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REVEALING INFLUENCE: EXPLORING BRITISH IDENTITY, SEXUAL POWER, AND LYRIC AMBIGUITY IN SPENSER, KEATS, AND TENNYSON

Sarah Curtis

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, sarcurt19@gmail.com

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REVEALING INFLUENCE:
EXPLORING BRITISH IDENTITY, SEXUAL POWER, AND LYRIC AMBIGUITY IN
SPENSER, KEATS, AND TENNYSON

by

Sarah Curtis

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2009

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts in English.

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial
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for the Degree of
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in the field of English

Approved by:

Dr. Scott McEathron, Chair

Dr. Ryan Netzley

Dr. K.K. Collins

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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TITLE: REVEALING INFLUENCE:
EXPLORING BRITISH IDENTITY, SEXUAL POWER, AND LYRIC AMBIGUITY IN
SPENSER, KEATS, AND TENNYSON

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Scott McEathron

The poets of the Romantic period and before learned their craft by reading poetry. John Keats fell in love with poetry when he was about seventeen and became a powerhouse in the canon of poetic literature by reading and thinking about poetry—what it is, how it's made, and its value. Although critics regularly consider multiple sources, and even trace influence from one poet to another, influence is rarely the focus of critical analysis, but is instead a method of that analysis. Influence is not merely a tool, but a lens through which to understand more fully how poetry's form and themes evolve over time, and perhaps how they devolve as well. This thesis traces the influences of Spenser in Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and draws connections beyond the Romantic period to demonstrate how Spenser's world-making, Keats's lush language, and a tradition of re-evaluating sexual power roles and definitions of chastity carries through to the future, specifically Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*. My argument focuses on three major aspects of these poets' work: definitions of chastity; using legend and poetry to shape English identity; and the varied uses of poetic language in lyric poetry to create ambiguity which reinforces and forces interpretations of these themes beyond the poems they reside in.

DEDICATION

To my family: Jim, Ananda, Aurora, and Tristan, who stuck through the long hours, the bad moods, and the missed opportunities, so that I could do this work.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth, arguing for a turn to nature instead of written knowledge, said “Books! ’tis a dull and endless strife.”¹ I think, and I think Keats would agree, that Wordsworth was wrong. Not that wisdom isn’t there to be discovered in nature, but that books, history, and poetry provide a background, a building block on which to refine and expand human knowledge and understanding. The poets of the Romantic period and before learned their craft by reading poetry. John Keats fell in love with poetry when he was about seventeen and became a powerhouse in the canon of poetic literature by reading and thinking about poetry—what it is, how it’s made, and its value. I believe that all literature, and especially the most lasting literature, is built by history. Although critics regularly consider multiple sources, and even trace influence from one poet to another, influence is rarely the focus of critical analysis, but is instead a method of that analysis. Influence is not merely a tool, but a lens through which to understand more fully how poetry’s form and themes evolve over time, and perhaps how they devolve as well.

Although there is some element of influence in almost everything Keats wrote, *The Eve of St. Agnes* was written with the express intent of emulating Spenser. This is typical of Keats, as he aimed to be considered among the great English poets, and to that end he tried to write a new epic. Most notably when he wrote *Endymion* he was attempting to look at the form of epic in a revolutionary way. Yet, as he worked, he found himself going back over and over again to the literature that had inspired him in the first place. In the case of *Endymion* this primarily meant Shakespeare. It was in taking breaks from