnes" are partially set, Keats places his knight protagonist into the wilderness. Chartier's belle dame voices her opinions that equal in length to her suitor's words, but the true words and intentions of Keats's dame are censored by the knight's subjective memory of the entire encounter. While Chartier's belle dame is fully human, Keats presents a heroine of an otherworldly presence, which gives the ballad a "characteristic folklore narrative of the fatal enchantress who inspires a mortal with passion".²⁰⁷ Both stories show that passion results in death: the belle dame's suitor dies "within a day or twayne" (Chartier, 812) and Keats's knight is on the brink of death. The protective role of "golden sleep" that wraps the narrator "under his wing" (Chartier, 2) opposes the vision of "death-pale" ("La Belle Dame", 38) men who haunt the knight's "latest dream" ("La Belle Dame", 35) before he wakes into an even gloomier reality. The dead men in the knight's dream serve as a warning against the "faery's child" while it is Chartier's narrator himself who warns against "such avantours" (Chartier, 815) with women whose actions of "crueltè" (Chartier, 823) towards those who "deserved grace" (Chartier, 824) may earn them the reputation of "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCY" (Chartier, 828). The last and most prominent difference between the two versions is the ambiguity and sense of mystery that Keats incorporates into his ballad. Keats's belle dame gives the poem both a mythological and allegorical level, as she is reminiscent of femme fatale-like creatures (e.g. the sirens). She gains new meaning with time, as she comes to represent different forms of addiction and reflects social perceptions of women (e.g. the New Woman in the late nineteenth century). Keats's ballad altogether lacks a moral, unlike Chartier's story that gives advice on how to make "penance" (Chartier, 9). In this respect, the indeterminacy of Keats's belle dame makes her immortal and timeless, as she can easily carry different representations and symbols.

The ballad form has folkloric tradition and there are notable features that Keats's retelling shares with the medieval ballad of "Thomas the Rhymer". Two versions of this ballad are available in Keats's time: Sir Walter Scott's *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*²⁰⁸ and Robert Jamieson's *Popular Ballads and Songs*.²⁰⁹ Based on a Scottish legend, the plot is thus summarised by Graves:

²⁰⁷ Grigorian, *European Symbolism*, 134.

²⁰⁸ "Thomas the Rhymer. In three parts", in *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (London: G. Routledge, 1857). The most relevant part to my discussion is Part 1. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as "Scott".

²⁰⁹ "Thomas Rymer and Queen of Elfland", from Alexander Fraser Tytler's Brown MS, No. 1, included in Jamieson's *Popular Ballads*, II, 7, line 1. <<http://plover.net/~agarvin/faerie/Ballads/37.html>> 12.2.2018. All future references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as "Jamieson".

Thomas of Erceldoune was taken up by the Queen of Elfland on her milk-white steed and carried to a garden where she fed him on bread and wine, lulled him to sleep in her lap, and gave him the gift of poetic insight; but warned him that he might be destined as a Sabbatical sacrifice to hell, going by the road that 'lies out ovr yon frosty fell' (or 'cold hillside').²¹⁰

The tale is about a male mortal who is possessed by a supernatural female being — a dynamic that definitely present in Keats's poem. In his retelling of the meeting, communion and sudden separation of the knight and belle dame, Keats adapts Jamieson's simple vocabulary²¹¹ that is reminiscent of the folkloric tradition. Both tales abundantly use alliteration and repetition that add to the poems' oral quality, but Keats's range of punctuation changes the rhythm and tone. In the source, Thomas's service to the Queen is rewarded with a "gift of prophecy"²¹² yet Keats's knight is left "haggard and so woe-begone" ("La Belle Dame", 6) and he awaits the same fate as the belle dame's previous victims. This revision presents the belle dame as a supernatural creature with a destructive effect on men. There is an evident medieval framework, but though the story first resembles a romance, it turns into a ballad that is a hybrid of folklore, chivalric romance and mythology and also Gothic and Romantic aesthetics where death is closely linked to life and love.

In contrast to the ambiguous belle dame, the Queen's intentions and conditions are clear from the beginning. Jamieson and Scott both portray the Queen giving orders Thomas like that he "maun go wi me" and "serve me seven years" (Scott, 26-7 and Jamieson, 18-9), giving him a servant/lover role. There is a sense of consequence in the original legend, as Thomas essentially becomes the Queen's property after choosing "to kiss" (Scott, 19) her and is then subjected to further conditions like that if he speaks in the Elfin land, he will "ne'er get back" to his "ain countrie" (Scott, 56) and that he is forbidden to touch the "fruit" (Jamieson, 32 and 34).²¹³ The Queen is more dominant than Keats's belle dame who is decorated with "a garland" and "bracelets" ("La Belle Dame", 17-18) and whom the knight sets on a "pacing steed" ("La Belle Dame", 21) in a protective or even possessive way. In "Thomas the Rhymer", we see that it is the Queen who takes Thomas "up behind" her on the "milk-white steed" (Scott, 29-30 and Jamieson, 21-2) and dresses Thomas into "a coat of the even cloth / and a pair of shoes of velvet green" (Scott, 77-8 and Jamieson, 61-2). It is obvious that the Queen is more vocal and controlling in "Thomas the Rhymer" while in Keats's ballad the knight is only given the *illusion* of control.

The Queen's eloquence is contrasted by Keats's belle dame who is essentially silent. Though the knight's narrative tells us that she is singing "a faery's song" ("La Belle Dame", 24), speaks in a

²¹⁰ Graves, *The White Goddess*, 430.

²¹¹ Keats echoes Jamieson's phrases while Scott's version rewrites some of Jamieson's lines in Scots. For example, Thomas does not pull "off his hat" (Jamieson, 9), but "*aff* his cap" (Scott, 9, my emphasis).

²¹² Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 126.

²¹³ One can argue that Thomas's fragile position en route to and in the Elfin land is similar to Eve's in Paradise.

“language strange” (“La Belle Dame”, 27) and is lulling, moaning and sighing, we do not actually *hear* her voice and so it is possible to agree with Stewart’s claim that there is a “*displacement of voice*”²¹⁴ at play. This constant paraphrase and silencing opposes the “he said/she said”²¹⁵ dialogue sequence in “Thomas the Rhymer”. Though one can argue that there is a dialogue between the voice and the knight who attempts to answer the “interlocutor’s question”²¹⁶ posed in the first stanza, it is a failure considering that the inquiry is left essentially unanswered. The question is merely paraphrased at the end and no matter how many times we re-read the ballad, the answer to the opening question of what ails the “alone and palely loitering” (“La Belle Dame, 1) knight. Hence the ballad presents a vicious circle and invites us to join in a ritualistic revision of the past that is (like the romance) fruitless. There is no sense of hope and closure as in “Thomas the Rhymer” where the protagonist is “one day expected to revisit earth” (Scott, 171). The reader’s interest will most likely lie not in the knight’s whereabouts, but in the true nature of Keats’s belle dame, which becomes subjected to interpretations in literary criticism that range from victim to femme fatale.

Keats also alters the nourishment offered by the female to the man. The belle dame gives the knight “roots of relish sweet, and honey wild, and manna dew” (“La Belle Dame”, 25-6), which conveys a sense of otherness and also magic. In contrast, the Elfin Queen offers Thomas a “loaf” and “bottle of claret wine” (Jamieson, 37-8) and “apple frae a tree” (Scott, 65). These nourishments can be argued to have biblical significance as the loaf and wine are symbolical for Christ’s body and blood. The apple that is forbidden in Jamieson’s version is reminiscent of the Tree of Knowledge. The fruit has a devastating effect on mankind, as it represents “plagues that are in hell” (Jamieson, 35) and in the Bible the passage to banishment. Together these foods have underlying connotations of human faults and sins: curiosity, disobedience and murder. Keats’s relish, honey and manna dew, however, are natural and exotic in their lack of human alteration, unlike the “harvest” (“La Belle Dame”, 8) that involves imposed human structure. Keats therefore takes away any biblical connotations and instead suggests the belle dame’s paganism and also supernatural abilities as she is able to provide honey without being affected by the dangers of its source (the beehive) and the manna dew that originates from the desert (a distant landscape).

In summary, one can see that Keats embraces specific thematic concerns from his sources for his ballad. From Chartier’s “La Belle Dame sans Mercy” he adapts the concept of being awake and dreaming, but adds a Gothic twist with the vision. On the other hand, we see Keats diverge

²¹⁴ Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 127.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

from Chartier's moralistic commentary and transfer his ballad from Chartier's castle setting into the wilderness of "Thomas the Rhymer". Keats obviously plays with agency, as in opposition to the dominant Elfin Queen who is in control of Thomas, the belle dame remains ambiguous and mysterious, especially through the knight's heavily subjective narrative. "La Belle Dame sans Merci" does not conform to one single genre, as it has a balladic form and ending, a Gothic vision of "death-pale" ("La Belle Dame", 38) men and a foundation of a romance typical of a chivalric tale. The poem does not embrace the Christian levels of Chartier, Scott and Jamieson's tales, which shows Keats's lack of interest in religion apart from paganism at most for aesthetic effect. He instead introduces a mythological and allegorical belle dame whose true nature is, much like her physical body, ungraspable and therefore subjected to different interpretations across time.

"Common enthusiasm for Keats brought us into intimate relations."²¹⁷ — Holman Hunt

2.5. The Germ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's Aesthetics

This thesis is concerned with ekphrastic paintings and sketches by the three founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Daniel Gabriel Rossetti. The group is influenced by the art critic John Ruskin and follows his advice to

[...] go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thought but how best to penetrate her meaning; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.²¹⁸

Andrew M. Stauffe reads the group's belief in the necessity of an artist's 'truth to nature' as "code for the expression of one's imagination".²¹⁹ Besides their paintings, this philosophy is given form and space in the Pre-Raphaelites' short-lived 1850 periodical *The Germ*.²²⁰ The title of the periodical itself refers to the phrase "the germ of an idea", hence highlighting the close interrelation between nature and creativity. The magazine's prologue states that its mission is to "obtain the thoughts of Artists, upon Nature as evolved in Art" and "to enunciate the principles of those who, in the true spirit of Art, enforce a rigid adherence to the simplicity of Nature either in Art or Poetry".²²¹

This statement expresses an agreement with the "sister arts" relation between poetry and painting as

²¹⁷ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (New York: Macmillan, 1905) Volume I, 107.

²¹⁸ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. I. pt. ii. sec. vi. ch. iii. § 21. March 2008 <<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/eSoV/texts/vol12/vol12p339.html>> 13.3.2018.

²¹⁹ Andrew M. Stauffe, "The Germ", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (New York: CUP, 2012) 76-88 at 79.

²²⁰ The first two issues are named *The Germ, thoughts towards nature in art and literature*, only to be renamed for the final two issues as *Art and Poetry, being Thoughts towards Nature, conducted principally by Artists*.

²²¹ *The Germ*, No. 1. January 1850. 2.1.1996 <<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/courses/ennc986/class/germ1.text.html/germ1.html>> 13.3.2018. My emphasis.

well as parallels the Pre-Raphaelites with the Romantics. In Stauffe's words, both movements "turned to the natural world as a mirror for their own self-projections" in hope that these artistic mediations "enacted upon the world's particulars would reveal the truth of their hearts and souls."²²² Though commercially unsuccessful, the journal is significant for interlinking the arts and can be also seen an active act of defiance, a manifesto against the artistic conventions of their time.

Imogen Hart characterises Pre-Raphaelitism as an artistic movement that expresses

[...] disillusionment with contemporary artistic practice that manifests itself in the evocation of an imagined medieval period, specifically pre-Renaissance, when art was freely expressive and lacked the homogenising polish perceived to characterise the prevailing style ever since Raphael.²²³

According to Richard L. Stein, the very name of the group is "a revolt against the academic practice of 'borrowing' an elegant style or subject from Raphael or any other officially authorised master".²²⁴ Therefore their treatment of composition, colour saturation, embellishments and other aspects of their works all go against the conventions that have "a deep hostility to aesthetic experience, a disbelief that either the creation or the appreciation of art might involve spontaneity, richness, conviction, or personal vision".²²⁵ Apart from the Royal Academy and its diktat of art that produces unoriginal, stock paintings without emotional substance, the Pre-Raphaelites are also reacting to a number of other circumstances of their time:

Many Victorians felt that in the machine age, beauty and spirituality had been lost. **Gothic Revival architects** like Augustus Pugin turned back to **medieval styles**. The German Nazarene painters rejected modernity and adopted **historical styles of painting and of dress**. John Ruskin described in *The Stones of Venice* the '**freedom**' of medieval times in contrast to the 'slavery' of the modern factory. The **invention of photography** in 1839 profoundly changed the way people perceived the world.²²⁶

Medievalism becomes an inspiration in terms of architecture, paintings and even part of a political and social ideology that opposes the industrialist and increasingly materialist Victorian England. Technological advancements no longer call for artistic realism, making it all the more avant-garde to present an imperfect perspective of reality. The Pre-Raphaelites therefore choose scenes that would not only engage them emotionally, but also the viewer.

²²² Stauffe, "The Germ", 79.

²²³ Imogen Hart, "The designs of William Morris", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (New York: CUP, 2012) 211-222 at 211.

²²⁴ Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press 1975) 130.

²²⁵ Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation*, 126.

²²⁶ "Origins and Manifesto", Tate Modern <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/pre-raphaelites-victorian-avant-garde/pre-raphaelites-victorian/pre>> 19.3.2018. My bold emphasis.

According to Linda Fořtová, the Middle Ages become a source of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelites because of its “theme of love, its delicacy and intimacy, personal quality and, last but not least, the religious iconography and allusions”.²²⁷ The desire for spirituality and personal art in a time of industrialisation is a natural reaction, just like Keats’s original impulse of writing poetry as a way of at least temporarily freeing himself from everyday toil as a surgeon. The group also adapts technical and visual features from other painters, such as “the hardness of outline, the stiffness of attitude [...] and Catholic sentiment”²²⁸ from the Nazarenes and the textures and “densely foliated foregrounds”²²⁹ of the early Flemish painters. Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* that champions Venetian Gothic architecture possibly inspires the painters’ unorthodox choices of composition that are placed inside imitative pointed and round arches. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin conveys a “positive connection between colour and human passion in the context of his account of Venetian art”²³⁰ that without doubt encourages the Pre-Raphaelites’ increasing experimentation with colour. Colour is heavily prominent and symbolic in Keats’s poetry, too — the best examples are the saturated tones of reds and purples in “The Eve of St. Agnes” that represent passion.

The Romantic poet and the Victorian painters share an insistent desire for experimentation that goes against established conventions, and for integrity that would satisfy their own spiritual and artistic needs. However, medievalism plays a different function for each party. For Keats, it provides at first an escapist setting that is nonetheless an established Romantic legacy while for the Pre-Raphaelites, medievalism represents a source of thematic and visual inspiration for reviving Victorian art. In terms of religion itself, Keats adapts Christianity and paganism merely for effect whereas the Pre-Raphaelites (namely Rossetti who is Catholic) are believers, but also use religious symbols as contributions to the painting’s atmosphere while depending on popular knowledge of biblical commonplaces for commercial purposes. Nevertheless, both sides pursue beauty and combine the spiritual and sensual in new ways, though there are instances where the painters select and modify Keats’s work in order to portray their own personal/artistic truth rather than the poet’s.

²²⁷ Linda Fořtová, “The visual aspect of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poetry”, xxx. Submitted to the Faculty of Arts as M.A. thesis at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Charles University in Prague, 10. 9. 2012.

²²⁸ J. B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: OUP, 1998) 28-30.

²²⁹ Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008) 62.

²³⁰ Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*, 102.

Chapter 3: Keats's Aesthetics of Medievalism and Romance

*"It ["Isabella"] may, as may [Shakespeare's] Lear; leave the reader far behind, but there is none of that sugar and butter sentiment that cloyes and disgusts."*²³¹ — Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor

3.1. "Isabella, Or A Pot of Basil"

"Isabella" is based on a narrative originally by Boccaccio, hence Keats's modifications and emphases convey his take on the Italian Renaissance author's aesthetic. In Andrew Sanders's summary, Keats elaborates on the original tale with "a complex scheme of natural imagery, an interpolated social and moral commentary, and elements of the Gothic."²³² These shall be discussed on the following pages in connection to the poem's synaesthetic imagery and themes.

The 1819 narrative poem is part of Keats's series of narrative experiments with the romance genre. The use of the Italian form of *ottava rima* is not so experimental, as this metre is etched in the English Romantic public conscience in association with poems namely by Keats's contemporary Lord Byron where it is used to convey narrative irony.²³³ This is essential for understanding that Keats's poem adopts this ironic tone from the beginning of his take on "Isabella". Keats writes in one of his letters that the poem is "a weak-sided Poem" with "an *amusing sober-sadness* about it".²³⁴ Indeed, "Isabella" is a tragic tale that is intended to evoke pity in the reader, but simultaneously it parodies the youths' romantic expectations through lines like "poor, *simple* Isabel!" ("Isabella", 1, my emphasis). Keats dedicates the first 50 lines to the "ironic investigation of privatised emotion"²³⁵ of Lorenzo and Isabella's love-sickness and then criticises the "ancestral merchandize" ("Isabella", 106) of Isabella's family by listing the natural and human costs of their pride and wealth for 4 stanzas (14 to 17). It is immediately obvious that the narrator's sympathy lies with the lovers whereas the brothers will be the villains due to their lack of empathy as they choose to avoid truths given by "beggar-spies" (132) and being "proud" (121, 123, 125, 127, 128) despite having any basic moral, artistic or intellectual values. However, the omniscient narrator, albeit making bold statements like "Why in the name of Glory were they proud?" (128), is insecure about his position, as he is set in "the gap between Boccaccio's simple medieval factuality and the obstacles facing a modern teller of the story".²³⁶ This leads to the apologetic stanza 49 where he expresses remorse for the upcoming "quiet glooms of such a piteous theme" (152) and wishes to create an honourable "echo" of Boccaccio in the "north-wind" (160), i.e. English. It happens

²³¹ "Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor", 19, 20 September 1819, in *Letters*, 341.

²³² Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 386.

²³³ Lord Byron uses *ottava rima* in "Beppo: A Venetian story" and *Don Juan*.

²³⁴ "To Richard Woodhouse", 21, 22 September 1819 in *Letters*, 352. My emphasis.

²³⁵ Cox, "*Lamia, Isabella and The Eve of St. Agnes*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, 53-68 at 63.

²³⁶ Barnard, *John Keats*, 78-9.

repeatedly that Keats places strange features into the poem. For example, the line “serpents’ whine” (190) is, in Everest’s opinion, “at once grammatically forced, and unluckily inapt (serpents don’t whine).”²³⁷ Such renditions give Keats’s narrator a clumsiness in comparison to the carefully constructed lines in Keats’s early Spenserian works. Yet Everest argues that this lack of poetic smoothness plays with the story’s “‘primitive’ artifice” and the rhetoric hence suits “the pre-industrial freshness of its setting and materials.”²³⁸ While this may be a plausible point, it also suggests that Keats is placing irony on *himself* too in the apologetic stanza as it suggests his insecurity about not being apt to revivify the Boccaccian theme that Hazlitt believes could be successful “if executed with taste and spirit.”²³⁹ Though Keats has a negative opinion about “Isabella”, it is a considerable beginning to his reconsideration of romance and Huntian aesthetics.

Among Keats’s masterly additions to the original Renaissance narrative are the aural qualities and references. The lovers especially are associated with music and are attentive to sounds. Isabella plays the “lute-string” (15), takes part in “matin-song” (190), gives “a laugh full musical” (198), chants “merrily” (208) after saying farewell to Lorenzo in anticipation of seeing him soon and after the vision, she wishes to sing “one latest lullaby” (340) at Lorenzo’s forest grave. The legacy of her romance with Lorenzo is also musical, as “a sad ditty of this story [is] born” (501). Lorenzo’s ghost in the “strange sound” (281) of his posthumous voice depicts the “little sounds of life” (308) around his forest tomb: while he himself chants “alone the holy mass” (307), he hears “glossy bees” (309), and “many a chapel bell” (310).²⁴⁰ One can also see a parallel between Lorenzo and Isabella’s “lorn” (279 and 492) voices that lose their musical qualities. Death takes “the soft lute” (278) from Lorenzo’s speech and in opposition to her previous chants, songs and melodies, Isabella (in her second state of grief following the brothers’ theft of the basil pot) is only capable of emitting a “*melodious* chuckle in the *strings*” (491, my emphasis). She becomes essentially mute after recovering Lorenzo’s head, limiting her voice to sighs and moans — in Helena Nelson’s words, “she retreats into an almost silent existence”.²⁴¹ Keats twice invokes the symbols of “Music” (434, 482) and “Echo” (435, 483) in connection to Isabella’s sorrows. They add to the poem’s theatricality and also help move the narrative from Isabella’s inner state to the voice’s more omniscient perspective. The choice of words in line 503 that the “burthen” of the tale is “sung” all across the country harkens back to the depiction of Keats’s wish to have an “echo of

²³⁷ Kelvin Everest, “Isabella in the market-place: Keats and feminism”, in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 107-126 at 114.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, 98.

²⁴⁰ The bell motif reappears in “The Eve of St. Agnes” as representation of the Beadsman’s and Angela’s nearing deaths.

²⁴¹ Helena Nelson, “Wherefore all this Wormy Circumstance? John Keats and “The Pot of Basil””, in *Keats-Shelley Review* 14 (2002) 15-22 at 20.

thee [Boccaccio] in the north-wind *sung*” (160, my emphasis), which again emphasises the poem’s aural role as a melodic entity. This association returns to the oral tradition of most narrative poetry (romance included) that is meant to be read aloud. In Benedetti’s translation of Boccaccio’s tale, no music imagery is present yet we do see Isabella often *call* after Lorenzo, who then comes to her in the form of a vision. The musical references and parallels are therefore part of Keats’s revision of Boccaccio, creating a greater correlation between the tale and its final product: the song, or “ditty”.

The duration of the lovers’ happiness is fairly short, as Keats mainly focuses on what Duncan Wu terms as “psychological disturbance”.²⁴² He gradually increases the drama and disillusioned tone of the poem by depicting the deterioration of Isabella’s mental health brought by the sudden absence of the “luxury” (236) of love in her life. Her growing alienation from society is shown through her solitude, leading to the “vision” (273) that does not scare, but *soothes* her. Her “Ha! Ha!” (329) following the vision is surprising and may be reminiscent of Hamlet’s rather misplaced “Ah, ha” when conversing with his murdered father’s Ghost.²⁴³ Both cases of laughter exhibit the characters’ growing insanity. Madness is obvious in the digging scene as a “feverous hectic flame” (348) burns in Isabel as she unearths Lorenzo’s body and she shows her “knife” (348) to the “aged nurse” (343) with a smile. Even though the narrative voice establishes the moral that “love never dies, but lives, immortal Lord” (397), there is no doubt that the reader feels disturbed by the macabre reunion of the lovers where despite Isabella’s fervid emotions, her lips when kissing Lorenzo are “more chill than stone” (371) and therefore evocative of death. The carnal colour of the “purple” (370) silk into which she places Lorenzo’s head conveys her sexual awakening. Purple is also symbolical of the Christian ritual of Lent (a time of penance and also fasting), which shows Keats’s recasting of religion.²⁴⁴ Isabella’s behaviour is of sexual as well as motherly nature as she tends to the head and its individual features — the “wild hair” (403) and “each fringed lash” (405) — before burying it into “a garden-pot” (414). Her nursing of the head becomes an obsessive ritual comparable to a religious ceremony as she “entirely shuts out the objective world around her”,²⁴⁵ losing track of time and space by physically and psychologically tending to “her sweet Basil evermore” (423). This intensity of emotional dedication is a definitive feature of the Gothic, as Isabella’s obsessive care of a dead man’s head is disturbing. While the “Basil green” (458) is flourishing, she loses her youthful beauty as she weeps a “continual shower / from her dead

²⁴² Duncan Wu, *Romanticism, An Anthology* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012) 1389.

²⁴³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards (New York: CUP, 2011) 1.5.138.150. All further references to this play will be included in footnotes as “*Hamlet*”.

²⁴⁴ “March, 31 Days”, in *The Catholic Directory and Annual Register for the Year 1838* (London: Booker and Dolman, 1838) unnumbered pages.

²⁴⁵ Stillinger, *Keats and Romance*, 602.

eyes” (452-3) and fails to feel “any hunger-pain” (468). The scene where the intrusive brothers find underneath the thriving plant in the pot a “vile” (475) head “with green and livid spot” (475) that they immediately recognise as “Lorenzo’s face” (476) is surprising as well as horrific. This moment and the fact that Lorenzo’s body is twice buried and unearthened conveys the moral that the truth will be uncovered no matter how much one tries to hide it. These brothers represent all at once familial, patriarchal and class authority, as they disallow Isabella to make her own choice regarding a partner as her marriage is meant to expand further the family’s wealth and status and their disapproval of Lorenzo is based on the fact that he is a “*servant* of their trade designs” (165, my emphasis). They cause Isabella’s downfall and death, the final straw being their robbery of the basil pot that is a symbolical relic of her love for Lorenzo. Therefore they also embody the “harsh truth”²⁴⁶ of reality.

The opulent material wealth of Isabella’s family is not meant to be admired, but criticised for its negative social and environmental consequences. Isabella and her brothers inherit the goods, but all the effort is done by men in “torched mines and noisy factories” (108) whose bodies suffer. The labour is exhausting, as “many once proud-quiver’d loins did melt / in blood from stinging whip” (109-10) and the workers get “hollow eyes” (110) after standing “all day” (111) to take “the rich-ored drifting of the flood” (112). Instead of naming the riches, we are given the background of their extraction as part of colonial enterprise. The reference to the formerly British colony “Ceylon” (113) — current-day Sri Lanka — conveys Keats’s critical allusion to the British Empire as well as capitalist politics that promotes materialism. The brothers who represent Florence obviously exploit the inhuman imperial behaviour and even decide to detach themselves from news of the sufferings and deaths by being “paled in and vineyarded from beggar-spies” (132). But since Lorenzo’s murder is conducted by their own hands, the line “every night in dreams they groan’d aloud, / to see their sister in her snowy shroud” (263-4) conveys both the brothers’ guilt and their awareness of their sister’s changing visage. Isabella’s “paleness” (318) and fading beauty corresponds to Lorenzo’s body, so it is a premonition of her approaching death as part of Keats’s use of dramatic irony. There is evident irony present in the depiction that each brother is “*richer* by his being a murderer” (224, my emphasis), which further accentuates what Barnard calls “moral poverty”.²⁴⁷ In contrast to the brothers who cross moral boundaries for the sake of wealth and family reputation, Isabella takes pleasure in simple activities like singing and doing “broidery” (16). She reveres love that becomes during Lorenzo’s absence synonymous to luxury. She is depicted to have fits of “misery” (235) where she broods “o’er the *luxury*” (236, my emphasis) of love and its related

²⁴⁶ Rachel Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate e-book, 2014) 75.

²⁴⁷ Barnard, *John Keats*, 81.

physical pleasures. She treats Lorenzo's head like a precious "jewel" (430) by carefully wrapping it in a "silken scarf" (409) that is made "with the dews / of precious flowers puck'd in Araby" (410) and has the "odorous ooze" of "divine liquids" (411). The head becomes her biggest treasure mainly because of what it *represents*: their "dead indeed, but not dethroned" (400) love. Keats thus turns away from the typical celebratory associations of the Huntian notion of "luxury", converting it into emotional states and material wealth filled with pain, killing and unnecessary deaths of humans and animals alike. Wu supports my reading, as he believes that "Isabella" indicates Keats's attempt to "break free of the Huntian emphasis on 'luxuries'",²⁴⁸ which is a motif in Keats's *Poems*.²⁴⁹ The image of Isabella worshipping a basil plant despite being surrounded by riches becomes the most striking image in the entire poem and is eternalised in Holman Hunt's 1868 painting.

Another of Keats's additions to the original plot is the number of natural imagery in the poem, especially in connection to the lovers. The seasons of spring and summer are traditionally associated with sexual awakening and rebirth, but Keats plays with these connections with the lovers who experience "sad plight" (25) that lasts the "long month of May" (25) and confess their love only after after "the break of June" (25). Keats also equates the lovers' features and relationship to flowers. When their love is yet unconsummated, Isabella's cheek falls "sick within the *rose's* just domain" (34, my emphasis) and their happiness grows "like a *lusty flower* in June's caress" (72, my emphasis) once they reveal their love for each other. The rose imagery returns when they are compared to "twin roses" who are "by the zephyr blown apart" (74). Due to their different social statuses, they meet "close in a bower of hyacinth and musk, / unknown of any, free from whispering tale" (86). Keats portrays nature here as a protective force,²⁵⁰ which echoes Hunt's description of the pavilion in Francesca's garden as the location where she can enjoy "*bower-enshaded kisses*".²⁵¹ The lovers' physical affection is also conveyed through flowers. For example, despite his initial meekness, Lorenzo gives in to his desire to taste "the *blossoms* that unfold / in its ripe warmth this gracious morning time" (67-8, my emphasis). The metaphorical description that they "share the inward fragrance of each other's heart" (76)²⁵² adds a sense of harmony to the scene that contrasts their earlier dramatic love-sickness. According to Schulkins,

[T]he lovers are no longer at odds with nature, but they rather become engulfed in its beauty and sexual vitality. Upon consummating their sexual desire, Lorenzo and Isabella

²⁴⁸ Wu, *Romanticism, An Anthology*, 1389.

²⁴⁹ "Luxuries" are found in "I Stood Tiptoe" and "Sleep and Poetry". Further reading on this topic is offered in E. F. Guy's paper "Keats's Use of 'Luxury': A Note on Meaning", in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 13 (Winter, 1964) 87-95.

²⁵⁰ Helen Vendler notes that Keats presents such a "flowery bower of Nature" also in "Ode to Psyche". "Tuneless Numbers: The Ode to Pysche", in *John Keats*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007) 13-36 at 28.

²⁵¹ Hunt, "The Story of Rimini", Canto III, 463. My emphasis.

²⁵² We see a similar line in "The Eve of St. Agnes" where Porphyro and Madeline's consummation is expressed as "the rose / [that] blendeth its odour with the violet" ("Agnes", 320-1).

become part of the natural scene as they blossom into health in its eroticised and sexually unrestricted surroundings.²⁵³

The lovers add colour and warmth into each other's lives as Isabella leads Lorenzo from the "wintry cold" (65) to the "summer clime" (66), which is also suggestive of carnal intimacy. Flowers are even used to portray the powers of Boccaccio's stanza. The line "thy lilies, that do paler grow / now they can no more hear thy ghittern's tune" (149-50) conveys the blooming effect of Boccaccio's language, though it often gets lost in translation. Social roles are described in terms of the natural dynamic of bees and flowers in Spring as Lorenzo is included between the "bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers" (i.e. society) who fly around the "poison-flowers" with "richest juice" (104), i.e. the brothers and their wealth. The "Sweet Basil" (416) that grows "thick, and green, and beautiful" (426) and "more balmy than its peers / of Basil-tufts in Florence" (427-8) visually hides the "wormy circumstance" (385), i.e. the horrific reality of the "fast mouldering head" (430). The herb's "perfumed leafits" (432) also helps hide the stench of decay. The basil additionally has cultural associations, specifically with Italian cuisine. Stillinger claims that the smell also "represents the perfectly united and sensuous world Lorenzo and Isabella shared in their sexual bower."²⁵⁴ However, one can find this to be too far-fetched as the basil can possibly just have a practical function to hide the head in terms of smell and especially vision, considering how commonplace the herb is in an Italian setting. Nonetheless, such a pragmatic approach is not likely as much a part of Keats's agenda as the motif of beauty with underlying horrors and traumas.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Isabella is given in Keats's rendition the dual role as lover and mother. Her motherly inclinations is compared to that of a bird, which also highlights the cyclical domain of nature and procreation:

And when she left, she hurried back, as swift
As bird on wing to breast its eggs again;
And, *patient as a hen-bird*, sat her there
Beside her Basil, weeping through her hair. ("Isabella", 469-72, my emphasis)

Though Isabella is paralleled to a mother taking care of her offspring (which is by itself a natural phenomenon), Keats gives the ritual a grotesque dimension, as after all, Isabella is nursing not a living child, but a dead lover's head. In this regard, the poet subverts this otherwise ordinary behaviour. While the bird comparison is connected to Isabella's motherly side, the flower metaphors is used to convey her awakening sexuality. By associating the lovers with nature, Keats establishes sexuality as normal and also as beneficial for human health. There is no doubt that Lorenzo awakens Isabella's sexuality and one can see that her poor physical health returns after his death,

²⁵³ Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation*, 76.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 86.

but with the addition of insanity caused by sexual frustration. According to Schulkins, this reading conveys “Keats’s rejection of the conservative notion of the passionless female in order to acknowledge sexuality as an inseparable part of female identity.”²⁵⁵ Isabella’s sexuality is not simply acknowledged, but actually exaggerated and shown rather as a hysterical force that leads to insanity.

Keats studies the psychological development of the characters as well as their changing physical appearance. The brothers’ “sick and wan” (213) faces are reminiscent of the love-sick lovers from the beginning of the poem. Death changes Lorenzo’s physical features. Though “flush[ed] with love” (215) right before his murder, Lorenzo’s hair loses colour and shine, as the “forest tomb / had marr’d his glossy hair which once could shoot / lustre into the sun” (275-7), his once warmed dewy lips gain “cold doom” (277) and a “miry channel for his tears” (280) is around his “loamed ears” (279). These changes are as heart-breaking as much as they are frightening. The Boccaccian matter-of-factness is used in stanza 37 where Lorenzo’s ghost summarises his death, but Keats’s version gives a more poetic account about his surroundings in stanza 38:

Red whortle-berries droop above my head,
And a large flint-stone weights upon my feet;
Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed
Their leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-fold bleat
Comes from beyond the river to my bed [...] (“Isabella”, 298-302)

The forest that is “dim” (175) and “quiet” (216) makes it an appropriate location to cover up “slaughter” (216), which is an evident alteration from the forest as a scene of adventure (hunting), mythological creatures (nymphs, centaurs, fairies etc.) and paradisaal pleasure, as we have seen earlier with the garden-bower in “Isabella” and Hunt’s “The Story of Rimini”. Isabella’s love-sickness returns, as she undergoes “*feverish* unrest” (244, my emphasis) of emotions like “passion not to be subdued” (247), which refers to her sexual frustration. Her beauty’s “gradual decay” (256) parallels nature in autumn when there is “death among the bushes and the leaves” (253) and flowers die from the lack of sunlight and warmth. It is evident that Isabella’s warmth and light are metaphorically sourced by Lorenzo and his absence causes her beauty to begin wilting.

The story is set in medieval Italy, but Keats makes it seem like the reader is constantly travelling across time and cultures due the numerous references to Classical mythology, Christianity and obvious parallels with the commercial exploits of the British Empire. Such references not only accentuate the poem’s themes, but also create new additional images in the reader’s mind. The Classical references include “Dido silent is in under-grove” (99) that parallels Isabella’s “great

²⁵⁵ Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation*, 14.

distress” (100) and the “clay” (173, 339) is connected to the Promethean myth from which mankind and culture are born. The muse “sad Melpomene” (441) represents not only melody (hence connecting to the poem’s music imagery), but also tragedy and so she forecasts Isabella’s death. The nymph Echo (483) is representative of unsuccessful love for Narcissus and her muteness and hopelessness²⁵⁶ can be compared to Isabella’s situation as her desires are given no consideration by the brothers. Another possible connection between the nymph and Keats’s heroine is that Isabella’s words are re-sung and therefore *echoed* all across the country. In terms of biblical references, one of the most vibrant ones is “Hot Egypt’s pest” (140) from the Exodus that conveys the blinding pain the narrator wishes to impose on the brothers in order to protect the lovers from the “covetous and sly” (141) murder plan. On a similar note, there is the description that the brothers’ feeling of guilt “came on them, like *a smoke from Hinnom’s vale*” (262, my emphasis) that functions as a reminder of their murder or sacrifice of the innocent “youngster” (172) in the name of their family’s future. The Old Testament references imply the repetitiveness of human character since biblical times, which goes hand in hand with Keats’s emphasis on universal emotional experiences that make the story (up to the point of Lorenzo’s murder, reburial and decapitation) understandable even for modern-day audiences. The lovers are associated with references to medieval Christian culture. The line “young *palmer* in Love’s eye”²⁵⁷ (2, my emphasis) presents Lorenzo as Love’s pilgrim, which implies a spiritual/emotional quest and Isabella performs religious rituals like praying at “vespers” (21) and going to confession (“chapel-shrift”, 467). Altogether the combination of references from Christian culture and Classical mythology in a tale that originates from the Italian Renaissance shows Keats’s experimental revision. The result is an extended Boccaccian story that is not limited to only one culture, genre and form of narration. The unstable temporal span outlined in the previous stanza is accompanied by a diversity of spaces. In stanzas 14 to 17, we read of labour happening underground in “mines” (108) and in the ocean where “the Ceylon diver held his breath / And went all naked to the hungry shark” (113-4). Both cases take place away from the public eye, which may be another allusion to colonial slavery that takes place in foreign lands and not easily accessible places in contrast to ground-level labour in “factories” (108) — a growing phenomenon seen in industrialising Britain. In summary, the mythological, biblical and social allusions help

²⁵⁶ “The goddess Hera deprived her of speech, allowing her only to repeat others’ words and except for the ability to repeat the last words of another. Echo’s hopeless love for Narcissus, who fell in love with his own image, made her fade away until all that was left of her was her voice.” Definition of “Echo”, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Echo-Greek-mythology>> 26.4.2018.

²⁵⁷ The palmer figure also appears in the lovers’ dialogue in Act I scene v of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In the sonnet sequence, “palmer” is used as part of the lovers’ extended metaphor where physical actions of kissing and holding hands are paralleled to religious acts of praying and purging.

make “Isabella” more culturally complex by referring to stories filled with emotions and experiences that remain universal. While this wide cultural scope reduces the impression of reading a medieval poem, the allusions are part of Keats’s technique of hybridising different elements into a romance narrative. By taking liberties with the genre and therefore going against conventions, he conveys his own developing aesthetics and formulates recognisable features of his new poetry.

Another central image of “Isabella” is without doubt the decapitated head. However, it is not entirely unique, as it is an established motif in Western culture with a mythological and biblical tradition. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona claims that the severed head can be used as “trophy of victory”,²⁵⁸ which correlates to Isabella’s view of the head as her “prize” (402). Keats is therefore reversing the motif of women as a trophy-like entity that appears in the chivalric and fairytale tradition.²⁵⁹ In contrast to the heads of Goliath, Medusa and Holofernes who are tyrants outwitted by humans (David and Judith) and demi-Gods (Perseus), the evidently innocent Lorenzo is murdered by men of a higher social class. Though the brothers believe that it is a necessary action in order to sustain their family’s reputation and future, the brothers’ murder of an virtuous man is the reverse of, for example, Spenser’s killing of the Blatant Beast. The Medusa mythological reference is used in the digging scene where Isabella uses a knife of “duller steel than the *Persèan* sword” (393, my emphasis) to “cut away *no formless monster’s head*” (394, my emphasis), which further implies Lorenzo’s purity. According to Apostolos-Cappadona,

[T]he inversion of this variant that is the display of the severed head of a good and just person is suggested by the acheiropaic images of Jesus Christ, especially the Veil of Veronica and the Mandyllion of Edessa, which are displayed both as his victory over death and as *healing/curative images*.²⁶⁰

Besides presenting a decapitated head that belongs to a positive character whose life is unjustly taken away, Keats also gives it a healing effect associated with Christian saints such as St. John the Baptist and St. Denis.²⁶¹ The healing process in Keats’s poem, however, is reciprocal: Lorenzo gives Isabella’s life purpose and, in Isabella’s mind, he figuratively receives healing and growth through her tears. Hoeveler asserts that “as a child is fed with its mother’s milk, so the body of the dead lover will be nourished and comforted by the beloved’s tears.”²⁶² Indeed, Lorenzo does ask Isabella to “shed one tear upon my heather-bloom / And it shall comfort me within the tomb.” (303-4). The

²⁵⁸ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Beheading/Decapitation” in *Encyclopaedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*, ed. Helene E. Roberts (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998) Volume I, 121.

²⁵⁹ An example of this is Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” where Palamon will “*winnen*” Emily as his wife in a tournament against Arcite. In Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales, A Selection* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 56, Part II, 628. My emphasis.

²⁶⁰ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Beheading/Decapitation”, 121.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² Hoeveler, “Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats’s *Isabella*”, 331. My emphasis.

description of the basil flourishing in the same pot as Lorenzo's head "as by magic touch" (459) shows mythical power as well as suggests that the lover is truly comforted and thriving under Isabella's care. However, one can argue that Isabella is more dependent on the basil pot, forming an addiction and death-like existence that gains a mythological and folkloric dimension with the song.

In conclusion, "Isabella" breaks from the tradition of romance genre as well as Huntian notions of luxury and bowers by intensively showing the "wormy circumstance" of what love can lead to and the price we pay for it. Isabella and Lorenzo represent the universal quest for love while the brothers portray the choice of material wealth over basic humanity and empathy. Barnard claims that in the poem, "the intensity of sexual love leads to death"²⁶³ and this downward spiral without doubt adds to the poem's effectiveness and memorability. The intense grief that causes Isabella's insanity also brings gruesome imagery into the poem, such as the decapitation and obsessive nurturing of the rotting head. Keats's experimentation is also present in the constantly changing narrative tone that expresses sympathy, criticism and irony in form of interjections and diction. This variety results in a dominant narrative voice that gives the reader little to no room for interpretation. However, the assertive voice that emphasises disrupted psychology, social commentary and death rather than the joys of romance helps transmit Keats's revision of the "gentleness of old Romance" (387). He brands his appropriation of the genre with what Wolfson calls "perversion", as the main element of his romance is the "pot of basil, holding Lorenzo's head."²⁶⁴ It is possible to argue that Keats's brand of romance is based on his desire to satisfy the Romantic audience and their "critical, ironic, self-conscious times, an age in which not even romance can avoid Romantic irony".²⁶⁵ However, it is obvious that Keats also uses "Isabella" to make his mark in poetry, establishing his distancing from Hunt and conventions of romance that is subjected to not only his own aesthetics, but also the demands of the period readership for parallels with social reality.

*"[...] be more of an artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore."*²⁶⁶ — Keats to Shelley

3.2 "The Eve of St. Agnes"

The 1819 narrative poem marks Keats's return to his most admired influence: Spenser. This is all the more evident through the use of the Spenserian stanza that allows his imagery to be transmitted

²⁶³ Barnard, *John Keats*, 68-9.

²⁶⁴ Susan J. Wolfson, *Reading John Keats* (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 2015) 55.

²⁶⁵ Cox, "Lamia, Isabella, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*", 57.

²⁶⁶ "To P. B. Shelley", 16 August 1820, in *Letters*, 464.

to the reader with “sweet and swift-slipping movement”²⁶⁷ reminiscent of the Elizabethan poet. Besides showing Keats’s imaginative engagement through synaesthetic imagery and medieval topoi, the poem also shows reconsideration of the dreamy and escapist world of romance.

Jack Stillinger outlines two main modes of reading “The Eve of St. Agnes”. The first mode of reading is as a “*Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending” with *Sleeping Beauty* motifs of rescuing “a maiden from imprisonment or a spell”²⁶⁸ and the second is as a reconsideration of romance, as

Madeline awakens to find a real Porphyro in her bed instead of the lover she was innocently dreaming about, and she is astonished and dismayed. One might take this to be bad behaviour on Porphyro’s part, because it is connected in the poem with various images of witchcraft, sorcery, peeping Tomism, seduction, and rape.²⁶⁹

I maintain the story to be a mixture of both readings — it is, in my opinion, a reconsideration of the optimistic romance with gruesome (the depictions of the Beadsman and Angela’s dead bodies) and ironic elements (narrative commentary) that also convey Keats’s philosophy concerning life and poetry. To begin with, the poem has, without question, a foundation of romance. The prince-like figure, Porphyro, travels “across the moors” (74) and moves through the castle. He begins at the “portal doors” (76), “ventures in” (82), hides “behind a broad hail-pillar” (94), then with Angela’s guidance through “a lowly arched way” (109) gets into “a little moonlight room” (112), into the “closet” (165) in Madeline’s room and finally into her “bed-side” (253). His journey through rooms leads to his reward — a “sweet dreamer! Lovely bride!” (334), Madeline. They then embark together on a route back through the castle “into the wide hall” (361), “to the iron porch” (362), with final emphasis on the gate where the “key turns, and the door upon its hinges groan[s]” (369), after which they flee “away into the storm” (371), their destination being “o’er the southern moors” (351) where Porphyro promises Madeline a “home” (351). This entire journey is marked by a threat of being seen by Madeline’s kinsmen, whose crude and violent nature is constantly emphasised. First the narrator calls them “hyena foemen” (86), then Angela depicts them as a “blood-thirsty race” (99) and lastly Porphyro describes them as “more fang’d than wolves and bears” (153). Porphyro’s “many hours of toil and *quest*” (338, my emphasis) through wilderness and the castle are rewarded and also contrasted by Madeline’s chamber that offers him refuge like a true “paradise” (244). It is only a temporary safety zone, however, as the journey out of the castle is inevitable if they wish to stay together and keep Porphyro alive. There is a clear parallel with Porphyro as a knight who has the courage to risk his life in order to rescue a maid from “sleeping

²⁶⁷ Matthew Arnold, *On the Classical Tradition*, ed. R. H. Super (University of Michigan Press, 1960) 143.

²⁶⁸ Jack Stillinger, *Reading “The Eve of St. Agnes”* (New York: OUP, 1999) 36.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36-7.

dragons” (353), which equates Madeline to an imprisoned princess. Porphyro’s awareness of playing a knightly role is shown by “invoking metaphors of chivalry and romance”²⁷⁰ and religious ardour, such as that he goes on a “quest” (338) as a “pilgrim” (339) and that he wishes to become “her beauty’s shield” (336) and worship at her “silver shrine” (337). The magical atmosphere of fairy tales and legends is suggested through the language: Madeline is “hoodwink’d by *faery* fancy” (70, my emphasis), Porphyro’s ability to enter the castle unnoticed is equated to a “liege-lord of all the *Elves* and *Fays*” (121, my emphasis), Merlin from the Arthurian legends in line 171 is mentioned and finally the “*elfin*-storm from *faery* land” (342, my emphasis). These references to supernatural and legendary beings accentuate the marvellous and dream-like atmosphere of the night and play on the established features of romance.

Porphyro and Madeline’s union would not be possible without their surrender to what Thomson calls “a silly ritual”²⁷¹ whose correct performance might provide them with “visions of delight, / And soft adoring from their loves receive / Upon the honey’d middle of the night” (47-9). The virgin Madeline’s dedication to her “faery fancy” (70) is so intense that it leads to a careful selection of visual, aural and oral stimuli. This selection is based on the clear instructions of the ritual that dictates that

[...] *supperless* to bed they [St. Agnes’ maids] must retire,
 And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Not look behind, nor sideways, but require
 Of Heaven with *upward eyes* for all that they desire. (“Agnes”, 51-54, my emphasis)

Some critics express a negative opinion of Madeline and other virgins who blindly follow this ritual: Stillinger views this behaviour as “stuporous insensibility”,²⁷² because Madeline deliberately shuts herself from reality in order to escape into dreams, and Thomson finds Madeline’s lowering of her “maiden eyes” (57) and ignoring of “many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier” (60) around her as “ironic, considering that she is ‘full of this whim’ (55), that is, plotting a *vision of her lover*.”²⁷³ Hence both critics note the obvious naïveté of the heroine (and other virgins), who rely on superstition instead of taking action to find romance. A counter-argument is that Madeline is — much like Shakespeare’s Juliet — uninterested in the men of her kin and, aware of the feud between her and Porphyro’s families, she uses the night’s pagan charms for any reassurance of their possible union. In fact, Waldoff observes that the lovers face the same problem of separation and hence “use

²⁷⁰ Leon Waldoff, “Porphyro’s Imagination and Keats’s Romanticism”, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (April, 1977) 177-194 at 185.

²⁷¹ Heidi Thomson, “Eavesdropping on “The Eve of St. Agnes”: Madeline’s Sensual Ear and Porphyro’s Ancient Ditty”, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (Jul., 1998) 337-351 at 351.

²⁷² Jack Stillinger, “The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in “The Eve of St. Agnes””, in *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (Jul., 1961) 533-555 at 549.

²⁷³ Thomson, 341. My emphasis.

their imaginations”²⁷⁴ to solve it, though evidently Madeline turns to dreaming and Porphyro uses imagination to “in a bold and innovative way.”²⁷⁵ Porphyro is not a dreamer like Madeline, but he seizes the opportunity of St. Agnes’ Eve to conceive “a stratagem for appearing before her and seeming to make her dream come true”²⁷⁶ while yet keeping “an eye on reality”.²⁷⁷ He is aware of the danger he puts himself in by being in a “mansion foul” where “not one breast affords / him any mercy” (88-9), and his survival lies in the hands of two women of the house: the “old beldame, weak in body and in soul” (90), Angela, and the romantic interest, Madeline. Though a “traitor” (330) to her house, Angela is loyal and maternal towards Porphyro as she informs him of Madeline’s plans, where to find the maid’s “own lute” (175) and leads him towards the heart of the castle and story — Madeline’s bedroom. She does so under the condition that Porphyro “must needs the lady wed” (179), else her guilt will make her unworthy of earthly burial (180). While Porphyro is rational and strategic, he is also affected by imagination and visions of pleasure: his eyes that grow “brilliant” (132) and from which “tears” (134) drop express his amazement at the vision of “Madeline asleep in lap of legends old” (135). This personification suggests the legends’ protective nature, as they have the potential to assure Madeline that she will reunite with her forbidden lover. By the end of the poem when he wins Madeline, he also uses faery diction (for example, the tempest is an “elfin-storm from faery land” (343)), which makes him too appear “half-asleep in the lap of legends old”.²⁷⁸ Nonetheless, the faery language can also be seen as part of Porphyro’s strategy to lure Madeline away from the castle (dreamy paradise) into the storm (reality).

In contrast to Porphyro and Madeline, the narrator conveys a more ironic view of romance and the fantastic events of the night. There is, on the one hand, what Fogle names “deliberate emphasis on fairy unreality”²⁷⁹ when the narrator writes that the party-goers are “numerous as shadows haunting” (39) and the “the[ir] brain, new stuff’d, in youth, with *triumphs gay* / of *old romance* (40-1, my emphasis). This line conveys not only criticism of the youths’ blind hopes for a stock happy-end romance, but also that the stories are “old” and therefore outdated and irreproducible. The narrator’s scepticism is further suggested by the strikingly unrefined phrase “new stuff’d” that conveys the unfavourable view of the youths’ naïveté, and also the word “hoodwink’d” (70) in relation to Madeline. The abstract noun “revelry” (37) that describes the

²⁷⁴ Thomson, 340. Paraphrase of Leon Waldoff’s *Keats and the Silent Work of the Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 70.

²⁷⁵ Waldoff, “Porphyro’s Imagination and Keats’s Romanticism”, 178-9.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ R. H. Fogle, “A Reading of Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes”, in *College English*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (March, 1945) 325-328 at 326.

group emphasises the loss of individuality and rather creates the image of a fanatical crowd of hopefuls who recreate old rituals and listen to legends as their guides to romance — this is heavily criticised by the unfavourable eyes of the poem’s modern narrator. The conclusion of the poem that turns from the fleeing young lovers to Angela who is “palsy-twitch’d, with meagre face deform” (376) and the Beadsman’s death goes in line with the popular Romantic genre of tragedy. This ironic finale leaves grotesque and chilling images in the reader’s mind, contrasting with the previous sensualities and wide range of colour, sound and movement. Keats emphasises even more the ironic conclusion in one of the drafts where he specifies the manner of the Beadsman’s death:

The Beadsman stiffen’d — ‘twixt a sigh and laugh,
Ta’en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough²⁸⁰

The Beadsman’s laughter is a comment on the absurdity of life, as death is inevitable despite having had a “thousand aves told / for aye unsought” (377-8). All of his efforts are unsolicited, as by “seeking to subdue the flesh to the spirit [he] becomes only meaningless, lifeless matter among the very ashes that symbolise the meaninglessness of the mortal body”.²⁸¹ Laughter appears also earlier on where Angela says that she has “mickle time to grieve” (126) as she doubts the power of “good angels” (125) to protect Madeline and Porphyro from the wrath of reality. She is then shown to laugh in the “languid moon” (126), which conveys her scepticism and this association with the moon can also represent her low physical energy and fading skin that contrasts with Porphyro’s vitality, shown by his “brilliant” (132) eyes and the fervid taint of the “flushing of his brow” (137). Youthful beauty, energy and belief in superstitious powers are opposed by the aged and disillusioned Beadsman and Angela, who are “grotesque and gruesome”²⁸² elements and their grim deaths contrast the heroic ones found in chivalric romance, such as the Arthurian legends.

The tale includes many elements that are medieval. The most significant are the different forms of spirituality on which the characters depend, similarly to the population of the medieval period who have “a proclivity towards religion, superstition and rituals”.²⁸³ Keats’s portrayal of Christian, Classical and pagan rituals in his oeuvre are loyal to medieval aesthetics that

[...] draws on two sources: one conceived of as an embodiment of divine revelation, namely the Bible (particularly the Hebrew books, or “Old Testament”); the other regarded as the product of human wisdom, namely the corpus of Greek and Roman philosophical writings.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Stillinger, *Reading “The Eve of St. Agnes”*, 146.

²⁸¹ Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats’s Major Poems* (London: OUP, 1963) 137.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁸³ Sunil K. Sarker, *S. T. Coleridge* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001) 168.

²⁸⁴ John Haldane, “Medieval Aesthetics”, in *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (New York: Routledge, 2013) 3rd edition, 25-35 at 26.

The Christian framework is represented by the Beadsman, who is seen to be telling “his rosary” (5) under the “sweet Virgin’s picture” (9), the Catholic figure of protection. His dedication to the “thousand aves” (377) prayer seems urgent all the more, considering his “aged and poor” (21) body that is nearing death — “already had his deathbell rung” (22). While he lacks sympathy for the sculptured “knights, ladies, praying in dumb oratories” (16) who “may ache in icy hoods and mails” (18), he is concerned not only for “his soul’s reprieve” (26), but also for the living, as he stays up all night to grieve “for sinners’ sake” (27). The Beadsman is unoriginal, as he repeats the behaviour of the characters of old romance (which is a possible criticism of the religion’s lack of modernity) and another irony lies in the fact that despite all of the prayers, death is inevitable and he dies alone. Besides the Beadsman and the eternally praying inanimate sculptures (16), other characters are also seen in temporary prayer or making reference to it. Porphyro “implores all saints” (77) for success that night before entering the castle, and he claims to Angela “O may I ne’er find grace / when my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer” (146-7) if he hurts Madeline. Angela claims to recite prayers of protection for Porphyro “each morn and evening” (157), which conveys her maternal approach towards him. She then orders Porphyro to “kneel in prayer” (178) for protection while she arranges a clear route for him into Madeline’s bedroom. The heroine is seen praying by the window where her hands are “together prest” (220). The simile that her soul is “clasp’d like a missal where swart Paynims pray” (241) is a reference to the inaccessible Christian Bible for non-Christians (Muslims). This line, however, lacks any logical sense — it is, in the words of Jules Jusserand, “a string of beautiful words, *suggesting*, at most, a meaning rather than *having* any.”²⁸⁵ Instead, it serves as a possible Orientalist reference that widens the poem’s aesthetic scope. In contrast to the Christian prayer, the ritual of St. Agnes’ Eve is essentially pagan. The ritual gives Madeline the opportunity to “experience the spiritual repetition of life”²⁸⁶ and a visionary escape from the “petty passions of the world”²⁸⁷ represented by the surrounding “whisperers in anger, or in sport; / ‘mid looks of love, defiance, hate and scorn” (68-9). Lastly, there is the Classical foundation, as like Porphyro’s name that originates from the Greek, the St. Agnes’ ritual refers to the innocent ‘agnos’ (a metaphor for virgins) and the Greek god of sleep in the line “Morphean amulet” (257). The “holy loom” (115) may not only be reminiscent of the Ancient Greek Fates who control the thread of mortality, but also of the Christian ritual of the “weaving of the *pallium* for the pope [...] from the wool of two lambs blessed at the altar of the Roman church Santa Agnese on St. Agnes’

²⁸⁵ Quoted in Stanley Burnshaw, *The Seamless Web* (New York: G. Brazillier, 1991) 96. My emphasis.

²⁸⁶ Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 129.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Day” by the “nuns in a secrecy (*clausura*) of the convent”,²⁸⁸ depicted in the poem as the “secret sisterhood” (116). Keats obviously uses religion in “The Eve of St. Agnes” as a technique to create atmosphere and deeper characterisation of the figures whose desires (Madeline’s visionary reunion with Porphyro) and insecurities (Beadsman’s fear of not having an afterlife) are reflected in their choice and performance of a ritual. Also, the inclusion of the paganism functions as a “challenge to the authority of the Church of England”²⁸⁹ — Keats calls paganism “a battering ram against Christianity”,²⁹⁰ which is an opinion formed under Hunt’s influence and is included as part of his revision of romance as a non-believer and sceptic.

Other than the spiritual level, Keats presents a number of cultural references to medieval culture. The figures of medieval high society are presented in the form of sculptures (“knights, ladies” (16)) and stained glass with the imagery of a “thousand heraldries” surrounding “a shielded scutcheon blush’d with blood of queens and kings” (214, 216). In contrast to Keats’s emphasis on “old romance” and coldness, the phrase “*blush’d with blood*” (216, my emphasis) creates the impression that the illustration is still alive and warm. One can also find other members of the medieval hierarchy: the Beadsman, Madeline’s servant, the “beldame” (90) Angela, “*Lord Maurice*” (103, my emphasis), the “Porter” (363), “Baron” (372) and “warrior-guests” (373). The Greek name of Porphyro and the obviously Germanic “Hildebrand” (100) suggest different origins, emphasising the cultural and geographic intermingling of society. There are also examples of medieval visual art — the colourful “triple-arch’d” (208) window with “carven imag’ries” (209) of a still life of “fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass” (210), a carpet with “broad golden fringe” (285) and a hunting scene tapestry (“the arras, rich with horseman, hawk and hound” (358)). There is also a list of instruments that are signature for medieval music: “silver, snarling trumpets” (31), “timbrels” (67), “kettle-drum” and “clarionet” (259), “tambour frame” (174) and the “hollow lute” (175, 289). The setting moves from a “chapel” (13) to the castle interior with a “hail-pillar” (94), “lowly arched” (109) halls with “cobweb” (110), colourful stained glass windows comparable to “the tiger-moth’s deep-damask’d wings” (213), “wide stairs” (355), “long carpets [...] along the gusty floor” (360) and “footworn stones” (368) by the door. This detailed inspection of the interior can be linked to Hunt’s focus on “domestic interiors and garden bowers”²⁹¹ in “The Story of Rimini”. In terms of attire, Porphyro has a hat with a “lofty plume” (110), but Madeline’s attire is left unspecified. However, Keats already provides enough to imagine a medieval scene.

²⁸⁸ Martin Procházka, Romantic Symbolic Poem III: Keats, “Seminar 5” handout, 3.

²⁸⁹ Kandl, “The politics of Keats’s early poetry”, 9.

²⁹⁰ “To Leigh Hunt”, 10 May 1817, in *Letters*, 19.

²⁹¹ Jane Stabler, “Leigh Hunt’s aesthetics of intimacy”, in *Leigh Hunt: Life, poetics and politics*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London: Routledge, 2003) 95-117 at 97.

The poem's sensuality is conveyed through its use of aural, visual and oral elements that will be addressed in the following paragraphs. Keats's contemporaries notice the poem's rich visuality. Hazlitt depicts the effect of the stained glass window scene of stanza 25 thus:

The beautiful and tender images there conjured up, 'come like shadows—so depart'. The 'tiger-moth's wings', which he has spread over his rich poetic blazonry, just flit across my fancy; the gorgeous twilight window which he has painted over again in his verse, to me 'blushes' almost in vain 'with blood of queens and kings'.²⁹²

According to Leigh Hunt, the poem is "rather a picture than a story",²⁹³ which suggests the dominance of the visual over narrative. Douglas Bush shares this opinion, as he writes that the poem is "no more than a romantic tapestry of unique richness of colour" and one is "moved less by the experience of the characters than [...] by the incidental and innumerable beauties of descriptive phrase and rhythm."²⁹⁴ On the other hand, critics like Robert Gittings find the story to be "a series of medieval pictures, giving a *fresh view of the same story* from stanza to stanza, like some jewelled fresco from a church wall",²⁹⁵ which suggests that descriptions actually help layer the story, giving it more depth and vividness. The visual side of the poem is without question the most effective, successfully transferring the images into the reader's mind. The most rich sections of the entire romance are without doubt stanzas 24 to 26 where Keats describes Porphyro's view of the bedroom and Madeline's ritual and undressing. In Andrew Bennett's view, the verbal descriptive qualities of these passages take away its visual effect:

Stanzas 24-26 [...] generate a poetry of the visual, [and] demonstrate, in the texture of their language, the paradox of the language description: *the more descriptive language becomes, the less visual the descriptions, the less coherent and probable are the possibilities [for] readers to generate a "visual" scene in the "mind's eye."* Descriptive writing operates on different levels than the visual: repetition, antithesis, paronomasia, metaphor, onomatopoeia, the foregrounding of diction verbal ambiguity, etc., *produce a verbal rather than a visual enticement to the reader.*²⁹⁶

A possible reason for the abundance of description may be that for the first time in the poem, we — the reader — and Porphyro, are static and hence can observe more from one position. This is a change, as we are moving for most of the poem: from the chapel to the castle, from room to hallway to room and back again. This journey presents a series of visual contrasts — from the chilly, dark exterior to the warm lighted interior, the contrasting pairs of the young Porphyro and Madeline and the "old" (90) and "ancient" (28) Beadsman and Angela who function as "a pair of *memento*

²⁹² Keats: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971) 247.

²⁹³ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁹⁴ Douglas Bush, "Keats and His Ideas" in *The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal*, ed. Clarence D. Thorpe et al. (Carbondale, Illinois, 1957) 231-45 at 239 footnote.

²⁹⁵ Robert Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819* (London: Heineman, 1968) 68. My emphasis.

²⁹⁶ Andrew J. Bennett, "'Hazardous Magic': Vision and Inscription in Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes'", in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 41 (1992) 100-121 at 110. My emphasis.

mori's"²⁹⁷ and the Porphyro of Madeline's dream and reality that shocks the maid, as she perceives him as pale even though he is depicted to be "burning" with emotions.

Sound takes on several forms throughout the poem, ranging from complete silence in Madeline's bedroom to full volume of "boisterous" (258) coming from the players at the party downstairs, with whispers and gentle lute chords in between. The Beadsman and Madeline both put the mortal joy of music aside as they mentally prepare for rituals that are central to fulfilling their desires of spiritual vision and existence. The heroine chooses to "scarcely" (57) hear the music that is given an erotic and religious parallel, as it is "yearning like a God in pain" (56) and the Beadsman is "flatter'd to tears" (21) by "Music's golden tongue" (20). In both cases, Keats emphasises the intensity and ability of music to invoke emotion even in the "aged man" (21). The approaching deaths of the Beadsman and Angela are expressed through the metaphor of bells and silence: "already had his *deathbell rung*; the joys of all his life were *said* and *sung*" (22, my emphasis) and the "passing-bell may ere the midnight *toll*" (156, my emphasis). Madeline's focus on the nearing moment of the ritual is further highlighted by her ignoring the usually loud "timbrels" (67) and the voices of the people surrounding her ("the sound of merriment and chorus bland" (95)). Thomson correctly declares that silence is central to "both Porphyro's stratagem and Madeline's ritual",²⁹⁸ yet while noiselessness helps Porphyro to remain unnoticed by his enemies, Madeline's muteness ("no uttered syllable" (203)) promises the service of the eve's supernatural powers. Synaesthesia is present in the voyeuristic climax of the poem. One can easily imagine the clicking when Madeline "unclasps her warmed jewels one by one" (228) and the "rustling" (230) of her attire as it falls. While before it is Porphyro's heart that is "burning" (159), now it is his eyes *and* ears. Silence follows in the room, as Porphyro listens Madeline "breathing" (246) as an aural sign of her falling into "slumberous tenderness" (247). It is not until he is assured of her being asleep that Porphyro "himself" (249) breathes again. The tension is transferred also onto the reader who, like Porphyro, remains silent as to not awaken Madeline and break the ritual.

However, instruments are shown to break twice the silence in Madeline's bedroom. The first time is when there is the (luckily) temporary music of the "boisterous, midnight, festive clarion, / The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet" (258-9) — a reminder of the party nearby — that disappears once "the hall door shuts again" (261). The second instance is when Porphyro awakens Madeline with "chords that tenderest be" (290) played on a "hollow lute" (289). She is very receptive to Porphyro's lute-playing as her ear is described to be "touching the melody" (293). This

²⁹⁷ Fogle, 326.

²⁹⁸ Thomson, 343.

image conveys “how well Madeline responds to Porphyro”²⁹⁹ and also predicts their approaching physical union. Madeline is actually a very enthusiastic listener if she wants to be — she pays close attention to the instructions of the “old dames” (45) on how to achieve “wing’d St. Agnes’ saintly care” (44) and it is the recollection of these directions that occupy her “thoughtful” (55) mind, therefore canceling out any other noise. Porphyro breaks the muteness of the ballad that is “long since mute” (291) as well as Madeline’s. Her voice is awakened when she emits “a soft moan” (294), which according to Thomson “breaks the rule of silence in Madeline’s virginal Agnes’s Eve ritual”.³⁰⁰ We hear her voice for the first time as she engages in a short dialogue with Porphyro.³⁰¹ Madeline’s first words to him heavily emphasise the aural: “Thy *voice* was at sweet *tremble* in mine ear / made *tuneable* with every sweetest *vow*” (308-9, my emphasis) and “Give me that *voice* again” (312, my emphasis). Their consummation is accompanied by the sounds of the blowing “frost-wind” (322) and the “pattering” (323) of “sharp sleet / against the window-panes” (324). The wind and sleet can be also heard during the lovers’ post-coital conversation where Porphyro assures Madeline that “there are no ears to hear” (348) them leave. The fact that the house is asleep and has “no human sound” (356) accentuates the importance of their silent steps. Keats inserts a supernatural atmosphere through the description that the lovers “glide, like phantoms” (361) — they seem to transition into an ungraspable vision, melting into the air and losing all human weight. The final sounds of the poem are emitted by inanimate objects, taking away any human agency, as “the bolts full easy *slide*:— / the chains *lie silent* [...] / the *key* turns, and the door upon its hinges *groans*” (367-9, my emphasis).

Another modernising aspect of Keats’s revision of romance is what M. H. Abrams terms the “materiality of Keats’s linguistic medium”,³⁰² which refers to the phonetic side of words and their production by “the organs of speech, that is, in the lungs, throat, mouth, tongue, and lips”.³⁰³ The act of reciting the words of a poem gives it its vitality as well as makes it all the more memorable for the reader, who recounts the aural and physical sensations — i.e. hearing the poem’s metre, rhymes, repetitions, alliterations and more while enjoying the physical sensation of producing the sounds and tones, turning a simple visual reading of the poem into a “richly sensuous oral activity.”³⁰⁴ For example, the line with Orientalist references “From silken Samarcand to cedar’d

²⁹⁹ Thomson, 346.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 337.

³⁰¹ This transition from instrumental music to dialogue is reminiscent of the communication between Chartier’s “L’amant” and “La Dame”.

³⁰² M. H. Abrams, “Keats’s Poems: The Material Dimensions”, in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2004) 319-336 at 324.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 320.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

Lebanon” (270) uses a number of consonants produced in different areas of the mouth: the teeth (fricative), tongue (alveolar), palate (velar), lips (bilabial) and combinations of two areas (labiodental and labiovelar). Oral recitation highlights the line’s euphonic qualities, like the onomatopoeic “silken” that recalls the slippery and soft material. This suggestion of the word’s meaning through sounds may indicate Keats’s agreement with Alexander Pope’s view from “Essay on Criticism” where he claims that in poetry, “the sound must seem an echo to the sense.”³⁰⁵ Besides onomatopoeia, Abrams claims that the iconicity of a word is transmitted by “a seeming mimicry of sound by sound”,³⁰⁶ such as in the line “the silver, snarling trumpets ‘gan to *chide*” (31, my emphasis). Breath is the most important fuel of words and sounds and Abrams asserts that

[O]f all the forms of art [...] the material base of poetry, whether spoken or sung, is the most intimately human, because it is constituted solely by our bodily actions, and because its vehicle is the *breath of our life*.³⁰⁷

There is also a number of actions that involve and indicate human breath in the poem, giving the characters their life and immortality — namely Madeline’s wordless sighs (63, 66 and 303), panting (201, 295) and moans (294, 303) and Angela and Porphyro’s whispers (68, 183, 280). The imagining of the characters’ voices, breath and the aforementioned sounds and instruments vivifies the poem and adds to its beauty, creating a sensuous reality within the framework of romance.

The poem also emphasises the close parallel between sexuality and taste, which is an observation made by Lionel Trilling who states that “the luxury of food is connected with, and in a sense gives place to the luxury of sexuality”.³⁰⁸ This parallel is evident from the ritual itself that instructs virgins to retire to bed “supperless” (51) in order to experience pleasure “upon the *honey’d* middle of the night” (49, my emphasis). The virgins’ fasting contradicts the portrayal of St. Agnes’ eve as a “feast-night” (174). However, Porphyro prepares a feast on Madeline’s bedside table. The fruit that first appears as part of the “carven imageries” (209) on the triple-arched window solidifies in stanza 30 where we see a heap

[O]f candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr’d
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
 From silken Samarcand to cedar’d Lebanon. (“Agnes”, 265-270)

This stanza clearly emits a sense of luxury, reminiscent of Hunt’s notion of “luxuries”. The words “candied” “spiced” “jellies”, “creamy”, “syrups” and “spiced” all convey different forms, textures

³⁰⁵ Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism”, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) Volume 1, 2677. Part 2, 365.

³⁰⁶ Abrams, 322-3.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 321.

³⁰⁸ Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking Press, 1955) 18.

and tastes of fruit. This section is greatly admired by Hunt who claims that it “make[s] us read the line delicately, and at the tip-end, as it were, of one’s tongue”.³⁰⁹ In addition to the oral and sensuous qualities of the lines, Bennett claims that there is also a “mimetic effect” that functions as further “reassurance of luxuriant riches”.³¹⁰ Like the silk from Samarcand and spices from Lebanon, the sweets from the Moroccan Fez evoke Orientalism and so Keats widens the romance’s cultural spectrum. These goods become all the more strikingly opulent and rare when one considers the story’s medieval setting, as they are imported from foreign lands. It is relevant to mention that Keats includes a similar list of (less exotic) food in a deleted stanza initially inserted between stanzas 6 and 7, where Madeline envisions that in her dream,

[...] her future lord would there appear
Offering as sacrifice — all in the dream —
Delicious food even to her lips brought near:
Viands and wine and fruit and sugar’d cream,
To touch her palate with the fine extreme
Of relish [...]³¹¹

Madeline evidently has a “hungry imagination”³¹² as she visualises a man who will provide food and feed her. This notion is heavily linked to the still-present line where Porphyro describes himself as “a *famish’d* pilgrim” (339, my emphasis). Waldoff suggests a possible parallel between Petrarch’s visual feasting on Laura’s beauty that Keats includes in his “Sleep and Poetry”:

Petrarch [...] Starts at the sight of Laura; nor can wean
His eyes from her sweet face” (“Sleep and Poetry”, 389-91)

There is the plausible point that Keats presents beauty and love as metaphorical food for the soul and eye, yet within “The Eve of St. Agnes”, it seems more that hunger is connected to lust, a different kind of appetite that is ready to be sated. It is a pity that Keats does not include the aforementioned stanza in the final draft, as it would show Porphyro’s outlaying of food as Madeline’s dream turned into reality and accentuate their affinity even more. Another sensuous luxury worth mentioning is that of smell that is especially linked throughout the poem to Madeline who has a “fragrant bodice” (229), “lavender’d” (263) linen bedsheets and whose communion with Porphyro is described as “the rose / blendeth its *odour* with the violet,— / Solution *sweet*” (320-2, my emphasis). The fruits’ sweet “perfume light” (275) only adds to the poem’s sensuality.

The communion is the poem’s climax, yet there are also other instances of physical sensations in the romance. The most evident example is the alteration between cold and warmth,

³⁰⁹ Keats: *The Critical Heritage*, 280.

³¹⁰ Andrew Bennett, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, in *John Keats*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007) 129-148 at 140.

³¹¹ Stillinger, *Reading “The Eve of St. Agnes”*, 26.

³¹² Waldoff, “Porphyro’s Imagination and Keats’s Romanticism”, 188.

which opens the poem. The “a-cold” (2) owl, “trembling” hare (3) and the Beadsman’s “numb” (5) fingers and “frosted breath” (6) all accentuate the “bitter chill” (1) of the January evening. Even the inanimate representations of humans are suffering: “the sculptured dead [...] seem to *freeze*” (14, my emphasis) and the Beadsman is shown to lack empathy as his “weak spirit fails / to think how they may *ache* in *icy* hoods and mails” (17-8, my emphasis). It is only “Music’s golden tongue” (20) that awakens emotions in him, yet while tempted to listen, he closes himself off from it. Porphyro, on the other hand, does not seem bothered by the cold as he is warmed by his “heart on fire / for Madeline” (75-6). His excitement and strong physical energy are conveyed through the depiction that he is “burning” (159).³¹³ The line “enchantments *cold*” (134, my emphasis) personifies the long age and inactivity of the charms. The “little moonlight room” (112) where Angela takes Porphyro is “pale, latticed, chill, and silent as a tomb” (112) and the exact reverse of Madeline’s chamber, which is “silken, hush’d, and chaste” (187). One of the possible reasons for this contrast can be that the moonlit room is still too close to the influence of nature and reality, whereas the bedroom represents an embarkment into fantasy, the welcoming location where Madeline’s dream and Porphyro’s wish come true. The cold moonlight in the small room has the opposite effect in the maid’s chamber where the “wintry moon” (217) throws “*warm* gules” (218, my emphasis) on Madeline’s body. Colvin praises Keats’s ability to vivify “everything he touches, telling even of dead and senseless things in terms of life, movement, and feeling”.³¹⁴ An example of such vivification is the depiction of Madeline’s “*warmed* jewels” (228, my emphasis) where Keats focuses not on “their lustre or other visible qualities”, but also portrays them as “breathing with the very life of the wearer”.³¹⁵ The word selection in the line “*trembling* in her soft and *chilly* nest”³¹⁶ (235, my emphasis) is evocative of the freezing hare and owl in the opening scene and may therefore hint another correlation between the castle interior and exterior. The “*warmth* of sleep” (237, my emphasis) soothes the cold physical sensation, yet the “soul” (238) escapes into the realm of imagination and dreams. In this alternative world Madeline encounters a Porphyro who makes the real one appear “chill” (311), though he is described to be “impassion’d” (316) and “flush’d” (318). It is nature that continues to be chilly, as “frost-wind” (322) and “sharp sleet” (323) are heard. The poem closes with the Beadsman, but it is not his body, but his “ashes” (378) that are cold. Coldness helps give the poem its circular structure.

³¹³ The motif of a fervent man appears previously in “Calidore, A Fragment” where Keats portrays the knight as “burning / to hear of knightly deeds” (“Calidore”, 142-3).

³¹⁴ Colvin, *Life of John Keats*, 399.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 401.

³¹⁶ The nest imagery appears in “Isabella” where the female protagonist’s room is depicted as a “downy nest” (138).

Fogle argues that “The Eve of St. Agnes” is “in the highest degree romantic, but it is erected four-square and solid upon a foundation of materials from the real world.”³¹⁷ Besides the romantic elements of a prince’s successful quest of liberating an imprisoned maid by avoiding her guardians’ eyes, there are also features of reality. Porphyro’s journey through the various rooms of Madeline’s castle is comparable to Keats’s metaphoric comparison of “human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments”.³¹⁸ Madeline’s bedroom is reminiscent of Keats’s depiction of the “Chamber of Maiden Thought” where one becomes “intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders and think of delaying there forever in delight”.³¹⁹ Madeline’s bedroom is associated with visual and physical joys that heavily contrast the castle’s hostile environment and the chilly January weather. Yet like the pressing issue of Porphyro’s unwelcomed presence in the house and the limited time of the magical eve slipping away, the reality of “Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression” affects the Chamber that

[...] becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open, but all dark, all leading to dark passages.³²⁰

Albeit happily reunited, Porphyro and Madeline’s journey out of the Chamber is indeed through a “darkling way” (355) that promises further danger of being caught by the family’s “glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears” (354). They flee into the night storm and one is left unsure of whether their journey across the moors to Porphyro’s home is successful, especially considering the merciless character of nature that takes away Angela’s and the Beadsman’s lives. In Amy Lowell’s reading, their passing conveys “the old story of the cruelty of nature” where “for two who are happy, life demands the insatiable toll of death.”³²¹ While in reality this equation is not possible, it effectively portrays cause and consequence and the necessity of returning from dreams to reality. C. F. Burgess’s opinion agrees with this notion, as he states that

[T]he poem has thus come full circle, from chill to warmth, from reality to the imaginative to reality. Porphyro has come from the outer world and to it, he must return.³²²

One can only hope for a reconciliation of the families that would offer a peaceful environment for the young lovers, yet the concluding emphasis on death (of the Beadsman and Angela) and the dreams of the Baron and his “warrior-guests” (373) of “many a woe” (272) and “of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm” (374) — that are also markers of the Gothic genre — creates a sense of hopelessness that weakens any sense of optimism for the lovers’ future.

³¹⁷ Fogle, 325.

³¹⁸ “To J. H. Reynolds”, 3 May 1818. *Letters*, 124.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ Amy Lowell, *John Keats* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925) II, 171.

³²² C. F. Burgess, ““The Eve of St. Agnes”: One Way to the Poem” in *The English Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 5 (May, 1965) 389-394 at 394.

A striking feature of Keats's romance that adds to its visual effect is the heavy use of colours and tones that are, besides being visually effective, connected to the characters and their development. In fact, Keats writes about this briefly in his letter:

I wish to *diffuse the colouring* of St. Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which *Character and Sentiment* would be the figures to such drapery.³²³

The two main colours throughout the poem are silver and purple, which are shades from the cold and warm tone spectrums. Porphyro's character is evidently connected to warmth, as the hero's name originates from the Greek word *porphura*, meaning purple. His sexual energy is most evidently illustrated in the depiction that his heart makes "purple riot" (138) when he composes a "stratagem" (139) on how to see Madeline. Silver, on the other hand, is associated both with Madeline and the superstitious power of St. Agnes' Eve that is represented by the "dim, silver twilight" (254) of the "faded moon" (253) under which Porphyro prepares his part of the night's enchanting power. In Fogle's summary:

[T]he thread of silver commences faintly with the "argent revellers" and continues in the pale moonshine with which the whole poem is bathed, until its spell is symbolically broken and the lovers must depart from the enchanted castle.³²⁴

Despite Madeline's association with silver, she is paralleled to a rose, the shade of which is similar to Porphyro's symbolical colour. Her deep sleep is equated to the same flower that is "blinded alike from sunshine and from rain" (242-3). The rose implies her sexuality: the term "bud" (242) conveys virginity while the consummation is implicated through the metaphor of intermingling scents where Madeline, of course, represents the rose and Porphyro the violet (321). According to Bennett, the use of "colour-words" are related to the poem's descriptions of "the tainting of Madeline's purity, the successful consummation of Porphyro's purple plan to emblazon himself on Madeline."³²⁵ Indeed, before this point, Madeline is described as "lily white" (52), "pure" (225) and "free from mortal taint" (225), all of which emphasise her innocence, virginity and also almost otherworldly appearance of a "splendid angel" (223) — a line that is originally "silvery angel", as Burgess notes.³²⁶ Madeline is associated with silver on several occasions — she carries a "silver taper" (194), wears a "silver cross" (221), and Porphyro thinks of her as his "silver shrine" (337) while he himself is her "beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed" (336). The word "dye" is among the range of diction implying (even if temporary) change of colour, which includes "*flushing* his brow" (137, my emphasis), "*stains* and splendid dyes" (212, my emphasis), "*deep-damask'd*" (213, my emphasis), "*blush'd* with blood" (1216, my emphasis) and "*threw* warm gules"

³²³ "To John Taylor", 17 November 1819, in *Letters*, 395.

³²⁴ Fogle, 327.

³²⁵ Bennett, "'The Eve of St. Agnes': One Way to the Poem", 142.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 392.

(218, my emphasis). Wasserman observes that such blending of the two main colours of the poem — Madeline’s signature silver and Porphyro’s purple — “begin to run together”³²⁷ once they are in the same room. The range of colour-changing words prior to this point is recognised by Burgess as “Keats’s careful preparation for this symbolic blending of silver and reddish-rose”.³²⁸ It is worth noting that a colour change is portrayed even outside Porphyro’s direct influence. For example, the “wintry moon” (217) shining through the stained glass casement throws “warm gules” (118) on Madeline, creating a “rose-bloom” (220) on her hands and “soft amethyst” (221) on her “silver cross” (221) — an image that is symbolic of Madeline’s approaching transition from virgin to woman. However, the light on her hair that is a “glory, like a saint” (222) emphasises her dual role as a female and a creature “of heaven and of earth, of the spirit and of the flesh”.³²⁹ This double identity not only accentuates the male gaze narrative, but also evokes the visual and literary trope that presents women as angels and therefore all the more saintly and desirable.

Burgess asserts that the blending of Madeline and Porphyro’s signature colours “take[s] on even larger symbolic meaning, betokening the *flesh and the spirit duality* of Porphyro’s love for Madeline”.³³⁰ Porphyro’s affection is both “ethereal and carnal”.³³¹ On the one hand, he adores Madeline as a man with his “heart on fire” (75) who wishes to “speak, kneel, touch, kiss” (81) her and to “drowse beside” (278) her in death. On the other hand, his diction is religious as he refers to himself as an “hermit” (277) and “pilgrim” (339) and he describes her to have a “glory, like a saint” (222), looking like a “splendid angel, newly drest, / Save wings, for heaven” (223-4). There are readings in which Porphyro is seen as villainous, but this language is proof of the opposite. For example, Waldoff argues that while Porphyro’s diction “does suggest the idealised state of his feelings”, it can also be taken as the narrative’s evidence of Porphyro’s “honourable intentions.”³³² Another proof of his pure motives is that his behaviour opposes the post-coital abandonment and failed romance that we find in Keats’s future “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. Porphyro’s loyalty to Madeline subverts this behaviour by offering the maid both marriage and a home. If one does agree with the interpretation that Porphyro rapes Isabella, then it would completely change the story’s effect from a quest-like pursuit of a forbidden love’s reunion, magical atmosphere and sensual narrative to a warning of the deceptive nature of romance. However, I believe that Porphyro is

³²⁷ Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 111.

³²⁸ Burgess, “‘The Eve of St. Agnes’: One Way to the Poem”, 391-2.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 392.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 391-2. My emphasis.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 391.

³³² Waldoff, “Porphyro’s Imagination and Keats’s Romanticism”, 181.

liberating Madeline from her despotic family that — like Isabella’s brothers — does not allow her to make independent decisions even concerning her romantic partner.

Fausset writes that “The Eve of St. Agnes” has “no other aim but the creation of sensuous beauty” and if Keats’s career would end with writing this poem, then “there would have been every excuse for posterity’s acceptance of him as a poet who sought beauty for beauty’s sake rather than for truth’s.”³³³ There is truly an abundance of aural, oral and visual elements that add to the poem’s sensuality and creative powers, yet one can find elements of truth in the way Keats captures mankind: the range of emotions from “love, defiance, hate, and scorn” (68), desire for affection and revenge, the close proximity between youth and age and their dependency on each other for aid, purpose and knowledge. Different modes of living are also presented, such as the “ancient” (28) Beadsman’s slow and spiritual life on the periphery of society and even life and the youths’ dedication to “faery fancy” (70). The poem captures the events of one magical evening from different angles, moving from the exterior (Porphyro, the Beadsman) to the interior (the loud party, Madeline’s bedroom) while simultaneously highlighting a series of contrasts that are part of Keats’s synaesthetic imagery that engages the senses of touch, sound and sight. In summary, “The Eve of St. Agnes” offers the reader a tasteful visit to the magical and enchanting world of romance, yet the return back to reality is inevitable. However, Porphyro and Keats alike gain rewards from their journeys: Madeline and a greatly imaginative poem that offers a more sensuous and enchanting perspective on Romantic medievalism than the tragic “Isabella” and “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. “The Eve of St. Agnes” is therefore the premiere example of a poem filled with “ore”.

*“My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you. I am forgetful of everything but seeing you again. My Life seems to stop there; I see no further. You have absorb’d me.”*³³⁴ — Keats to Fanny Brawne

3.3 “La Belle Dame sans Merci”

It is highly relevant to first discuss the main alterations between the 1819 and 1820 versions of the ballad, as there are some aesthetic levels that the latter version does not reach. The most evident is the rewriting of “knight-at-arms” (“La Belle Dame”, 1) to “wretched wight”.³³⁵ The introduction of a figure from the chivalric order instantly gives the poem a more medieval feel and establishes an image of a male warrior who is then shown to be low-spirited, physically withering and also

³³³ Hugh l’Anson Fausset, *Keats: A Study in Development* (London: Martin Secker, 1922) 70 and 75.

³³⁴ “To Fanny Brawne”, 13 October 1819, in *Letters*, 390.

³³⁵ The 1820 version published in *The Indicator* is included in *The Poems of John Keats*. All further references to this poem will be included in parentheses in the main text as “*Indicator* “Belle Dame””. Line 1.

effeminate as his features are compared to flowers. The “wretched wight” (in the sense of a man) not only conveys that the subject is a mortal human, and hence emphasises the ballad’s plot as a failed romance between a supernatural being and a mortal, but also the alliteration is more expressive. According to McGann, “wight” is an archaism borrowed from Spenser and its use “makes the narrator of Keats’s poem more objective by creating a distance between him and the ‘wight’ due to the distinctly ironic overtone”.³³⁶ There is certainly a greater presence of irony than in the 1819 version where the narrator’s exclamation “O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms!” (“La Belle Dame”, 5) shows sincere wonder at and interest in the cause of the knight’s deteriorated state.

Another major revision made under the bad poetic influence of the radical and Cockney is the reversed sequence of stanzas 5 and 6. While the 1819 version presents the knight first making the garland for the dame and then setting her on his horse, the latter has the opposite structure. The garland-steed sequence gives a greater impression of courting and mutual affection whereas the steed-garland conveys restlessness. This is emphasised by the “‘pacing steed’ which waits none too patiently for his owner to cease dallying, signifies the knight’s chivalric identity”.³³⁷ One can agree with Kelley’s reasoning that

[B]y reversing the order of two stanzas in this version, Keats makes the **mutuality of the love relationship** take precedence over the wight’s eventual enthrallment. [...] 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. In the *Indicator* version the wight puts her on his horse before their exchange of love and gifts. **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.**³³⁸

We might add that the *Indicator* sequence has a more distinctly sexual effect due to the combination of the horse and the female rider who manipulates the knight’s vision, as he “nothing else saw all day long” (*Indicator* “Belle Dame”, 18). In Kelley’s reading, “the sexual implications of a horse and female rider overtake the chivalric emphasis of the earlier version”.³³⁹ The 1819 draft indeed conveys greater gallantry and patient development of enthrallment than the *Indicator* version which may also give the impression of possession or abduction, as the knight had just met the lady “in the meads” (*Indicator* “Belle Dame”, 13) and the situation thus works as an active invitation for the belle dame’s powers. Furthermore, the two versions show different behaviour of the belle dame and the knight. In the elfin grot, the knight describes the belle dame shows a range of emotions:

And there she *wept*, and *sigh’d fill sore* (“La Belle Dame”, 30, my emphasis)

And there she *gazed*, and *sighed deep* (*Indicator* “Belle Dame”, 30, my emphasis)

³³⁶ Jerome McGann, “Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism”, in *Modern Language Notes* 94 (December 1979) 988-1032 at 1002.

³³⁷ Kelley, “Poetics and the Politics of Reception”, 71.

³³⁸ *Ibid.* My bold emphasis.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

The draft version clearly shows the belle dame capable of sorrow and passion, whereas the latter version seems to convey a more dreamy, abstract subject who is not as expressive. Another alteration is in the final line of this stanza. In the draft, the knight shuts the maid's eyes "with kisses four" ("La Belle Dame", 32), which is simplified in the revised version to that he "kiss'd [her] to sleep" (*Indicator* "Belle Dame", 32). Keats justifies this line in his letter to his brother George and his wife Georgiana:

Why four kisses, you will say? Why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse. She would have fain said "score" without hurting the rhyme, but we must temper the Imagination, as the Critics say, with *Judgment*. I was obliged to choose *an even number that both eyes might have fair play*: and to speak truly I think two a-piece quite sufficient. Suppose I had said seven; there would have been three and a half a-piece; a very awkward affair and well got out of on my side.³⁴⁰

It may seem comic that Keats's central reasons for this choice of words are rhyme and a natural pattern of behaviour. Kelley reads both the knight/wight's responses to the belle dame as "active, even slightly masterful",³⁴¹ implying that there are attempts to tame and soothe their wild object of interest. The third significant alteration is in the first line of stanza 9:

And there *she lulled me asleep* ("La Belle Dame", 33, my emphasis)
And there *we slumber'd on the moss* (*Indicator* "Belle Dame", 33, my emphasis)

The draft version suggests the belle dame's dominance whereas the latter implies that the action is collective. However, both versions are peaceful in comparison to the nightmare that follows.

In summary, the *Indicator* version clearly has a similar plot line as the with the plot of the aforementioned "Thomas the Rhymer" whereas the draft has a more immediate medieval atmosphere. The draft's medievalism is conveyed through the immediate introduction of a knight, (which creates an easy connection to the pale men from the chivalric order in his dream) and also imitated medieval spelling like "lullèd" ("La Belle Dame", 33, my emphasis). The revised version emphasises the knight's agency and also mutual affection as they slumber on the moss together than the first version where one can find more instances that present the belle dame in a less sympathetic light as she casts a spell over the knight through physical charm, food and song. Overall, the former version is more in line with the trend of imitated medievalism that is, however, challenged by Keats's concept of negative capability which imbues the ballad with mystery and highlights inconclusiveness as an aesthetic value. The story's indeterminacy can be argued to increase the reader's involvement of imagination, as not all information and circumstances are given. While the knight's narrative gives us a glimpse of his temporary moments with the belle dame in the meads

³⁴⁰ "To George & Georgiana Keats", 15th April 1819, in *Letters*, 285. My emphasis.

³⁴¹ Kelley, "Poetics and the Politics of Reception", 70.

and cave and then his dream, the beauty of the story lies in the numerous ways all of the scenes can be interpreted and reimagined — the truth is abstract. There are some more minor differences between the two versions, such as the replacement of the poetic exclamation “O” for “Ah” and the tense change concerning the sedge that is modified from “has” to “*is wither’d*” (*Indicator* “Belle Dame”, 3, my emphasis), creating a greater sense of immediacy. Lastly, one can find small changes such as the modification of the belle dame from bending “sidelong” (“La Belle Dame”, 23) to leaning “sideways” (*Indicator* “Belle Dame”, 19). The “sidelong” version is a sound embellishment, as “long” already appears in the previous line, and hence this repetition creates an echo. Such modifications are definitely subjected by the considered audience: Keats composes the poem for and includes it as part of his private correspondence with his family whereas the *Indicator* version clearly has to appeal to a wider audience as well as Hunt’s aesthetic. It is especially for this reason that it is better to use the ballad’s draft version when discussing Keats’s medieval aesthetics. This version will be quoted for the rest of this work unless stated otherwise.

Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” continues in the ballad revival tradition of the Romantic period like the aforementioned *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* by Scott and Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. He follows Coleridge and Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* legacy of the balladic tale and to publish poetry describing “incidents and situations from common life” written in “a selection of language really used by men”.³⁴² On the surface, Keats adopts the balladic ABCB form with iambic tetrameter, though each closes with an iambic dimeter. The simple diction used throughout the poem in the form of mainly mono- and disyllabic words complement the iambic metre. However, the shorter concluding lines contrast with the preceding tetrameters in their rhythm, creating an impression of incompleteness in terms of both form and pace. Concerning form, in Colvin’s opinion, the two feet “take in reading the full time of four” and hence “the movement is made one of awed and bodeful slowness.”³⁴³ This deceleration may also be reflective of the knight’s withering life energy that is indicated through the repeated depiction of his physical paleness. Secondly, the shortened metrical structure can also be seen as further addition to the ballad’s obscurity, as space is left empty with untold realities and accentuates the story’s sense of mystery. In contrast to the mysteries like what is the belle dame’s true nature, the alternate end rhymes make the poem euphonious and clearly structured. The tail rhymes and the iambic form are reminiscent of the ballad’s folkloric origins, and although Keats plays with the rhythm by adding a shorter final line to each stanza, the poem is suitable for both reading and oral recitation. Commas

³⁴² Wordsworth, “1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”, 264.

³⁴³ Colvin, *Life of John Keats*, 350.

and dashes slow down the rhythm whereas exclamation marks and question marks cause a rise and fall in intonation, creating a variety of tones and adding to the poem's shifts in rhetoric. While adapting the ballad form, Keats moves away from the moralistic commentary and didactic narrative presence we witness in, for instance, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", where the bridegroom is described to be "a sadder and a wiser man"³⁴⁴ the morning after hearing the mariner's tale. There is, of course, a variety of potential readings of the ballad — e.g. as a ballad that warns of falling in love with someone one barely knows and instead idealises in the early stages of infatuation. The story also works as a retrospective of a knight's unsuccessful quest for love, but one cannot rationalise the experience even with "Judgment".

Repetition is another formal technique present in Keats's ballad. Besides the alternate end rhymes, Keats includes anaphora, especially of the word "and" that begins one fourth of the lines. This conjunction is mostly present in the knight's narrative, especially in stanzas 5 and 7:

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, *and* fragrant zone; [...] ("La Belle Dame", 17-18, my emphasis)

And made sweet moan. [...] ("La Belle Dame", 20, my emphasis)

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, *and* manna dew,
And sure in language strange [...] ("La Belle Dame", 25-7, my emphasis)

The frequent use of the conjunction imitates not only the everyday speaking manner captured in ballads, but also the natural stream of thought and speech of people in general — both of these factors increase the impression of having a personal conversation with the knight. The ballad repeats the concept of paleness in four instances: "haggard" (6), "pale" (37, 38), "death-pale" (38) and "palely" (2, 46), adding to the ballad's motif of decay. Lastly, the palillogy of "wild" (16, 26, 31) is present throughout the knight's narrative, giving the lady the status of an otherworldly and untamed being who is knowledgeable in vegetation available in untamed nature. The belle dame is obviously "other" as she is associated with the wilderness while the knight with his metal arms and social position represents the cultured space of medieval urban society. While the harvest implicates an outreach of urban culture into the belle dame's realm, we see with the knight and the men in his dream that any romantic attempts to possess and understand the belle dame are unsuccessful.

In terms of voice, there is a transition from the nameless introductory narrator to the knight between the second and third stanzas. The knight's narrative remains the most prominent, though it includes two instances of direct speech that introduce other voices: the knight's paraphrase of what

³⁴⁴ S. T. Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) Volume 2. Part 7, 624.

he believes are the belle dame's words of love (29) and the warning of the men in his dream. Besides leading most of the narrative, the knight also provides a "sure" (27) translation of the lady's words from her "language strange" (27) — a doubtful supposition. In contrast to the female's words that convey emotional assurance, the cry of the "death-pale" (38) men that "La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall!" (39-40) have an unsettling effect. The horror of their howl is heightened by their physical appearance. One can say that these men represent the horrific kind of otherworldly appearance, as their paleness and "starved lips [...] with horrid warning gaped wide" (41-2) are reminiscent of haunting ghost visions from Gothic tales.³⁴⁵ It is truly ironic that instead of a soothing dream, the lady's lullaby evokes this nightmare, as her visually pleasing Elfin and Fairy qualities would cause one to expect otherwise. Based on this quick jump from romance to the Gothic, one is led to believe that the belle dame is to blame. The belle dame's ambiguity becomes a widely discussed subject in gender readings of the poem. For example, Heather Braun argues that the belle dame is playing with expectations of her male victims (as well as of the reader who have certain expectations from romance) as she

[...] feigns passivity for the sake of gaining power. She allows her Knight to 'set' her where he pleases and to dress her up in distinctly exotic garb. She accepts his gifts of 'a garland for her head, and bracelets too' with 'sweet moan' and 'language strange,' indeterminate gestures that encourage the Knight to translate her intent and desires for her.³⁴⁶

The belle dame take action by feeding the knight with "roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna-dew" (26), luring him into her "Elfin grot" (29) and lulling (33) him to sleep. However, the knight is given "an illusion of his own control" and his inability to understand her continues "the mystery of her own allure" as well as "allows her to retain control over lovers past and present by turning them into passive and languishing victims."³⁴⁷ According to Jacqueline M. Labbe, the belle dame's effect is that "the Knight has been rendered sexually, as well as psychically, impotent" and in this aspect he befits his no longer fruitful, autumnal surrounding.³⁴⁸ However, I maintain the opinion that the poem is not meant as a commentary on gender and the deceptive nature of beautiful women, but instead it follows the tradition of literary and mythological temptresses.

It is highly possible to link Keats's belle dame to Spenser and his *Faerie Queene*. This perspective is defended by critics like Natasha Grigorian who writes that the belle dame's "quasi-

³⁴⁵ An example of Gothic visions from the Romantic period is in Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) where the dreams of the protagonist Adeline have horrific elements such as the dying Chevalier. These dreams have an explanatory function, as they help her solve the mystery of her father's disappearance. The dream of Keats's knight, however, cannot be seen to be as reliable as an explanation of the truth behind the belle dame's character — she is, like love, inexplicable and abstract.

³⁴⁶ Heather Braun, *The Rise and Fall of the Femme Fatale in British Literature, 1790-1910* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 27.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ Jacqueline M. Labbe, *Romantic Visualities* (London: Macmillian Press Ltd, 1998) 108.

supernatural inaccessibility links her to the medieval version of the fatal enchantress, as taken up by Spenser³⁴⁹ as well as Wasserman who argues that:

[L]ike the lady of the tradition of courtly love, she is the ideal whom the lover must pursue but whom he can never possess; and hence he is doomed to suffer her “unkindness,” which is her nature although not her fault.³⁵⁰

Wasserman’s claim is not as satisfying as Grigorian’s Spenserian connection, because the belle dame in her essence is a mythological creature whose existence is based on a ritualistic enthrallment of victims. She does not reject the knight’s advances, but uses his strength to fuel her own. Similarly to the Greek mythological sirens who draw men into the oceans with their beauty and song, she lures the knight into her lair (the elfin grot) with her feminine charm. She is not in the same category as Chartier’s belle dame, who becomes the “beautiful lady without pity” because of rejecting a lover in a way that does not show “chivalric *politesse*”,³⁵¹ mainly because of her social otherness that noticeably attracts the knight and her previous victims. She therefore complicates Leon Waldoff’s seemingly straight-forward division of Keats’s female characters into two categories: in Schulkin’s summary, the female character is either “the ‘fair maid’, who offers joy and security, or the demon woman who betrays and abandons her lover”.³⁵² The belle dame is ambiguous — on the one hand, she is a seemingly vulnerable “lady in the meads” (13) and innocent “fairy’s child” (14) and, on the other, the merciless “Belle Dame sans Merci” (39) who brings death to numerous men from all hierarchal orders of chivalry and turns the knight (like Madeline) into another “hoodwinked dreamer”.³⁵³ However, it is more probable that Keats means to show the dangers and downfalls of love through a ballad with medieval motifs that help carry across his view to his readers. In this aspect, medievalism and its chivalric romantic aspirations are not nostalgic, but twisted into a mystery that allows different perspectives without uncovering the “truth”.

The aesthetic strength of the ballad lies in its visual contrasts. The most evident one is between the visual appearance of the belle dame (that is clearer than her ambiguous personality) and her male victims: the knight and men who appear in his dream. In fact, all of the men in the story are pale, which contrasts with the belle dame’s deceptively beautiful and ethereal looks:

Full beautiful—a faery’s child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild. (“La Belle Dame”, 14-16)

³⁴⁹ Grigorian, *European Symbolism*, 121-2.

³⁵⁰ Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 75.

³⁵¹ Kelley, “Poetics and the Politics of Reception”, 70. Original emphasis.

³⁵² Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation*, 110. Waldoff discusses this categorisation of Keats’s female characters in his *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 86-98.

³⁵³ Jack Stillinger, “Reading Keats’s Plots”, in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione de Almeida (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990) 88-102 at 97.

The belle dame's wild appearance and strong connection with nature contrasts with the knight's metal suit and the expected traditional image of embellished outfits for kings and princes. It is worth mentioning Gittings's observation that the "alone and palely loitering" knight is "a character straight from Burton's casebook",³⁵⁴ suffering from the symptoms described in *Anatomy of Melancholy* as the cold "humour" of love-melancholy.³⁵⁵ While one may not be aware of this connection, the image of the dispirited and withering knight is without doubt an effective one, as it serves as a contrast to the more active belle dame whose power lies in extracting life energy from her victims (who appear in the knight's dream) in a ritualistic manner.

Another central contrast in the poem is that of the three divergent settings: the idealised world of chivalry with expectations of romance and adventure, the knight's vision and the unwelcoming bleak reality that cannot measure to the "dream-vision"³⁵⁶ experienced with the belle dame. These three distinctive scenes not only portray different realms of existence, but also provide material for visual imagination. Reality is portrayed as the "cold hill's side" (36, 44) and its surrounding autumnal nature is silent, as birds have gone, and fruitless, which has a discomfoting effect in contrast to the assurance of a successful season as "the squirrel's granary is full / and the harvest's done" (6-7). This view is set in contrast to the "meads" (13) that mark the beginning of the knight's dream-like experience with the lady. The last setting is the "elfin grot" (29) where the knight experiences both the peak of pleasure as well as horror, i.e. his nightmare. The men's claim that he is in the Belle Dame's "thrall" may refer both to the knight's emotional dedication to her as well as his being lost between two realms: a retrospective reality that is like a dream and the silent and cold landscape when he awakes. His solitude is accentuated by the absence of people and living nature alike, as "the sedge has withered from the lake, / and no birds sing" (3-4). The colour spectrum of the hopeless present and the dream-like past are striking, especially because they are successfully conveyed to the reader through the circular structure where the autumnal landscape both opens and closes the poem. This contrast also emphasises the transformative power of love, as after his fantastical experience, the knight perceives reality as bleak — the sterility of his failed romance is reflected also in the landscape. The clear correlation with the central character is in line with the literary technique of pathetic fallacy, hence we can argue that nature is not an uncontrollable and powerful element as most Romantic poetry presents and instead it is subjected to

³⁵⁴ Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year*, 117.

³⁵⁵ In Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Longman, 1827), the symptoms of love-melancholy include a delusion that lasts "all day long" (298) and as we see in the ballad, this mental isolation is joined by social as the knight is "forsaking mens society, making great moan" (280) and is "pale of colour, slothful, apt to sleep" (285).

³⁵⁶ Mark Sandy, "Dream Lovers and Tragic Romance: Negative Fictions in Keats's *Lamia*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Isabella*", in *Romanticism on the Net* (20, November 2000) <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005955ar>> 7.3.2018. 4.

the belle dame's influence. The great emphasis on nature and the ungraspable creature go against the romance genre that mainly promotes understandable human characteristics and behaviour (often fuelled by Christian values) and also the castle setting that provides a sense of security and civilisation. By inserting the knight into the wilderness and under the control of the uncontrollable belle dame, the reader cannot but feel sympathy for the knight and his disappointment as well as be reminded of folkloric and mythological beings who deceive humans. In this light, the romance gains a mythological level, as it continues in this tradition of humans falling victim to supernatural creatures that they think they can understand, possess and love, but fail and are left defeated.

In terms of medieval elements, Keats appropriates the plot namely of the aforementioned "Thomas the Rhymer" and uses a number of "ballad clichés such as the rose and the lily, the light foot, pacing steed, and fairy song".³⁵⁷ Though such clichés can be considered to be typical topoi for the genre, they are revised by Keats as the flowers (symbols of femininity) are associated with the knight. Furthermore, the knight is presented not in a duel scene, but on a quest for love that leaves him lonely and emotionally devastated — in the words of John Garrett, he is "a metaphor for one whose quest is all-consuming, exhaustive and deadly".³⁵⁸ Fay comments that Keats's revision where "the 'knight' of one version becomes the 'wight' of the other" causes the impression that "the nostalgia of Spenserian romance is *mocked* rather than embraced".³⁵⁹ One can disagree with this statement, as the unfortunate turn of chivalric romance is not as much a mockery of the tradition as a personalised reconsideration and interpretation of a poetic tradition. We indeed see a shift from the hopeful romantic and chivalric future of "Calidore" where Keats successfully exercises the genre expectations of gallantry and potentials of romance to the knight's unsuccessful love quest. It is, however, possible to agree with Schulkin's perception that the knight is a victim of "the deceptive and idealising powers of courtly love",³⁶⁰ especially considering that the knight is displaced from the typical setting of courtly love. Indeed, while in "Calidore" the protagonist finds himself in an environment that calls for and supports chivalry and romance, the knight-at-arms is in the natural habitat of the belle dame that turns hostile and sterile after her disappearance. Keats successfully conveys the sensuality created by the belle dame's presence, as we are provided with descriptions of smells, taste and visual beauty. The evident *joie de vivre* connected with the belle dame's presence contrasts with the barren landscape in which we find the withering knight.

³⁵⁷ Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 126.

³⁵⁸ John Garrett, *Selected Poems of John Keats* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987) 71.

³⁵⁹ Fay, *Romantic Medievalism*, 121.

³⁶⁰ Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation*, 113.

Alongside the images typical of the romance genre such as the knight, the female object of his interest, the “pacing steed” (21) and the chivalric order, flowers are an important motif. First, they are associated with the knight’s complexion: he has a “lily” (9) on his brow and “a fading rose” (10) on his cheeks. The knight presents flowers as a gift to the lady in forms of a “garland for her head, / and bracelets too, and fragrant zone” (17-18). The decorative, folkloric and aesthetic function of the unspecified species of flowers stands in great contrast from the lily and rose, which are symbolic of death. The knight’s decay is still evident even without the noun that appears in Keats’s original draft where he writes “I see *death’s* lily on thy brow... And on thy cheeks *death’s* fading rose” (my emphasis). Even without the word, Keats’s successfully emulates the “destructive depression that accompanies love”.³⁶¹ In the reading of Robert Graves, the flowers gain the status of a power symbol as Keats “characteristically transferred the lily on her [the lady’s] brow to the brows of her victims”.³⁶² The flower has therefore a dual function as a decorative and possessive tool in the case of the lady and description of the knight’s physical decline. Kelley claims that due to the numerous times flowers appear in the poem, they become “a redundant visual sign of Keats’s indebtedness to Spenser, an emblematic portrait something like the pictorial tableaux Spenser uses to reveal and conceal allegorical meaning.”³⁶³ The flowers that decorate the belle dame’s body, indeed create a surface image reminiscent of “an emblem or a Spenserian tableau” that together “are the signs of who or what she is”³⁶⁴ without giving access to her inner nature. Her otherness and beauty are shared with Spenser’s Florimell who is also an unattainable femme fatale figure.

Though the formal features of the poem are typical of the ballad tradition, Wasserman asserts that “La Belle Dame sans Merci” renders a “dim sense of mystery and incompleteness”.³⁶⁵ The poem indeed creates a set of questions that remain unanswered, such as the following:

Is the woman a wicked temptress, trying to destroy men out of sheer cruelty? Or is she trying to defend her life? Is she a supernatural being? Does the knight stay by the lake because he sees no further purpose in living or because he expects the woman to return? Is he a wandering ghost or a forlorn lover? How can the knight be sure La Belle says she loves him if she speaks a strange language? Has the knight’s experience been real or merely an illusion?³⁶⁶

The belle dame’s mythology gives the ballad its mystery and like any answers to the listed questions, she is unreachable. Her ungraspable character makes her entire existence abstract and allegorical, open to any number of interpretations. While it is tempting and natural for the rational mind to demand answers and know exactly what happened, the reasoning of the poem is

³⁶¹ Thomas McFarland, *The Masks of Keats: The Endeavour of a Poet* (New York: OUP, 2000) 67.

³⁶² Graves, *The White Goddess*, 427.

³⁶³ Kelley, “Poetics and the Politics of Reception”, 75.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 65.

³⁶⁶ Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation*, 110.

inexplicable and hence easily relatable to Keats's concept of negative capability. The poem can be therefore seen as an exercise of this theory, as Keats invites the reader to embrace uncertainty, though in the case of the knight, the experience with the belle dame is devastating and haunting.

The first-person narrative perfectly captures the increasing activity of the belle dame as the "I" power shrinks and "she" becomes the main agent. This agency is linked to Keats's concept of "pleasure thermometer" mentioned in Keats's letter to John Haydon as an abstract concept that measures the "gradations of Happiness".³⁶⁷ Pleasure reaches its height in stanza 8 where the knight and belle dame have sexual intercourse, implied through the dame's sighs (30) and the knight's fatigue. Sex is definitely high on the pleasure spectrum and it is associated with life as well as with death. This ambiguity is part of the poem's ironic take on romance, as sex does not promise any assurance of loyalty, but is followed by the ghastly vision. The dream and dreary reality are a sudden shock for the knight after the "series of increasing intensities that absorb the self into essence: nature, song and love".³⁶⁸ However, the climb up the pleasure thermometer is bound to be end, leading to what Keats presents in "Endymion" as "richer entanglements, enthrallments far / More self-destroying".³⁶⁹ Like Endymion, the knight is "tortured with renewed life"³⁷⁰ as he has to face the spiritual aftermath of his unsuccessful love encounter and a near-death experience.

In summary, when considered on its own, Keats's poem evokes the knight's failed quest for love. By making the knight fall for a woman of an ambiguous and intriguingly mythological nature beyond human reason and reach, Keats presents a narrative that challenges the simpler tradition of courtly love. The knight delves deep into a romance with a creature drawn from the folkloric and imaginative landscapes of human mythology as well as the Gothic literary tradition, and in this manner embodies the enduring search of mankind for love that, however, becomes destructive and draining. By moving a figure of the chivalric tradition into a feral natural setting that is under the control of mythological creature, Keats revises the genre of romance. The belle dame's duality as maid and demon, balancing the power of both life and death, presents the knight with a sublime experience that overshadows his rationality, obligation towards his court to fulfil whatever quest he is sent on, and also his self-preservation. The beauty as well as tragedy of the poem lies in the paradox that the knight desires the belle dame, but is also undergoing a death-like existence. Through the ballad, Keats portrays both the delights and agonies of love that keeps the knight enthralled by the memory of the belle dame. The reader is enthralled too, but by the indeterminacies

³⁶⁷ "To John Taylor", 30 January 1818, in *Letters*, 85.

³⁶⁸ Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 69.

³⁶⁹ "Endymion", I.798-9.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, I.919.

of the poem. Both the knight and reader therefore face an ambiguous situation where rationality cannot be applied, hence putting Keats's concept of negative capability into practice.

We can now turn to the poem's ekphrastic properties. Due to its brevity, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" has fewer examples of "visible language"³⁷¹ than the two earlier medieval narratives. Nonetheless, there are still several depictions that awaken the senses of sight, smell and touch. The reader is visually stimulated by the clearly described gestures such as the lady bending and singing and the dead men's "gaped wide" (42) lips. We can only imagine the melody of a song that constitute, along with nature, the soundscape of the imaginative space created by the poem. The knight cannot adequately translate her language ("sure in language strange she said", 27, my emphasis), but he interprets it in a way that assures him to continue his emotional trust in her and pursue further contact. Keats engages the senses of smell (flowers), touch (the cold hillside) and taste (the wild vegetations provided by the belle dame). Nature plays a crucial role in the poem in terms of atmosphere and engagement of the senses and the depictions of landscape and vegetation heavily opposes the castle interior setting depicted in "Calidore". In his three illustrations, Rossetti puts the two central characters into a forest setting (that can be imagined when reading stanza 7) and focuses more on the figures, placing little to now detail on their surrounding environment.

Given the poem's formal simplicity, the depictions of nature and the development of the knight and belle dame's relation are all the more effective and resonant. The visual qualities of the poem provide material for the iconographic code in visual art. The lily and the fading rose that metaphorically describe the knight's fading body are iconographies of death. The knight's "arms" and horse are emblematic of chivalry. The belle dame's offering of "honey"³⁷² is related to sweetness and therefore to love and sexual pleasure. The lady's long hair, light foot and wild eyes are visually synonymous with a free-spirited woman without social responsibilities, living beyond human society which makes her unpredictable. However, the lady's ethereal identity as a "faery's child" (14) and the knight's fascination with her ways, including the unintelligible language and strange diet, contribute to her status as a symbolically charged entity who is not merely human, but something different that allows the knight's quest to assume its adequately mythological proportion. It gives the poem the ability to refer to something greater than itself and acquire expansive meaning and address the question of love that is universal and eternal.

³⁷¹ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 114.

³⁷² One can recall the association of honey with pleasure in "The Eve of St. Agnes", where virgins wish to have "visions of delight, / and soft adorings [...] / upon the *honey'd* middle of the night" ("Agnes", 47-9, my emphasis).

Chapter 4: The Pre-Raphaelites' Adaptation of Keats's Medieval Aesthetics

*"He [Keats] filled poems such as Isabella and The Eve of St. Agnes with gorgeous, exquisitely detailed pictures that could be transferred, as it were, directly onto the painters' canvases."*³⁷³ — Jack Stillinger

4.1 The Pre-Raphaelites and "Isabella, Or A Pot of Basil": Holman Hunt and Millais

This discussion will focus chronologically on three visual interpretations of Keats's Italian poem: Millais's 1848 painting 'Lorenzo and Isabella', Holman Hunt's drawing 1848 'Lorenzo at his Desk in the Warehouse'³⁷⁴ and probably the most known out of the three, Holman Hunt's 1868 'Isabella and the Pot of Basil'.³⁷⁵ Consideration will be given to the composition, ekphrastic qualities and the scene's thematic implications in relation to the aesthetics of both Keats and the Brotherhood.

'Lorenzo and Isabella' [Figure 1] is Millais's first painting produced as part of the Brotherhood as well as "part of a collaboration with Hunt towards illustrations to Keats's poem 'Isabella, or, the Pot of Basil'."³⁷⁶ The painting functions also as "almost a manifesto of Pre-Raphaelitism"³⁷⁷ with its features that mix several periods at once. In the case of Millais's painting, the perspective is flawed as the right side of the table holds twice as many than the left, which might also be a technique to balance the scene, as the kicking figure dominates both the left side and centre of the composition. The "dramatically contrasting blocks of intense colour mimic the decorative effects of late Gothic art",³⁷⁸ significantly Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini Portrait' that Paul Barlow claims Millais "is certain to have been familiar with"³⁷⁹ by seeing at the National Gallery in London. Millais mimics Van Eyck's family picture by his use of intense colours, details and objects (such as the plates and furniture) which "seem to intrude themselves onto the bodies of the figures",³⁸⁰ creating overall a compressed feeling. The painting compresses several scenes into one pregnant moment. During its 1849 exhibition at the Royal Academy, Millais's debut work is adjoined by the following selection from the 1st and 21st stanzas of Keats's poem:

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
They 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 ... ("Isabella", 1-6, my emphasis)

³⁷³ Jack Stillinger, "The "story" of Keats", in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, 246–60 at 257.

³⁷⁴ This drawing will be henceforth referred to in single parentheses in the main text as 'Lorenzo at his Desk'.

³⁷⁵ Hunt's painting will be henceforth referred to in single parentheses in the main text as 'Isabella'.

³⁷⁶ Paul Barlow, "John Everett Millais (1829–1896)", in *Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) 133-147 at 134.

³⁷⁷ Barlow, "John Everett Millais", 134.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Barlow, "John Everett Millais", 135.

These brethren having found by many signs
 What love Lorenzo for their sister had,
 And how she lov'd him too, each unconfines
 His bitter thoughts to other, *well nigh mad*
That he, the servant of their trade designs,
Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad,
 When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees
 To some high noble and his olive-trees. ("Isabella", 161-168, my emphasis)

The dining scene reflects the lovers timid relationship expressed in lines 5 and 6 and also the brothers' anger that Isabella is engaged with someone below their class. In Codell's words, the two stanzas show "Lorenzo's love for Isabella" and "his servile relationship to her brothers" by which both Keats and Millais establish "the conflicting themes of love and duty".³⁸¹ The painting successfully conveys this clash of interests and the intense atmosphere it causes. In the opinion of the Pre-Raphaelite critic Christopher Wood, the selected lines give "an adequate explanation of the connection between the poetic source and painting".³⁸² However, we are faced with a personalised selection that also conveys the poet and painter's reconsideration of their art, creating what Codell terms as "fetishised pastiches of art history and literature".³⁸³ In Millais's painting, we specifically see a mixture of "proto-Renaissance style and spatial arrangements, [...] eighteenth century English conversation-piece painting, and English Romantic poetry",³⁸⁴ showing a drift from established conventions at the Royal Academy (landscape paintings, scenes from the Bible and Classical mythology, imitation of the Old Masters etc). The excerpt also shows Millais's embracing of Keats's social commentary concerning "class and anti-authoritarianism",³⁸⁵ as the poem and painting show love between two innocent members of different social statuses that is subjected to the authorial brothers, who clearly symbolise the dominant and patriarchal Royal Academy.

One of the painting's most striking features is the clear view of Lorenzo's profile, which is the only one in the entire scene that is not side-ways. His face is noted for sharing Keats's own features which are described in Richard Monckton Milnes's 1848 biography:

[His] eyes were large and blue, his hair auburn; he wore it divided down the centre, and it fell in rich masses on each side his face; his mouth was full, and less intellectual than his other features. His countenance [...] had an expression as if he had been looking on some glorious sight. The shape of his face had not the squareness of a man's, but more like some women's faces I have seen — it was so wide over the forehead and so small at the chin.³⁸⁶

When we look at Millais's Lorenzo, we can immediately identify the "large" eyes (their colour is not as traceable), "full" lips, light "auburn" hair that is "divided down the centre" and falling "on

³⁸¹ Codell, "Painting Keats", 348.

³⁸² Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 50.

³⁸³ Codell, "Painting Keats", 350.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 50.

³⁸⁶ Richard Monckton Milnes, Lord Houghton, *Life and Letters of John Keats* (London: Edward Moxon and Co., 1951) 74. My emphasis.

each side” of his face and an admiring gaze as he looks at Isabella. This projection suggests Millais’s reading of Lorenzo as a literary reflection of the poet and also his anxieties about class and love. Lorenzo’s close proximity to Isabella and the standing servant on the right visually links him to the group of people who, according to Daniel Watkins, “share powerless positions under the social structure and economic dominance of the brothers”.³⁸⁷ There is indeed a parallel between Lorenzo’s dependence on the brothers for money and the poet’s subservience to readers and critics who may be — like the kicking brother — harsh.³⁸⁸ Millais (or any artist, in fact) may be seen to be in the same position as Keats, as his success and reputation depend on authoritative establishments, reviewers and the public. Lorenzo’s pink velvet/silk shirt and womanly face can add to the impression that he (and Keats) is feminised, though it may also be a way to gain the viewer’s sympathy as these features contrast the brothers’ aggression and extreme masculinity.

The scene is dynamic in its emotional intensity. The moment is dominated by the brothers, especially the kicking one whose aggression is furthermore accentuated by the cracked walnuts on the table and the bottle of salt that is knocked over by his elbow. According to Barlow, there is a “secrecy” of meanings hidden in the objects placed in the scene that also convey the “principal themes of this painting”.³⁸⁹ The objects represent the brothers’ inner state as well as intensions. The crushed nuts are indicative of Lorenzo’s crumbled manhood that is already shown by his vulnerable looks and tender behaviour towards Isabella, and the red wine symbolises the brothers’ future “bloody knife” (333). The luxurious plates, vibrant clothes and shiny silks covering the table and chairs showcase the family’s wealth and also may remind the reader of Keats’s lines on the human and environmental cost of riches. The relative lack of food on the table is also symbolic, as the brothers have an insatiable hunger for wealth and success. The only person with food is Isabella, who is seen to accept Lorenzo’s offer of a peeled orange — this fruit can be seen as representative of *fruitful* and sweet love. The urn in the middle of the table can possibly symbolise the garden-pot in which Lorenzo’s head will be buried. From this list alone it is clear that objects help convey the story and this technique becomes “a distinctive feature of Pre-Raphaelism”.³⁹⁰

Apart from object symbolism, plenty of meaning can be extracted from the figures’ gestures and body language. The frontmost brother’s extended leg is seen by Wootton as “phallic”³⁹¹ and therefore representational of the household’s patriarchal system. The victim of his kick is a grey-

³⁸⁷ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 349. Paraphrase of Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats’s Poetry and the Politics of Imagination* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1989) 56.

³⁸⁸ The anonymous *Quarterly Review* critic is blamed by P. B. Shelley in “Adonais” for Keats’s death (stanzas 36-7).

³⁸⁹ Barlow, “John Everett Millais”, 135.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 51.

hound that slides into Isabella's lap, functioning as a reminder of Isabella's primary responsibility towards her brothers as dogs are traditionally associated with loyalty. The other brother is looking at Lorenzo through his filled glass of red wine with his fingers covering his lips, which is seen by Barlow as an attempt to "conceal his expression",³⁹² but can be just as well a gesture of secret-keeping. It is also useful to mention that everyone on the opposite side of the table are avoiding eye contact with the brothers by drinking from an empty glass or using a napkin that Barlow reads as "'innocently' polite".³⁹³ The cheerful and hearty atmosphere one expects from a communal dining scene is missing, as instead the table guests seem uncomfortable and yet stay seated and act polite in order to keep their jobs. In contrast, the brothers are intently staring at Lorenzo who is unaware of it, turning his full attention to Isabella who also keeps her head down. The seating arrangement can be understood as an indication of social hierarchy: the seated and standing on the right are the submissive employees of the brothers on the left who are joined by two more men who are staring at the servants with a malicious smile. The fact that the brothers are located on the left side of the table and painting conveys their vileness while the right side is often associated with being "right", therefore the side we should sympathise with and support.³⁹⁴ Wootton notes that the brothers' bold actions and vibrant clothes "appropriate all attention from the love-sick Lorenzo and the fair Isabel",³⁹⁵ which is a significant alteration from the poem where Keats primarily focuses on the lovers and their developing relationship and psychology. Nonetheless, the viewer can immediately recognise the brothers' dominance from this scene alone and hence there is no doubt that, like in the poem, sympathy will lie with the lovers who are obviously threatened by the brothers' tyranny.

The kick is not part of Keats's original narrative, though it does have the functions to convey the dynamics of a despotic home and add movement to the scene. The entire composition though is, like the kick, Millais's own invention, though it still does in some aspects convey Keats's themes and moments from his narrative. For example, "Isabella" emphasises the notion of the public and private spheres. In his painting, Millais portrays a public shared meal (or thereby lack of) within which we have two more private scenes: on the one hand, the brothers' hostility and beginnings of their scheme "to make the youngster for his crime atone" (172) and, on the other, Lorenzo and Isabella's tender moment. The lovers' looks seem to correspond to their physical states before consummating their love as Isabella has colourless cheeks (27) and her paleness is especially accentuated by her cold-tone silver gown. Millais includes Isabella's "aged nurse" (343) next to

³⁹² Barlow, "John Everett Millais", 136.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ We see the same left evil / right good association in Hunt's 'The Flight of Porphyro and Madeline' (chapter 4.2).

³⁹⁵ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 52.

Lorenzo, her hand on her stomach and weary face convey hunger and exhaustion. The tidiness of the patterned wall, tablecloth and dress pattern opposes the brothers' "bizarre violations of expected norms",³⁹⁶ namely concerning table manners. Keats's natural imagery is condensed into a soft landscape background and a few potted plants on the right side that contrast the human-made wallpaper and social conventions. Such oppositions make the painting striking and a strong piece that is able to also stand on its own as a story of a conflictive meal scene.

In the same year as Millais, Holman Hunt begins composing his sketch 'Lorenzo at his Desk in the Warehouse' [Figure 2] that captures a busy working scene. The brothers are distinguishable from their employees by their hats that are indicators of their higher status and also by occupying the centre of the composition. While the brother at the back with his frown and lifted arm makes one of the workers weep into another's shoulder, the closer brother is leaning over Lorenzo's desk in a pensive manner. Though Holman Hunt "ostensibly presents the brothers as the enemy",³⁹⁷ the one at the front seems to be *cooperating* with Lorenzo. The placement of his head at a similar level as Lorenzo's functions as a symbolical gesture of "a common purpose and intellectual parity."³⁹⁸ In comparison to the other men in the factory who are doing manual labour, Lorenzo is sitting at a desk, surrounded by books that associate him with bureaucratic knowledge and literacy. His body language shows his conflicting interests: his feet and upper body are turned towards the leaning brother who represents duty while his eyes are aimed at the door behind which Isabella stands, representing love. This correlates with the excerpt below the drawing that Lorenzo knows "whose gentle hand was at the latch, / before the door has given her to his eyes" (17-8). Both Keats and Holman Hunt therefore show a working setting with a hidden romance narrative.

In his essay, Holman Hunt writes that "the lover's position in the house should be made clear to the spectator from the outset."³⁹⁹ While Lorenzo is portrayed as an almost equal partner by being served by another of the brothers' employees in Millais's painting and working at the desk, he is yet "scorned by the brothers for forming a relationship with Isabella".⁴⁰⁰ Holman Hunt places the sister on the periphery of the male-dominated business scene, but she remains a tool for further wealth as she is expected to marry "some high noble and his olive-trees" (168). In the same way that they dominate the warehouse and dining scene, the brothers dictate Isabella's future. Indeed,

³⁹⁶ Barlow, "John Everett Millais", 136.

³⁹⁷ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 56.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁹⁹ William Holman Hunt, "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: A Fight for Art", in *Contemporary Review* 44 (1886) Part I, 471–88 at 482.

⁴⁰⁰ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 56.

according to Wayne Cook, one of the incentives of the tale is to show the “cost of greed and power”⁴⁰¹ — the most evident being Isabella’s happiness and sanity.

The parallels between Millais and Holman Hunt’s interpretations convey the artists’ reciprocal influence. There is a prominent visual similarity between their Lorenzo figures and the poet, which conveys their understanding of the autobiographical dimension of “Isabella” with its author. We see a greyhound in both the drawing and painting that is associated with Isabella as an iconography of loyalty. Both artists tackle the issue of social hierarchy by showing the dominant brothers and submissive and tender Lorenzo. The servant’s interest in Isabella is not as obvious in Holman Hunt’s sketch where he is captured in a moment of collaboration with the brother while Millais’s painting shows him directly staring at her, hence drawing the brothers’ attention. Both Millais and Holman Hunt portray moments in public settings (warehouse, communal dinner) that make lovers and their relationship seem like a secondary plot. However, we can see the progression from Lorenzo’s timid (Holman Hunt) and fascinated (Millais) look towards or at Isabella that shows increasing public expression of Lorenzo’s private romantic interest in Isabella.

Almost two decades after the sketch, Holman Hunt returns to “Isabella” with the life-size painting ‘Isabella and the Pot of Basil’ [Figure 3] — a version that in his opinion does “better justice to it [the poem] than circumstances and my feeble power would allow in the first instance [1848 sketch]”.⁴⁰² Unlike the two 1848 interpretations, Isabella is no longer on the periphery, but in the *centre* of the composition, replacing the brothers. The viewer’s focus is on the lover’s intimate moment that conveys the themes of grief, necrophilia and class. Isabella’s sexuality is more apparent than in the previous two adaptations, as one can trace pubic hair underneath the folds of her dress and clearly see the curve of her waist. These implications, together with her hair and hands that are set over and around the basil pot in a possessive manner, convey her sexual energy. Judith Bronkhurst is correct to point out that Holman Hunt’s Isabella looks “healthy, in contrast to Keats’s heroine, who is wasting away”.⁴⁰³ Indeed, Holman Hunt’s tanned and womanly heroine goes against Keats’s established image of a withering (447) and pale Isabella. Holman Hunt’s more southern-looking model not only fails to accommodate Keats’s image of a decaying youth and beauty (455), but also the Victorian “conventional standards of beauty” — for example, a critic in the 1868 *Fortnightly Review* complains that Holman Hunt’s Isabella is a “commonplace, violent-

⁴⁰¹ Wayne Cook, “John Keats and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Pictorial Poetry and Narrative Painting” in *University of Hartford Studies in Literature*, 20 (1988) 1-21 at 19.

⁴⁰² Quoted in Mary Bennett, *Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Circle: The First Generation* (London: Lund Humphries, 1988) 66.

⁴⁰³ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 359-60. Paraphrase of Judith Bronkhurst, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, 1984) 217.

tempered Italian girl, with a vicious eye and a muddy brow”.⁴⁰⁴ This choice, however, may be part of Hunt’s emphasis on the Italian setting of the original story and development from the “pale, retiring maids of earlier Pre-Raphaelite work”.⁴⁰⁵ The figure’s indecency is also conveyed through her almost nude-coloured dress and bare feet, which add to the impression of her misplacement in the luxurious interior. Isabella’s physical misplacement is joined by a mental absence as her eyes are focusing on the pot. This suggests that her private world is focusing on “dreams, desire, and death”,⁴⁰⁶ which recalls stanza 53 in which Keats emphasises Isabella’s loss of temporal reality. While Codell argues that the painting conveys “Hunt’s elision of religiosity”,⁴⁰⁷ Isabella’s barefoot pose, the shoes at the door on the far left, the altar-like piece of furniture on which the pot is placed and her statement that the “surrounding room is a virtual sacred space”⁴⁰⁸ prove the exact opposite — that we are witnessing a private moment of worship. The scene conveys the pinnacle of Isabella’s love and insanity that becomes the most prominent scene of the entire romance.

Despite the “wormy circumstance” of what the pot hides, Holman Hunt calls the painting in one of his letters a “delicious subject”,⁴⁰⁹ which obviously does not refer to the gruesome union of the lovers, but more to Isabella’s surroundings. There is great emphasis on textures, patterns and scents throughout the composition and so one can definitely agree with Bronkhurst’s statement that “even in this gruesome scene, the sensuality of fine cloth, perfumes, and oils are ritually acknowledged.”⁴¹⁰ The coldness of the marble floor opposes the warmth evoked by the rug around her waist and the cloth beneath the pot that recalls the “silken scarf” (409). There is a shiny, porcelain watering pot located next to the wooden altar, which takes away from Keats’s strong image of Isabella watering the basil mainly with her “thin tears” (424) that implies the frequency and intensity of her crying. The plant is obviously thriving, which suggests that Isabella is nurturing her “jewel” (431) for some time already. The originally simple “garden-pot” (414) is upgraded to “an elaborated vase, decorated with skulls”,⁴¹¹ matching its surroundings. While Lorenzo’s head is “safely casketed” (431) from the brothers and society, the skulls on the vase/pot symbolise the hidden horror and the heart is symbolical for love. The vase is part of Holman Hunt’s interpretation where “the accumulation of details — inlaid wood, marble floors and gleaming silver — indicates his own, rather than a character’s status.”⁴¹² Holman Hunt’s self-projection into the scene is

⁴⁰⁴ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 361. Ironically, the model for Isabella is Hunt’s English wife Fanny Waugh.

⁴⁰⁵ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 61.

⁴⁰⁶ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 362.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 361.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰⁹ Letter from Hunt to Quoted in Bronkhurst, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 216.

⁴¹⁰ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 360. Paraphrase of Bronkhurst, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 216.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid*, 359-60. Paraphrase of Bronkhurst, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 216-7.

⁴¹² Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 59.

accentuated further by his personal attachment to the model and also the evident social criticism of decadence of the middle class that prioritises wealth and profit over emotional and intellectual substance.⁴¹³ The neo-Classical pillar behind Isabella also reduces the impression of medievalism, going in line with the technique of artistic hybridisation. The fact that Lorenzo's name is legibly sown onto the scarf takes away from the mystery of the pot's content and instead clearly conveys to its viewer the gruesome and disturbing elements of the original source. Codell notes that "no particular stanza from the poem was attached to the painting at its exhibition",⁴¹⁴ which intensifies the impression that Holman Hunt's primary intention is not to illustrate and promote Keats's medieval romance, but to reinforce his personal adaptation on the theme of "profit over loss".⁴¹⁵ Hence while Holman Hunt addresses Keats's issues of class and desire, 'Isabella and the Pot of Basil' is not as ekphrastic as the 1848 works 'Isabella and Lorenzo' and 'Lorenzo at his Desk in the Warehouse' that are accompanied by the stanzas they are meant to illustrate.

Holman Hunt's and Millais's paintings of scenes from "Isabella" are obvious pastiches of different styles. The perspective is much more realistic in Holman Hunt's works — in 'Isabella', one can see the bedroom in the far back and the tile pattern adds to the paintings' depth and despite the simple colour palate of white and black and simplistic outline scheme in 'Lorenzo at his Desk', the artist conveys depth by using various levels of detail and shade pressure. In contrast to Holman Hunt, Millais's painting is illogical in its sudden light area in the middle of the mustard and grey-green wallpaper and the fact that twice as many people are seated on the right side of the table. The mix of saturated and pastel colours in Millais's painting is evocative of the artists before Raphael while Isabella's white dress in Holman Hunt's painting makes her stand out from her surrounding of reds, beiges and greens. There is subtle iconography in the painting adaptations, which mainly carry connotations of power and sexuality. The crushed nuts, kicking brother and glance at Lorenzo through the wine glass is part of Millais's visual language that add to the impression of being in a dynamic pregnant moment. Indeed, based on the accompanying selection of the original poem from different stanzas, the painting captures not only the present scene, but also refers to future ones. Holman Hunt's adaptations of a scene from the poem's opening and near close convey his imagination concerning the brothers' business space and Isabella's room. Time seems to freeze, as Lorenzo feels Isabella's proximity and Isabella loses sense of reality, nurturing her lover's remains.

⁴¹³ We can see a similar critical view in Hunt's 1853 'The Awakening Conscience' where despite the rich interior, there is immoral behaviour at play and the lady is seen to be distancing herself from immoral actions, symbolically gazing into the light.

⁴¹⁴ Codell, "Painting Keats", 360. Paraphrase of Bronkhurst, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 216.

⁴¹⁵ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 60.

“It [“*The Eve of St. Agnes*”] is brimful of beauties that will enchant you.”⁴¹⁶ — Holman Hunt to Millais

4.2. The Pre-Raphaelites and “*The Eve of St. Agnes*”: Holman Hunt and Millais

Holman Hunt and Millais produced one finished oil painting each on the theme of “*The Eve of St. Agnes*”. With a 15-year divide between them, the artists portray two distinct scenes from the poem where Keats shares his notion of beauty and his commentary on sexuality, society and rituals. My method is to first discuss the paintings on surface level and then the extent to which they present or modify Keats’s narrative and its themes. The painting and narrative techniques, artistic intentions and critical reception of the painters’ works will also be considered.

Holman Hunt’s 1848 ‘*The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro during the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry (The Eve of St Agnes)*’ [Figure 4]⁴¹⁷ is the first Pre-Raphaelite painting to be displayed publicly at the 1848 Royal Academy exhibition. The scene is portrayed in a serpentine composition that helps differentiate the foreground and deepened background. At the forefront we see the lovers with Porphyro’s hand on the door, they are staring at the sleeping men while in the background on the far left, the evening celebrations are still ongoing. By placing the lovers on the right hand side, Holman Hunt already suggests their “righteousness” whereas the left side is traditionally associated with evil and wrongdoing. It is also relevant to note the Pre-Raphaelite audience as well as viewers today will most likely “read” the painting from left to right — hence our eyes travel from the presumably loud celebrations on the far left to the increasingly silent right. This panorama hence captures the journey from evil to good. The round arches on the far left are not only aesthetically symmetrical, but also imply that the still continuing party is taking place in a different room as well as potentially serving as a frame of an independent picture inside the painting. According to Codell, this “three-dimensionality” contrasts “an opposition between fantasy and reality coherent with Keats’s vision”.⁴¹⁸ Indeed, we see the sleeping men who are possibly dreaming, Madeline the awakened dreamer and then the party-goers who are infatuated with drink, though the reality remains that even the sleeping porter poses danger to the lovers. The painting imitates the aural qualities of the poem, as the forefront represents silence and one can easily imagine the echo of music as well as the dancers’ rhythmic steps coming from the back room. Another evident contrast is between light and dark. Holman Hunt emphasises the importance of the silent lovers by fully illuminating them while darkness is used only in the hallway behind the

⁴¹⁶ Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, Volume I, 80.

⁴¹⁷ This painting shall be henceforth referred to as ‘*Flight of Madeline and Porphyro*’.

⁴¹⁸ Codell, “*Painting Keats*”, 356.

curtains on which the lovers' shadow is set and on also the visible side of the arched back wall. There is a flame by the door outside of the frame that shines on the lovers and sleeping men, creating a chiaroscuro-like dramatic effect reminiscent of the Old Masters. There is obviously a different source of light in the next room that is much brighter. In both cases, the light helps convey the painter's eye for detail using mainly warm-tone colours for the different textures of fabric, wood, tapestry, embellishments painted on the arch and carved details on the marble-looking walls. This contrast between light and dark is reached "by adapting fifteenth-century painting techniques" that includes painting "over a white ground",⁴¹⁹ rejecting the seventeenth century conventional technique of "brown under-painting".⁴²⁰ The medieval setting is evident through the architecture, outfits, furniture and ornamental patterns. The vibrant colours of such details are due to the technique of adding varnish to pigment and oil, producing "partially transparent" paint that, in combination with the aforementioned white ground, creates "an almost uncanny intensity not recorded in photographic reproduction."⁴²¹ Such dynamic colours become signature for the Pre-Raphaelites who combine more techniques and styles in their works. In the case of the 'Flight of Madeline and Porphyro', the painting is undeniably visually pleasing for its intensity of colour, amount of detail and contrast between dark and light areas that add to the scene's tension.

There are several direct visual references to the poem. Porphyro is wearing a hat with a "lofty plume" (110); the hallway behind them seems indeed to be "wide stairs [with] a darkling way" (355); the Porter lays "in uneasy sprawl, / with a huge empty flagon by his side" (363-4) and the "wakeful bloodhound" (365); there are "chains" on the "footworn stones" (368) and one can easily imagine the wooden door "upon its hinges groan" (369) and the coldness of the night "storm" (371) is suggested through the gap in the ajar door. The scene is obviously portraying stanza 41 of Keats's romance,⁴²² which also "accompanied the painting when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1848".⁴²³ However, it is possible to agree with Codell's remark that "the painting is not just a depiction of a moment in the poem",⁴²⁴ as we also see references to previous events and

⁴¹⁹ Carol Jacobi, "William Holman Hunt (1827–1910)", in *Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) 116-132 at 122.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flagon by his side:
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:-
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;-
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans. ("Agnes", 361-69)

⁴²³ Codell, "Painting Keats", 351.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

descriptions. To begin, instead of showing a house with “no human sound” (356), Holman Hunt presents us with active musicians and “revelry” (37) in the background. As a result, the lovers’ task of escaping does not seem as dangerous as their steps cannot be heard as strongly as if there was complete silence. Though sleeping due to obvious “Drunkenness” expressed in the painting title and the surrounding wine mugs, the lovers’ cautious body language suggests their worry of awakening the nearby Porter and the other guard sleeping on the “arm-chair” around the corner. They are aware of the danger behind the current harmless appearance, as expressed by Angela’s words from the first half of the narrative poem that “men will murder upon holy days” (119) and Madeline’s phrase “sleeping dragons” (352). The spilled wine on the floor may be an iconographic reference to the kin’s bloodthirstiness. The porter’s uncomfortable body language could reflect the poem’s closing nightmares “of witch / and demon, and large coffin-worm” (374) and Codell believes that “his perilous proximity to real space” makes the viewer “uneasy over what the end of dreaming might entail” and therefore he functions as a *memento mori*, replacing the absent Angela and Beadsman.⁴²⁵ The maid is shown to be “beset with fears” (351) and her dependence on Porphyro as her protector is conveyed through her hand on his chest, which is a physical contact reminiscent of their earlier intimacy. Porphyro is evidently taking on the role of a guardian knight as he keeps his hand on the sword sheath. Though occupied with keeping an eye on his “foemen’s ears” (152), his sexuality is signified by the sword and belt hanging from his belt. Wootton and Codell uniformly agree that the weapon generates “phallicism”⁴²⁶ and “phallic power and desire, his seduction of Madeline, and his masculinist rescue fantasy”.⁴²⁷ Madeline’s purple dress suggests Porphyro’s influence and previous references to his heart’s “purple riot” (138, my emphasis) and the sexual metaphor where “the rose / blendeth its odour with the violet” (320-1, my emphasis). The open door correlates with the historical present tense used in stanza 41. All of these references show Holman Hunt’s “rearrangement of Keats’s narrative order”⁴²⁸ and his personal interpretation.

Despite the number of direct references, Holman Hunt does make some further alterations based on his personal aesthetics. The musician seen through the left-most arched pillar is not playing any of the instruments mentioned in the poem, but a harp. The “bloated wassailers” (346) are still actively drinking and making noise instead of sleeping. An extra bloodhound is added alongside the Porter’s slumbering body. The lovers are not gliding “like phantoms” (361), as their earthly weight is implied through the shadow behind them. The most obvious alteration is that the

⁴²⁵ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 356.

⁴²⁶ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 48.

⁴²⁷ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 353.

⁴²⁸ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 47.

lovers do not seem to be in “flight” as the title of the painting suggests, but in a temporary halt between reality and fantasy that is represented through literal dreams and the dream-like joyous state caused by alcohol.

Another personal interpretation is the scene selection. In contrast to Keats who in the words of Martin Procházka “liberates sexuality”⁴²⁹ from its religious and philosophical frameworks by portraying a couple whose non-marital consummation is “justified by love rather than social, commercial or legal bonds”⁴³⁰ Holman Hunt chooses to avoid all of the bedroom scenes and instead emphasises the lovers’ “anti-establishment subject matter”.⁴³¹ In a similar way that Madeline defies the social norms of her kin with her love for Porphyro and Keats reconsiders romance, Holman Hunt and the other members of the Brotherhood challenge “Academy teaching and structures.”⁴³² Capturing the lovers in a critical moment opposes the “traditional linked stance of the strolling couple”⁴³³ and the harmony of such compositions is disturbed by the surrounding party and the “awkward angles”⁴³⁴ of the Porter’s body that is spread towards the viewer. According to Jacobi, the amount of detail of inanimate objects surrounding the figures mimics

[...] early painters’ [15th century Flemish art, Italian painters before Raphael] exploratory curiosity about the appearance of things, observing and transcribing, with fine brushes, even minor parts of figures, drapery and setting. Studies exist for a holly branch and the dogs in *The Eve of St Agnes*, for example.⁴³⁵

There are still conventional elements such as the “three-dimensional serpentine spatial composition”⁴³⁶ that assure the painting’s success at the Academy. Holman Hunt himself writes that

[T]he story in Keats’s *Eve of St. Agnes* illustrates the sacredness of *honest responsible love* and the *weakness of proud intemperance*. I may practise my new principles to some degree on that subject.⁴³⁷

The “new principles” that Holman Hunt wants to convey in his art are in Codell’s summary to “modify but not completely overturn painting’s conventions, to balance innovations with conventions for the sake of legibility and acceptability”.⁴³⁸ In this way, Keats’s poem represents a medium for creative experimentation and Holman Hunt does not avoid, but simply *refashions* its sexual theme by the suggested phallicism of Porphyro’s sword and post-sex physical intimacy represented by Madeline’s clinging onto her lover that conveys her awakened sexuality and fear. The couple seems to be the most respectable figures in the entire painting, which is the reading that

⁴²⁹ Procházka, Romantic Symbolic Poem III: Keats, “Seminar 5” handout, 4.

⁴³⁰ Jacobi, “William Holman Hunt”, 120.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁶ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 356.

⁴³⁷ Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 84. My emphasis.

⁴³⁸ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 357.

Holman Hunt wants to convey to the audience. He deliberately avoids the previous stanzas that described “Porphyro’s seduction and voyeurism and Madeline’s disappointment over finding the real lover, not her dream lover, in her bedroom”⁴³⁹ and instead presents a clear division between the drunkards who represent “weakness of proud intemperance” and the relative purity of the lovers.

This selective mode of reading is subjected to criticism. Bronkhurst considers Holman Hunt’s interpretation to be a “deliberate misreading”⁴⁴⁰ and Wayne Cook describes it as “superficial reading” that is used in order to “protect himself against Victorian disapproval”.⁴⁴¹ Indeed, one can criticise Holman Hunt for not painting the most visually rich albeit most sexual scene of Keats’s romance. However, his compromise between artistic and thematic innovation ensures him entrance into the Victorian cultural scene and hence on the long term adding to the popularisation of the poet. Codell describes Holman Hunt as “squeamish about the bedroom setting or Porphyro’s voyeurism and seduction”,⁴⁴² but only a few years later, Holman Hunt paints ‘The Hireling Shepherd’⁴⁴³ where he openly showcases the “heart of the matter hinted at in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the moment of seduction”.⁴⁴⁴ Based on this painting, one can reach the conclusion that Holman Hunt may have simply reduced the evident sexuality of Keats’s narrative for commercial purposes, though it is a topic that paintings such as ‘The Hireling Shepherd’ clearly address with a similar vibrancy as in the ‘Flight of Madeline and Porphyro’. The scene also suggests Holman Hunt’s interest in showing the position of the individuals who break the codes of their society, which parallels the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s disobedience and disagreement with the dictations of the Royal Academy.

Millais’s 1863 eponymous visual rendition of Keats’s romance [Figure 5],⁴⁴⁵ painted over a decade after Holman Hunt’s ‘Flight of Madeline and Porphyro’, does not avoid the “ripe sensuality at the poem’s epicentre”.⁴⁴⁶ Unlike his fellow Pre-Raphaelite, he gives a clear view of Madeline in a scene that is strongly reminiscent of stanza 26. The lady is half undressed, her face conveys deep thought. Her hands are placed around her stomach, her fingers in a position that gives the impression that she is about to untie the corset of her underdress. Her body and the floor surrounding her are outlined by the window behind her, its mullion creating lines of shadow. The maid is facing the bed, which similarly to all the other furniture (a fireplace with an illegible

⁴³⁹ Codell, “Painting Keats”, 352. Paraphrase of Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats’s Poetry and the Politics of Imagination* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1989) 79-81.

⁴⁴⁰ Bronkhurst, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 57.

⁴⁴¹ Cook, “John Keats and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: Pictorial Poetry and Narrative Painting”, 8.

⁴⁴² Codell, “Painting Keats”, 351.

⁴⁴³ The 1851 painting showcases a young woman with a lamb on her lap — an iconographic reference to innocence and virginity — while a potential lover is crawling behind her, his arms are almost around her. Their red cheeks accentuate sexual arousal, similarly as Porphyro’s flushed brow (“*Agnes*”, 137).

⁴⁴⁴ Jacobi, “William Holman Hunt”, 124.

⁴⁴⁵ This painting shall be henceforth referred to as ‘Eve’.

⁴⁴⁶ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 49.

painting above it, wardrobe, sofa-like bedroom bench, draped table with a small jewellery box) appears to be painted with vertical brushstrokes, which contrasts with the painting's landscape layout. Madeline's body shape resembles a vase, which is traditionally seen as an aesthetic object. This parallel is not accidental, as Madeline is intended by the painter to be admired.

Millais's oil painting is accompanied in the catalogue by seven lines from stanza 26.⁴⁴⁷ The painting reflects the striptease-like scene, as Madeline stands without any jewellery and the embroidered part of her dress is around her ankles. Jacobi notices that Madeline "rises, unsheathed as though from a cocoon, from her heavy robe"⁴⁴⁸ and besides the mermaid parallel, her figure resembles a blooming rose "bud" (243) — Jacobi's parallel and the rosebud imagery both convey a girl metaphorically blossoming into a woman. The motif of a female subject in visual art is universal, which Lynne Pearce emphasises in her comment that the painting is "first, a picture of a half-dressed woman" and "if one reads the label, [it is] an illustration of Keats's poem."⁴⁴⁹ Without the textual accompaniment, one can truly believe to be looking at an ordinary (un)dressing scene, yet it is the text that explains what we are seeing in an ekphrastic manner. Madeline conveys innocence and unawareness of an audience. A clear opposite is Édouard Manet's eponymous subject in his 1856 'Olympia' who is conscious of having company and *invites* the viewer to observe her with her sexually charged confident look. Regardless if the female subject is conscious or not of an audience, the viewer is participating in both ways in the "illicit decadence".⁴⁵⁰ In the case of 'Eve', we partake in voyeurism, becoming "an accomplice in Porphyro's transgression and a condoner of the heroine's violation"⁴⁵¹ and 'Olympia' puts us into the position of a "client in a brothel".⁴⁵² Despite sharing the same landscape composition, Olympia's spirit dominates her scene whereas Madeline is in Wootton's view "subsumed by her surroundings and appears confined in the shadow of a barred window, unable to escape the penetrative gaze of an unidentified viewer".⁴⁵³ The impression of imprisonment is definitely also shown in Keats's poem, as Porphyro saves her from

⁴⁴⁷ Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St Agnes in her bed. ("Agnes", 226-34)

⁴⁴⁸ Carol Jacobi, "Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk: Millais and the Synthetic Subject" in *Tate Papers*, no.18 (Autumn 2012) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/sugar-salt-and-curdled-milk-millais-and-the-synthetic-subject>> 5.4.2018.

⁴⁴⁹ Lynne Pearce, *Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 110.

⁴⁵⁰ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 65.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*, 69.

⁴⁵² Pearce, *Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature*, 143.

⁴⁵³ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 68.

her own bloodthirsty and controlling kin. Millais's Madeline illustrates Pearce's argument that women tend to be shown as "prisoners" in nineteenth-century narrative paintings, their environments becoming "hostile space of alienation, oppression, and danger".⁴⁵⁴ Madeline's vase-like figure accentuates her fragility as well as makes her resemble a decorative object. The reduction of Madeline from an individual to a prisoner or an object of the viewer's possession opposes Keats's heroine who expresses emancipation by dreaming (albeit in a collective ritual) about a partner her family does not approve of. However, one cannot wholly criticise Millais's emphasis on Madeline's beauty, as Keats includes in stanza 25 a blazon of Madeline's "delectable parts":⁴⁵⁵ her "fair breast" (218), "hands" (220) and "hair" (222). It is undeniable that both the poet and painter portray Madeline as a young woman emanating feminine beauty and they invite the reader/viewer to admire her. Nonetheless, the critic John Ruskin (otherwise a supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites) finds her "ugly, thin and stiff",⁴⁵⁶ though this may be fuelled by personal matters.⁴⁵⁷

G. H. Fleming considers the painting Millais's "gem of 1863",⁴⁵⁸ which suggests its aesthetic and marketing potential. However, the painting is in some respects disloyal to its source. The most striking variation being the interior that is evidently not medieval, as Millais captures the room and his model (his wife Effie) in "Knole Park, a vast Jacobean house in Sevenoaks, Kent."⁴⁵⁹ While a "wintry moon" (217) is shining on Madeline, the effect is not the same as the window is evidently filled with simple clear glass and so the scene is robbed from the gorgeous image of "warm gules" (217) shining through innumerable "stains and splendid dyes" (212) onto Madeline's pale chest. In this way it is possible to agree with Wootton's statement that "the painting [is] *less concerned with interpreting the poetic source* than creating an atmospheric 'nocturne'".⁴⁶⁰ The night atmosphere is definitely present, but lacks the medievalism of the original poem. Millais's 'Eve' therefore combines a portrait of a woman in Victorian-era attire in a faux-Jacobean interior based on Keats's poetic sensuality. This interpretation is defended by William M. Rossetti:

[H]e [Millais] was under no obligation to cite Keats as an authority for his picture of a girl going to bed by moonlight in a chamber with a painted window. [...] We would rather remember the picture in connexion with the lovely passage from Keats, link together in our mind Keats's Madeline and Millais's maiden, and gulp down the discrepancies for the sake of the association.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁴ Pearce, *Woman/Image/Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature*, 143.

⁴⁵⁵ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 68.

⁴⁵⁶ John Guille Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais* (London: Methuen, 1899) 373.

⁴⁵⁷ The model for Madeline is Effie Gray, Ruskin's former wife who marries Millais in 1855.

⁴⁵⁸ G. H. Fleming, *John Everett Millais: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1998) 203.

⁴⁵⁹ "The Eve of St. Agnes" <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O25272/the-eve-of-st-agnes-watercolour-john-everett-millais/>> 4.4.2018.

⁴⁶⁰ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 68. My emphasis.

⁴⁶¹ Quoted in Richard Altick, *Paintings from Books: Art and Literature in Britain, 1760-1900* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1985) 232.

We can therefore claim that Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes", inspires Millais to paint a scene with a pensive half-disrobed maid in the moonlight, but in its essence it is true that the final product is not a completely loyal interpretation. Especially considering the commercial potential of the Pre-Raphaelites, Millais's 'Eve' does not do justice to one of the most luxurious scenes of Keats's poetry by abstaining from its gorgeous imagery of light passing through the stained glass window.

Both paintings based on "The Eve of St. Agnes" capture "pregnant moments" that are central turning points in the plot: Madeline's last moments as a virgin before Porphyro's seduction and then their flight into the storm. The moments are "pregnant" for carrying the weight of past, present and future events and also engaging the viewer who instantly feels the tension. In this aspect, Holman Hunt's 'Eve' is more successful and faithful to its source, as it carries across to the audience glimpses of the entire story with the "sleeping dragons", Madeline and Porphyro's post-coital physical intimacy, the celebrations found in the first half of the story etc. Holman Hunt's selection of the poem is reflected in the painting, but Millais's work also eternalises a singular moment from his personal life. Both painters portray beauty, but with moral undertones that function as their own commentary on various issues. Holman Hunt almost didactically portrays the dichotomy of lovers vs. Madeline's drunk and indulgent kin, hence conveying his support of the couple's breaking of social norms. As for Millais, he seems to be focusing more on his personal interest in his female model who is posing in a period interior and therefore seems to be using Keats's image of a woman in a nocturnal setting as a starting point of inspiration. Sexuality is a central focus in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and while Holman Hunt refashions it into a socially more acceptable version with simple picture-book phallicism and Madeline's proximity to her lover, Millais puts the critics and audience alike into the position of a voyeur, looking at a potential erotic object with captivating innocence and womanly charm. Keats offers Holman Hunt literary material for experimentation in terms of technique, composition, colours and theme, yet the Keatsian references is not so clear in Millais's work, which makes the painted scene seem common. This might be due to the fact that the Pre-Raphaelites have been established by this point and so Millais is permitted to adapt a scene in his own taste while Holman Hunt is at the very beginning of the movement's journey into Victorian cultural conscience. His loyalty also reflects his high appreciation of Keats and his medievalism. The painters' motives are obviously different, and this reflects on the paintings that either hide or emphasise Keats's themes and imagery in a way that ensures personal ideological satisfaction or social success. However, it is clear that Keats provides both artists with inspiration and they in return, and in different degrees of truthfulness, offer him visual eternalisation and engraving into public conscience through their ekphrastic paintings.

Apart from minor personal touches and focuses on the interior and characters, both painters illustrate scenes with moral undertones: Holman Hunt portrays the flight of the lovers who represent “the provocative issue” of non-marital sexuality and Millais opens the space for ethical thought as Madeline’s privacy is broken, becoming a scene for public admiration. Codell believes that the criticism of the painting shows the reviewers’ “own discomfort over the desire provoked by that keyhole perspective.”⁴⁶² The works emotionally engage their audience: Holman Hunt hopes to evoke hope that the lovers (especially Madeline) successfully escape from the home of the authoritarian family and Millais captures a virgin who is unknowingly losing her innocence to strangers observing her private ritual. Both paintings lack a stable temporal position, as they mix Keats’s scenes with both conventional and modern painting techniques, make alterations from the poem and also iconographically refer to previous and future moments of the original narrative. In this sense, they are — much like Keats’s romances — hybrids of the old and new, both a challenge to and continuation of traditions and the two paintings present temporary moments of escape (Holman Hunt) and youthful beauty and innocence (Millais).

“[“*La Belle Dame*”] is a masterpiece [...] of the condensed and hinted order so dear to imaginative minds”⁴⁶³ — Rossetti

4.3 Rossetti’s “*La Belle Dame sans Merci*” Illustrations

Dante Gabriel Rossetti altogether creates four art works inspired by Keats’s ballad, from which only three survive. One of the central reasons Rossetti repeatedly returns to illustrating this specific poem is because he considers it and also his “favourite piece”.⁴⁶⁴ Considering Rossetti’s appreciation of the suggestive nature of poem, its “simplicity” that provides space for creative interpretation and the Brotherhood’s reading of the ballad as “a nightmare tryst, a grim tale of abandonment and deprivation”,⁴⁶⁵ the following part will examine the sketches from 1848, 1850 and 1855. The main areas of interest are their ekphrastic qualities and how they reflect Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics (horizontal compositions, detail, symbolism).

Rossetti’s first sketch from 1848 [Figure 6] is without question the most complete out of the three. Upon first glance, one notices a young and somewhat ghostly female figure who is almost embraced by a male character. Although the figures’ body language suggests movement, the dog facing the viewer on the left-hand side is stationary. The dog is visibly immune to the lady’s charm,

⁴⁶² Codell, “Painting Keats”, 365.

⁴⁶³ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Letter of 29 December 1879, in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, With a Memoir by William Michael Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895) Volume I, 420.

⁴⁶⁴ Hall Caine, *Recollections of Rossetti* (London: Cassell, 1908) 16.

⁴⁶⁵ Scott, “Language Strange”, 504.

unlike the knight whose head is bent towards her, enthralled. The altar-shaped illustration recalls the Pre-Raphaelites' appreciation of Gothic ecclesiastic art and architecture. The entire composition is vertical, which is highlighted all the more by the lean standing figures and the tree branch that hangs above them. The forest setting is suggested through trees in the forefront and background of the picture and the floor, though not as detailed as the figures, is covered in grass and leaves. The mixed medium of pen, sepia and pencil allow shading and textural details such as the lady's rope-like belt, the man's ornamental sleeves and the canopy and bark of the trees.

Rossetti's knight in this 1848 illustration does not fit the traditional image of a "knight-at-arms" — instead of a man in armour, we see a Robin Hood-like character with a moustache and layered bycocket. He does not seem entirely out of place in the forest as one would expect a knight to be, hence the piece struggles to convey Keats's central image of displacement. The chivalric outfit, sword and steed are replaced by a horn hanging from the man's chest and a dog that are associated with hunting.⁴⁶⁶ Of course, Keats does not specify the individual attributes of the knight-at-arms in the ballad, but it is less than likely that he has a messenger/hunter in mind. Rossetti's interpretive imagination is clearly at play, as he decides not to include a sword, shield nor steed that are all immediate visual associations of knights. On the other hand, one can argue that it might have been Rossetti's intention to take away the potential for battle and convey the knight in his disarmed state and therefore defenceless against the lady's charms. As for the lady, her facial features resemble those of the dead men in the knight's vision — her eyes and mouth are "gaped wide" ("La Belle Dame", 42) and her entire body is pale. One can therefore see an evident role reversal, as Rossetti presents the knight as strong and the lady glowing like a ghost. Her mostly white figure makes her stand out from the scene that is otherwise filled with shades of grey. This contrast can equate her to a siren, leading her victims towards their doom with her beauty. Additionally, her light contrasts with the shadows and darkness of the surrounding reality, which visually explains the knight's attraction to her all the more. This disparity can recall the malicious will-o'-the-wisp of British folk tales, whose light is deceptive as it often leads the victims from safe paths to their death, mainly by drowning.⁴⁶⁷ One can also recall the mythological nymphs who are portrayed in John William Waterhouse's 1896 'Hylas and the Nymphs', where, similarly to Rossetti's belle dame, the women are strikingly light in contrast to their dark forest surroundings.

⁴⁶⁶ The horn may recall the "trumpet's silver voice" that is heard in "Calidore" (55), which can be argued to link Keats's works. However, it is not very probable that Rossetti was aware of this fragmentary poem.

⁴⁶⁷ This legend will most likely be known to most of the Pre-Raphaelites' audience. The will-o'-the-wisp appears, for example, in Arnold Böcklin's 1882 painting, 'Das Irrlicht'. Such blending of the mythological and literary level is part of the Pre-Raphaelite legacy, like the 1900 painting 'Will-o'-the-Wisp' where Elizabeth Adela Stanhope Forbes adapts the folkloric legend based on a literary source (William Allingham's poem "The Fairies").

The 1850 sketch [Figure 7] presents a man and woman side by side, reminding us of a procession, the man leading forward his companion with his face turned towards her while she looks at the viewer. Similarly to the other two sketches, the lady's attire is white and the knight (again clearly not "at-arms") is wearing a medieval outfit with a darker top with suggested tailored details and light-toned, tight pants. The couple conveys intimacy by holding hands. The lady's hair is neatly arranged, with possibly floral decorations, which completely goes against Keats's "wild" belle dame portrayed in the other two sketches. Márta Mácsok and Fairfax Murray correctly observe the resemblance between the knight and belle dame figures and *Hamlet's* Laertes and Ophelia who appear in the "First Madness of Ophelia" [Figure 8], which is one of Rossetti's notable Shakespeare subjects.⁴⁶⁸ Mácsok asserts that there is a clear parallel between

[...] the virgin Ophelia, who is a kind of sexual taboo to her brother, and the lover Belle Dame, an impersonal object of masculine sexual desire, [who] have become interchangeable figures in the representations.⁴⁶⁹

The similarity between the belle dame and Ophelia not only shows an eclectic, aestheticised blending of literary sources, but also suggests Rossetti's perception of both as victims of male desire that leads to their downfall. It is also interesting that even though flowers are so prominent in the ballad, they are merely hinted at in this sketch, and yet in the aforementioned completed 1864 painting, "First Madness of Ophelia", the flowers are placed precisely where they would be on the belle dame: the Shakespearean tragic heroine is wearing a flower headpiece ("garland"), belt ("fragrant zone") and instead of "bracelets", Ophelia has a pattern of flowers on her sleeves. Though it is tempting to see this as a delayed visual adaptation of one of the ballad's central images, flowers do famously appear in the presented scene as part of Ophelia's speech in Act IV scene v. In this speech that her dis comforted brother calls a "document in madness",⁴⁷⁰ she recites names of different flowers and their functions, giving them to the people present.⁴⁷¹ The named flowers have symbolic meanings that express her character's emotional development and connect to the plot (Ophelia's awakened sexuality, memories of Hamlet and his expressions of love for her, insanity due to her broken heart, serving as a tragic forecast of her death), and their dual function as an aesthetic element connected both to life and death is similar to that suggested in Keats's ballad.

Rossetti's last drawing of the ballad from 1855 [Figure 9] captures the knight and belle dame on horseback. The intensity of the scene is accentuated by the rougher use of black ink and

⁴⁶⁸ Márta Mácsok, "From Text to Metatext: D. G. Rossetti's Illustrations of Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci"", in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall, 2003) 189-198 at 190.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁴⁷⁰ *Hamlet*, IV.v.159.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, IV.v.156-165.

graphite, which gives more texture to the knight's shining armour, the lady's wavy hair and the folds of her skirt. The horse's body is outlined with light pressure and is increasingly fading with distance from the figures. This technique, together with the lady's hand, clearly suggests that the viewer's attention should be directed at the middle of the piece that conveys the lovers' "erotic tension through a clasped hand being kissed as their lower bodies are forced together between the saddle and the horse's head."⁴⁷² Further tension is created through the belle dame's hair that is winding around the knight's neck. This specific feature is ambiguous, as it goes both for and against the image of the belle dame as a powerful entity. In Virginia Allen's opinion, her long hair is equivalent to that of the demonic biblical figure Lilith (a motif in Rossetti's later work),⁴⁷³ hence metamorphosing Keats's lady "into a Lilith-like image, imprisoning her lover with her hair — a femme fatale."⁴⁷⁴ Elisabeth G. Gitter agrees with Allen's reading of the hair as a weapon of a femme fatale, as it is used to create "a stranglehold around her lover's neck,"⁴⁷⁵ while the unaware knight kisses her hand.⁴⁷⁶ Contrarily to Allen and Gitter, Grant F. Scott argues that the knight "gathers her hair in a knot and winds it round his neck like a scarf, a gesture that might go part of the way toward explaining the pained expression in her eyes"⁴⁷⁷ and which would show that the belle dame is ensnared *by* the knight, not vice versa as it is in the poem. The objective reading of the sketch can go either way, yet in Victorian culture, hair (especially blond) plays a dual symbolic role.⁴⁷⁸ In Gitter's summary, "if a powerful woman of the Victorian imagination was an angel, her shining hair was her *aureole or bower*; when she was demonic, it became a *glittering snare, web, or noose*".⁴⁷⁹ The hair is evidently blond or lighter in all three sketches, yet we see a development from the 1848 sketch where the lady's hair is enveloping her head in an aureole-like fashion but in the 1850 illustration, it clearly is in line with the iconographical code of a female demon. However, it is evident in the ballad itself that the lady's "long" hair is part of her wild, female charm that entangles the knight. Rossetti's choice of hair arrangement in this final sketch can be a technique to show the span of the lady's power over the knight and also to add momentum and more texture.

⁴⁷² Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 94.

⁴⁷³ Lilith is a motif in Rossetti's later visual and poetic work, hence one can see in the belle dame's long hair the beginnings of artistic development. Her hair is a tool of power and seduction, as Rossetti describes in the ekphrastic sonnet that accompanies his eponymous 1868 painting "Lady Lilith" (later renamed "The Body's Beauty") with the line that her hair makes men "watch the bright web she can weave / Till heart and body and life are in" (7-8).

⁴⁷⁴ Virginia Allen, "'One Strangling Golden Hair': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith", in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Jun., 1984) 285-294 at 287.

⁴⁷⁵ Elisabeth G. Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination", in *PMLA* 99 (1984) 936-954 at 948.

⁴⁷⁶ The nook-like shape of the lady's hair is present in William Waterhouse's 1893 painting of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. This interpretation accommodates the reversed reading of the ballad, as she becomes a true femme fatale and enchantress who is confident in her sexual power, using it to seduce men that suddenly become vulnerable.

⁴⁷⁷ Scott, "Language Strange", 507.

⁴⁷⁸ More examples of the role of hair in Victorian culture, namely painting and poetry of Rossetti and others, are provided in Nina Auerbach's 1984 study *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*.

⁴⁷⁹ Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination", 936. My emphasis.

In summary, while the third sketch is subjected to much gendered critical reading discussing the dynamic of victim/victimiser that distracts the viewer from the work's aesthetic qualities, it can still be considered the most truthful to its source. The horse and leaning lady whose "hair was long" (15) match the original poem, though the hair is given an ambiguous role as a tool for the knight to show further endearment as well as the lady's control. The knight appears significantly younger than in the previous sketches, which makes him comparable to Keats's romantically inexperienced Calidore, hence explaining the knight's obvious engagement in the scene. Indeed, the first two sketches portray characters who appear older and neither of the knights are "at-arms", but in a lightly embellished medieval outfit. Scott describes the knight's face in the 1855 sketch as "blurred and indeterminate",⁴⁸⁰ but in fact, all three sketches capture the knights' faces at an angle that makes their features almost indistinguishable. They are more a "schematic force rather than a fully rendered form",⁴⁸¹ contrasting the belle dames whose portraits are always clearly depicted. Her "wild" appearance is most evident in the 1848 sketch, while she seems tame in the 1850 version with her parted hair and being led in a nuptial fashion by the knight. According to Scott, the belle dame's distracted look in the 1848 sketch can be about "her own uncertain future, or her conversion from "fairy's child" to "La Belle Dame sans Merci"". ⁴⁸² By considering also the lady's position in opposition to the original male narrative, the three illustrations advocate the poem's diversity of perspective, which is one of the chief qualities that Rossetti praises the poem for to begin with.

The fact that Rossetti chooses to depict three different scenes complicates Lessing's notion of a single "pregnant moment". The 1848 and 1855 sketches capture moments of enthrallment; the first conveys the knight's devotion to the absent-minded lady whereas the latter portrays the more intense scene on horseback, successfully conveying the psychological and sexual tension presented in the poem. The 1850 illustration, however, is not traceable to any specific part of the ballad and therefore resembles more a drawing exercise on figure and costume than an illustration of the poem like the other two sketches. The motif of flowers that is prominent in the ballad and an important dual symbol of beauty and decay is missing in all three of Rossetti's sketches. Their absence is justified in the 1855 illustration by including the stanza from the *Indicator* version of the ballad that reverses the plot order (where the flowers are given *after* the horse ride).

⁴⁸⁰ Scott "Language Strange", 508.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, 505.

⁴⁸² Ibid, 507.

Since the 1855 sketch is the only one to include an excerpt from the poem,⁴⁸³ it is easier to judge in terms of its ekphrastic potential. While Rossetti indeed shows on first glance a loyal depiction of Keats's scene and the knight's enthrallment, he presents the belle dame differently. The lady's expression and body language implies discomfort; her upper body is leaning away and yet her lower body is trapped in the little space on the saddle — according to Scott, she truly “appears less enchanting siren than damsel in distress.”⁴⁸⁴ The belle dame in the 1848 sketch seems similarly trapped by the knight, earning the viewer's sympathy with her terrified expression. When compared, the lady of the first sketch matches Keats's heroine the most with her wild appearance. The 1850 illustration gives the knight the most control out of the three, as he seems to be *leading* the lady instead of *being* led. Such changes may be due to the influence of William Holman Hunt and his 1848 “The Eve of St. Agnes” that leads Rossetti to replace “the despair of Keats's woeful knight-at-arms with the triumph of Porphyro, who bears off his frightened bride” and hence present “Keats's ballad as a scene of classic male abduction”⁴⁸⁵ and control. Rossetti gives the lady literal meaning as a graspable creature, which makes the second and third sketches *rewritings* of the ballad as the belle dame is in her essence an abstract entity. While all three sketches show the enthralling power of love, Rossetti fails to portray Keats's central interest of love as a destructive force and the lady's mythological qualities and controlling powers to roam between life and death. The Pre-Raphaelite seems more interested in the interpersonal dynamic than in the symbolic aspects. He also excludes the supernatural/Gothic level of the ballad that is captured, for example, in William Bell Scott's 1873 “La Belle Dame sans Merci” engraving which portrays the horse scene, but with the eerie outline of male figures on the horizon — a clear iconographic forecast of the knight's dream. Rossetti captures solely one moment in all three sketches without giving them the iconographic dimension that would allow a glimpse into past and future moments. Nonetheless, all three visual pieces share a black, grey and white palette, which gives them a bleak atmosphere that contrasts with the fact that all three capture moments of relative happiness that are, sadly, only temporary. In this aspect, Rossetti is successful in transmitting “the ballad's spirit of uncertainty and loss”⁴⁸⁶ and mystery while demonstrating Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on stylised decorative medievalism and vertical compositions reflective of their appreciation of ecclesiastic Gothic architecture.

⁴⁸³ I set her on my pacing steed
And nothing else saw all day long
For sideways would she lean & sing
A fairie's song (*Indicator* “Belle Dame”, 17-20)

⁴⁸⁴ Scott, “Language Strange”, 507.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 508.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 507.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth.”⁴⁸⁷ — John Keats

5.1 Conclusion of Argument

Two questions are posed in the introduction of this thesis. The first addresses the aesthetic evolution of Keats’s medievalism. When we compare Keats’s first Spenserian poems (“Calidore” and “Specimen”), we are given imagery that emphasises the beauty of nature and shares a sense of excitement for poetry, the medieval heritage and the poet’s own future. Nevertheless, there is a lack of plot as the poems are more interested in an aestheticised meditation on medieval themes in relation to the poet’s personal artistic progress. Though there is evident excitement in “Calidore” and “Specimen” to recreate the past, the abrupt endings and experimental intents do not meet the reader’s expectations of being told “tale of chivalry” (“Specimen”, 1). Keats’s medievalism between 1818 and 1821 does not only naturally place the reader into a medieval setting through a range of imagery, themes and diction, but also shows distance from the early Spenserian poems’ aesthetics with irony, scepticism, disillusion and social scope. We see a clear transition from the escapist and dreamy aesthetics of “old Romance” (“Isabella”, 387) to the increasingly socially involved and pathos-imbued “wormy circumstance” (“Isabella”, 385), in which characters are subjected to the throes of their immediate reality. The interplay of negative human traits disrupt the innocence, joy and beauty of love that make up the central interest of all these later romance protagonists. Tragedy pervades Keats’s revision of romance insofar as the relationships get cut short, often ending with or implying death (Lorenzo, the knight, Isabella, Angela, the Beadsman), and the futures are left indeterminate.

Keats experiments with medievalism in different forms, drawing on various sources. The *ottava rima* used in “Isabella” harkens to the Italian (and newly repurposed British) tradition, the Spenserian stanza of “The Eve of St. Agnes” continues in the ornamental legacy of the Renaissance poet and the ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci” connects to the Romantic revival of the originally folkloric form, popularised by Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. As we see with sources such as Scott’s “Melrose Abbey” and Coleridge’s “Christabel”, Keats’s medievalism also plays with supernatural elements that update the Gothic genre for the Romantic audience. The dreamy, optimistic character of the chivalric and romance tradition is disrupted by reality represented by the dominating role of pride that appears in “Isabella” as well as in “The Eve of St. Agnes” where the

⁴⁸⁷ “To George and Tom Keats”, 22 December 1818, in *Letters*, 60.

heroines are subjected to the demands and opinions of their families. Both of these narrative poems contain an obvious scepticism towards romance and its followers, as exemplified by the youth in “The Eve of St. Agnes” who rely on “enchantments cold” (“Agnes”, 134) of pagan rituals instead of proactively seeking romance at the night’s celebrations along with the intense and increasingly grotesque love-sickness found in “Isabella”. In “La Belle Dame sans Merci” we see through the knight’s narrative an automatic expectation of a romance with the “lady of the meads” (“La Belle Dame”, 13), but instead he becomes yet another victim of a mythological creature. The deliberate ambiguity of belle dame’s behaviour that correlates with Keats’s notion of negative capability goes against the closure of traditional romance, as the knight is left to roam in a vicious circle of memories in attempt to resolve her mystery. The romance genre is used in Keats’s early poetry for ornamental and escapist purposes and also as a means to connect his work to poetic tradition. Only later does he experiment more with the genre by updating it with social parallels and deconstructing by implementing his philosophy that a poem’s beauty relies on indeterminacies and lack of reason.

Keats uses established medieval topoi throughout his medieval poems, though it is especially in the later romances and ballad where he refashions them. The Spenserian heroic knight figure becomes re-imagined from the hopeful, over-excited Calidore of the eponymous fragment to the knight-at-arms in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” who is consumed by love for a mythological and destructive creature set on ritualistic enthrallment of men from the chivalric order. Porphyro is given a knight-like role as he ventures through the wilderness into the castle of his foes, liberating Madeline from the “sleeping dragons” (“Agnes”, 353) of her “blood-thirsty race” (“Agnes”, 99). In contrast to the faery and folkloric language of “The Eve of St. Agnes” and the ballad that work with a chivalric context with underlying mythology, “Isabella” clearly conveys the diction of class and trade, which reflects also on the portrayal of Lorenzo and his position as “the servant of their [Isabella’s family] trade designs” (“Isabella”, 165). Keats modernises the genre by adding Romantic values and themes. “Isabella” harbours robust references to issues of imperial colonisation and enterprise, known to the Romantic audience that witnesses various forms of slave-like exploitation. Also discernible is a critical commentary on the lack of individual freedom based on class, as Lorenzo’s lower social status automatically makes him in the eyes of Isabella’s brothers unworthy of the heroine’s affection. We can additionally find Keats portraying individuality and rebellion against social and family fealty in “The Eve of St. Agnes” whereby Madeline and Porphyro escape the castle after consummating their love. However, Madeline’s spiritual quest for love gets derided, as does youth in general whose brains are “new stuff’d [...] with triumphs gay / of old Romance” (“Agnes”, 40-41). The narrator expresses scepticism pertaining to the out-datedness of

legends, rituals and dependency on superstition. In contrast to Wordsworth and Byron's adaptations of quests that show a character's spiritual development when travelling through the world at a changing point in history, Keats shows the knight-at-arms and Porphyro in quests for *love*. While Porphyro realises a successful journey by fleeing the castle with a "peerless bride" ("Agnes", 167), the knight's romantic experience marks him both physically and psychologically. The poet also creates reconsideration of setting by rewriting the welcoming and lively nature of "Calidore" and "Specimen" as sterile and gloomy ("La Belle Dame") and hostile and uncontrollable (the storm in "The Eve of St. Agnes"). In "Isabella", Keats reworks the forest from a location of folkloric adventure and fairies to a convenient place to bury crimes.

A major part of Keats's revision of medievalism is the view of religion together with its associated actions and values. We see a number of sins such as excessive drinking, gluttony and lust in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and not to mention murder, greed and wrath in "Isabella". The sacred rites of marriage and burial become reconsidered and deconstructed, too. Marriage is treated as a tool to expand the family's material wealth in "Isabella" as the brothers intend for their only sister "to be a Noble's bride" ("Isabella", 456). In "The Eve of St. Agnes", matrimony exhibits a form of assurance for Madeline from her emotional state as "a dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing" ("Agnes", 333). Based on the dead men in the knight's dream, Angela's physical deformation and Lorenzo's decaying body that appears in Isabella's supernatural vision, death and the afterlife are grotesque and dispiriting. No proper burial takes place for the Beadsman who, despite his countless prayers, turns into "ashes cold" ("Agnes", 378). Lorenzo's body gets unconventionally buried and unearthed twice and also decapitated. It is ironic that while Madeline finds success through her prayers and performance of "ceremonies" ("Agnes", 50) of a pagan ritual to obtain "Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year" ("Agnes", 63), the Beadsman still dies "after thousand aves told" ("Agnes", 373). Keats also reinterprets the process of birth. Instead of a child, Isabella's "three hours" ("Isabella", 382) of "dismal labouring" ("Isabella", 379) produce the body of her dead lover. Following her own death, "a sad ditty of this story [is] *born*" ("Isabella", 501, my emphasis). Christianity is joined by mythological and social references that often give the story an indefinite temporal and cultural space, distancing its content from the medieval setting. For example, Lorenzo's decapitation that at once refers to the healing quality of saints' heads from the Bible evokes mythological beheadings. Another point worth noting is that Porphyro uses religious language not as part of a rite, but to show admiration of Madeline's beauty — a feature that appears in the famous sonnet-inspired dialogue between Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. In a similar manner, Isabella adapts the notion of worship with the altar-like function of the basil pot that, in

some readings, carries sexual implications. To summarise, religious rites and prayers, together with architecture, musical instruments and art (tapestry, stained glass etc), blend into a unique imagery that dominates the atmosphere of Keats's medievalism in a vivid manner. At the same time, these aesthetics fundamentally challenge the ethical concerns usually connected with these rituals.

The second question posed in the introduction concerns the Pre-Raphaelites' visual adaptations of Keats's later medievalism and how loyal these interpretations remain to their sources. To answer the question means to consider two artistic agendas: that of the Pre-Raphaelite movement as a whole and that of each individual artist (Holman Hunt, Millais and Rossetti). I began the thesis with a summary of the Pre-Raphaelites' aesthetics as saturated colours and numerous visual embellishments informed by an appreciation of ecclesiastic Gothic art and architecture that correspond to Keats's own imagery of rich descriptions that paint animated scenes in the reader's mind. To certain degrees, all three artists convey Keats's aesthetics, though they increasingly exhibit senses of personal interpretation. It is thus plausible to predict that each painter's approach towards the poet's work will develop over the span of twenty years (1848-1868) wherein the chosen range of paintings and sketches are created. In general, we can always find a number of features that follow Keats's text as well as modifications, conveying collective or personal aesthetics. All paintings and drawings carry titles that clearly demonstrate the origins of their sources. However, only five out of the eight analysed works include a quotation from Keats's poetry, which automatically accentuates their ekphrastic purpose. Millais's 'Lorenzo and Isabella' is joined by excerpts from stanzas 1 and 21 of "Isabella" and this selection explains the tension of the scene to the viewer. The two-line quotation from stanza 3 for Holman Hunt's 'Lorenzo at the Warehouse' also points out the romance bereft of any space in the working environment. Holman Hunt's 'Flight of Madeline and Porphyro' fails to illustrate the supernatural element of the quotation (stanza 41) since the lovers are not gliding "like phantoms" ("Agnes", 361), but still carry human weight, as indicated by their shadows. Like Keats's 26th stanza from "The Eve of St. Agnes" that connects the reader to Porphyro's voyeuristic experience, Millais's 1863 painting adaptation also invites the viewer to gaze at an unconscious female subject, which may inspire a sentiment of discomfort from witnessing a private moment. From Rossetti's three illustrations for Keats's ballad, only the 1855 variant includes a quotation that describes the horse scene from stanza 5 of the *Indicator* version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci". The sexual and emotional tension in the centre of the composition is expressed through the close physical proximity of the knight and belle dame — whose bodies are illustrated through more intense strokes than the lightly sketched horse. The remaining three analysed works do not include a quotation. Nevertheless, Holman Hunt's 'Isabella and the Pot of

Basil' alludes to the private atmosphere and visual elements of stanzas 53 and 54 and Rossetti's 1848 "La Belle Dame sans Merci" clearly visually associates the ghost-pale belle dame with the wilderness and the dead men in the knight's dream, which makes the sketch depict more than one scene from the ballad.

Even though all the adaptations refer directly to Keats's poetry, they do also show a varying degree of personal interpretation. We can trace clear reciprocal influences between Millais and Holman Hunt, as they both place the lovers on the right side and the villains or potential threats on the left of their 1848 paintings ('The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro' and 'Lorenzo and Isabella'). Their explicit positioning automatically correlates with the notion of left-evil and right-good. In this way, the painters immediately tell the viewer which characters merit sympathy, which bears similarities to the dominating role of the narrative voices in the poems. A clear interpretational experimentation occurs in Millais's painting that is filled with erratic iconography (the walnuts, kick, wine glass) and an unrealistic perspective. The dining scene, despite its opulence in patterns and textures (silk, velvet, wallpaper), does not contain the typical warmth and enthusiastic conversation expected in a communal meal, but instead agrees with Keats's emphases on class division and the brothers' immoral and superior behaviour. The medievalism is lost in Millais's 'The Eve of St. Agnes' that features an undressing woman in Victorian-era attire in a faux-Jacobean interior. The scene lacks the colours and textures captured in the original poem, using instead a more subdued, pastel palette of browns, beiges and grey-blues. The interior is also modified in Holman Hunt's 'Isabella and the Pot of Basil' that positions the heroine into a space with mainly neo-Classical elements such as the pillars and marble floors. The surrounding luxuries that accentuate the family's higher social class and financial status address the issues of class and morality. Millais renders a similar pastiche in his Keats debut 'Lorenzo and Isabella' that embodies elements from several art periods and genres. Rossetti creates a hybrid of Keats's medievalism and Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics in the 1848 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' sketch, in which the artist repurposes the enthralled knight as a Robin Hood/hunter-like character and shapes the scene using an altar-shaped composition. Rossetti's great attention to detail, however, becomes trademark for the movement. On the other hand, Holman Hunt shows loyalty to Keats's medievalism in his 'Flight of Porphyro and Madeline' in terms of attire, atmosphere and interior. Holman Hunt's 'Lorenzo in the Warehouse' corresponds to the sterile work environment with its clean lines and lack of colour found in the poem.

The artists convey sexuality, a crucial component of the universal quest for love, in different degrees. An implied physical closeness of the lovers can be detected in Holman Hunt's 'Flight of

Lorenzo and Isabella' and Rossetti's sketches. There are natural metaphors in Keats's "Isabella" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" that reflect sexual awakening and communion. The reader and viewer are put in the position of a voyeur in the original poem 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and Millais's painting adaptation. The fruit Lorenzo offers Isabella in Holman Hunt's painting is an iconography of fruitful love. Through Isabella's obsessive and necrophiliac attachment to the basil, Keats captures the hysterical aspect of female sexuality. We can also find many phallic symbols like the brother's kick and Porphyro's sword in Millais's paintings and the saddle in Rossetti's 1855 sketch. The author's sensibility influences the artworks' varying levels of revealing sexuality. The artists also faced the conundrum of conforming to conventions, fulfilling the demands of institutions and thinking about audience reception in order to ensure social and financial success. Love, like life, is temporary, and Holman Hunt, Millais and Rossetti all eternalise a moment when love stands in the centre: Lorenzo and Isabella at the dining table, Isabella's private moment with the basil, Porphyro and Madeline's escape from the authoritative family and the knight enjoying the belle dame's company. These scenes brim with beauty, as Keats and the painters include multitudinous details, but these moments of joys are only ephemeral, leading to social downfalls, grief and hopeless futures.

In conclusion, it is evident that Keats's later medieval poems and the Pre-Raphaelites' paintings are attempts to convey beauty in a convincing and non-clichéd way. They share the same quest of contributing original art to a long tradition of adapting medievalism in poetry and painting alike. The Pre-Raphaelites' works portray Keats's themes, namely social class; romantic desire; individuals at odds with authoritative power structures seen in family and society; the narrowing division between the private and public worlds; and an appreciation of medieval culture. The paintings show the beauty of the visual arts, customs and architecture that heavily contrasts the increasingly industrialising, utilitarian and materialistic Romantic and Victorian society. The Pre-Raphaelite recognition of Keats can be traced to the fact that the position of the artist remains subjected to the public, institutions and reviewers, therefore we can designate instances that trigger compromises or pronounced moves to revolt against conformity. However, it is clear that the poet and painters have their own aesthetic agendas and Keats's work serves as material for visual art with a personal and social dimension. The phenomena they depict — love, sexuality, greed, rage, pride, grief — are universal. While Keats's writings and the Pre-Raphaelite's pictures explore medieval environments, they draw upon everlasting human desires, traits and experiences that remain relevant to this day.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

In order to be thorough, I limited my thesis to the study of ekphrastic paintings from the first two active decades of the founding generation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It should be mentioned that Holman Hunt, Millais and Rossetti are not the only visual artists who have adapted Keats. In that respect, an interesting area for further study would be the echoes of and divergences from the first-generation Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics as opposed to works created by later Pre-Raphaelites and even independent Victorian-era artists. This discussion would continue not only Keats's posthumous pictorial legacy, but also the discussion of the development of *ekphrasis*. The following section will briefly address future graphic adaptations that can open such a research.

The Pre-Raphaelite "life-as-art" notion is adapted in Arthur Hughes's 1856 'The Eve of St. Agnes' by which a triptych layout conveys three different scenes in a gold, altar-shaped frame that recall the Pre-Raphaelite admiration of Gothic ecclesiastic architecture. The third frame is "virtually identical to Holman Hunt's [1848 'Flight of Lorenzo and Isabella'] in terms of composition and colour"⁴⁸⁸ and the inclusion of a citation (stanza 6) correlates with the "sister arts" concept and emphasises the work's ekphrastic quality. Unlike his painterly antecedents, Hughes's work includes one of the most beautiful visual elements of Keats's poem: the stained glass casement that adds to the medieval atmosphere with its resplendent furniture and attire. Another artist who captures Keats's medievalism is Daniel Maclise, whose 1868 painting portrays Madeline after prayer who is freeing her hair "of all its wreathed pearls" (227) and the chiaroscuro only emboldens the sacred atmosphere. The lute and "high and triple-arch'd" (208) casement from the poem are also included.

"Isabella" is also further adapted by subsequent artists. Like Hunt in the 1868 painting, John Melhuish Strudwick's 1879 oeuvre presents the heroine as an overtly sexual being, exposing a naked shoulder as her hand grasps her breast. The woman's loose clothes are not as transparent as in Hunt's version, but her red outfit only accentuates her pale skin. However, she stands in the centre of the composition, and since the basil pot is missing, we can assume that the pictured scene takes place after the brothers' escape. John William Waterhouse's 1907 painting shares a number of similarities with Holman Hunt's 'Isabella' like the heroine leaning over the basil pot and a watering pot that is set nearby. However, he also makes alterations such as transferring the scene from the private interior space of Isabella's bedroom to the public garden, not to mention moving Holman Hunt's skull image from the pot to the pillar beneath it. The added poppies symbolise death and (especially within post-WWI cultural context) remembrance, which works well. In contrast to

⁴⁸⁸ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 74.

Strudwick and Holman Hunt's adaptations, the naked skin of Waterhouse's Isabella is properly hidden underneath her loose clothes, though her blush signifies sexual arousal and her body language communicates senses of sexuality. In contrast to the warm-toned carnal colours that preoccupy Holman Hunt's painting, green predominates Waterhouse's composition, harkening back to Keats's natural imagery. In both versions, the heroine's white attire causes her to stand out in a glowing, ethereal manner. While the physical health of Holman Hunt's heroine is suggested through her tanned complexion, Waterhouse builds upon Keats's pale heroine. Based on these two paintings alone, one can hypothesise about the immense influence of Holman Hunt's 'Isabella' on later artists who continue to iterate the motif of a grieving young beauty emanating sexual energy.

Unlike the two previous poems that are repeatedly adapted, there are few portrayals of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in the nineteenth century. Besides a handful of sketches by Elizabeth Siddall and William Bell Scott, there is one lesser-known painting from 1863 by Arthur Hughes that shows a submissive and almost lifeless belle dame. Wootton notes that it is "not until the *fin-de-siècle* and the first part of the twentieth century that significant numbers of paintings and poems directly refer to Keats's ballad."⁴⁸⁹ Not only do we see a rise of interest in adapting the ballad, but also a changed perspective of the belle dame who is reinterpreted from a submissive maiden in despair to an enchanting and destructive femme fatale — a reading present in the paintings by Henry Meynell Rheam (1897), Frank Dicksee (1902) and Frank Cadogan Cowper (1926). The interpretation of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" depends on the changing perspectives on the role of women that reaches a comical level in the anonymous cartoon published in *The Punch* that depicts a vain belle dame touching up her make-up in the reflection of the knight's breast-plate.

Intriguing areas of focus could entail studying the ways in which the artists following the first-generation Pre-Raphaelites convey Keats's poems, identifying which themes and scenes they adapt, and investigating whether they also give their ekphrastic creations a social dimension. Further discussion could also explore how (if at all) other generations echo the works of Holman Hunt, Millais and Rossetti. Potentially, scholars can also turn to cinematographic renditions such as *The Poet of the Peaks* (1915), *Coraline* (2002) and *Arterial* (2013) in an effort to examine how Keats's posthumous legacy continues with newer expressive techniques like film. Nonetheless, it is useful to keep aware of earlier adaptations of Keats's medievalism. My thesis therefore belongs among valuable resources for studying the evolution of the first nineteenth century visual interpretations of Keats's later medieval poems that channel the poet's strong imaginative powers.

⁴⁸⁹ Wootton, *Consuming Keats*, 108.

5.3 Appendix — Pre-Raphaelite Paintings and Sketches

Figure 1: John Everett Millais, 'Lorenzo and Isabella' (1848-9)



Figure 2: William Holman Hunt, 'Lorenzo at his Desk in the Warehouse' (1848–50)



Figure 3: William Holman Hunt, 'Isabella and the Pot of Basil' (1868)



Figure 4: William Holman Hunt, 'The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro During the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry (*The Eve of St. Agnes*)' (1848)



Figure 5: John Everett Millais, 'The Eve of St. Agnes' (1863)



Figure 6: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1848)



Figure 7: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (1850)



Figure 8: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “The First Madness of Ophelia” (1864)



Figure 9: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “La Belle Dame sans Merci” (1855)



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5.6 Abstract in English

“From Tales of Old Romance to Wormy Circumstance: Aesthetic Tradition, Metamorphosis and Legacy of Keats’s Medievalism”

My thesis aims to provide an aesthetic reading of Keats’s medieval poems and their visual legacy. The selected poems illustrate Keats’s developing aesthetics, discussing first on “Calidore, A Fragment” and “Specimen of an Induction to a Poem” from his 1817 debut collection *Poems* and then the more widely known “Isabella, or A Pot of Basil”, “La Belle Dame sans Merci” and “The Eve of St. Agnes”. This selection shows the direction of Keats’s medievalism that reconsiders tales of “chivalry” (“Specimen”, 1) and “Old Romance” (“Isabella”, 387) as they become affected by “wormy circumstance” (“Isabella”, 385). These later works are interpreted by the Pre-Raphaelites who contribute to the popularisation and eternalisation of Keats’s poetry. The two research questions this thesis develops are 1. What is the aesthetic evolution of Keats’s medievalism? and 2. How is Keats’s later medievalism adapted in Pre-Raphaelite visual art, and to what extent these visual interpretations are loyal to their sources?

The discussion is divided into five chapters. In the first I will outline the basic features of the Romantic medieval revival, Keats’s early medievalism and the critical state of the art in this area. Chapter two focuses on aesthetics, providing biographical background of Keats’s mentors (Hunt, Haydon and Hazlitt), his divergences from the source texts of the later medieval poems and a brief overview of the Pre-Raphaelite agenda. The third chapter contains the focal point of the thesis, which is an aesthetic reading of the chosen poems that show skepticism, disillusion and reconsideration of medieval topoi, moving away from the idealised and optimistic tales of old romance and chivalry presented in the 1817 poetry collection. In chapter four, visual interpretations by the three founding Pre-Raphaelite members (William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti) will be examined in terms of which features of Keats’s poems they adapt and how loyally. While there is a clear correlation between Keats’s belief to “load every rift” of your subject with ore⁴⁹⁰ and the Pre-Raphaelites’ emphasis on saturated colours and ornamental details typical of 15th-century Italian art, one can see several diversifications in how the painters portray not only medieval topoi, but also certain plot scenes, themes and symbols. The fifth chapter concludes the whole discussion and suggests possibilities for further research.

Though the thesis’s main focus is on the poems’ features such as form, imagery and language that complement their aesthetic quality and revision of romance, social, political and biographical contexts will also be considered where relevant. My thesis thus aspires to contribute to the current scholarly appreciation of Keats as one of the pillars of Romantic aesthetics. His poetry remains markedly relevant to our present time, especially with its universal themes and in light of its 200-year anniversary marked by numerous thematic readings, exhibitions and conferences.

Key words: Keats, Pre-Raphaelites, Medievalism, Romantic Poetry, Aesthetics, Chivalry, Romance, Art, Painting

⁴⁹⁰ “To P. B. Shelley”, 16 August 1820, in *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005) 464.

5.7 Abstrakt

„Od bájných romancí k prohnilé skutečnosti: estetická tradice, proměny a odkaz Keatsova medievalismu“

Cílem mé práce je estetické čtení Keatsových středověkých básní a jejich vizuálního odkazu. Vybrané básně ilustrují vývoj Keatsovy estetiky. Práce postupně rozebírá „Calidore, A Fragment“ a „Specimen of an Induction to a Poem“ z Keatsovy debutové sbírky z roku 1817, *Básně*, a následně známější básnické skladby „Isabella, or A Pot of Basil“, „La Belle Dame sans Merci“ a „The Eve of St. Agnes“. Zvolené básně ukazují směřování Keatsova medievalismu a proměny jeho pojetí příběhů „rytířství“ („Specimen“, 1) a „staré romance“ („Isabella“, 387), do nichž se postupně promítá vliv „prohnilé skutečnosti“ („Isabella“, 385). Tato pozdější díla jsou interpretována Prerafaelyty, díky nimž Keatsova poezie získává oblibu a proslulost. Práce si klade dvě výzkumné otázky: 1. Jak se vyvíjí Keatsův estetický medievalismus? a 2. Jak je Keatsův pozdější medievalismus pojímán ve výtvarném umění Prerafaelitů a odpovídají tyto interpretace věrně svým zdrojům?

Analytická část práce je členěna do pěti kapitol. První z nich načrtne základní rysy romantického obnoveného zájmu o středověk, pojedná o Keatsově raném medievalismu a stavu soudobého poznání středověku. Druhá kapitola je zaměřena esteticky, podává životopisný přehled Keatsových mentorů (Hunta, Haydona a Hazlitta), popisuje, v čem se Keats odchyluje od zdrojových textů svých pozdních středověkých básní, a poskytuje stručný přehled programu Prerafaelitů. Třetí kapitola je ústřední částí práce, zahrnuje estetickou interpretaci vybraných básní, které ukazují skepsi, deziluzi a přehodnocení středověkých topoi a představují tak odklon od idealizovaných a optimistických romancí a rytířských románů, přítomných v básnické sbírce z roku 1817. Čtvrtá kapitola zkoumá výtvarné interpretace tří zakládajících členů prerafaelitského hnutí (William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti) a srovnává, které rysy Keatsových básní si tyto interpretace volí a nakolik věrně se jich drží. Mezi Keatsovým přesvědčením, že je zapotřebí „„naplnit každou trhlinu“ tvého námětu zlatem“⁴⁹¹ a důrazem, který Prerafaelité kladou na syté barvy a zdobné detaily, typické pro italské umění 15. století, je zřejmá korelace. Přesto lze mezi Keatsem a Prerafaelyty nalézt několik rozdílů v zobrazení nejen středověkých topoi, ale rovněž určitých scén, témat a symbolů. Pátá kapitola rozbor uzavírá a navrhuje možnosti dalšího výzkumu.

Práce je zaměřena primárně na formu básní, jejich obraznost a jazyk, tedy rysy, které doplňují estetickou kvalitu básní a jejich přehodnocené pojetí romance. Vedle toho však věnuje pozornost též společenskému, politickému a životopisnému kontextu. Cílem práce je tudíž přispět k současnému badatelskému hodnocení Keatsova díla jako jednoho z pilířů romantické estetiky. Jeho poezie je dodnes nanejvýš relevantní, zejména díky svým univerzálním tématům, a rovněž s přihlédnutím k dvousetletému výročí vydání *Básní* a Keatsově poetickému návratu k medievalismu, u jehož příležitosti se koná řada mezinárodních tematických čtení, výstav a konferencí.

Klíčová slova: Keats, Pre-Raphaelité, medievalismus, romantická poezie, estetika, rytířství, romance, umění, obrazy

⁴⁹¹ “To P. B. Shelley”, 16 August 1820, in *Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005) 464.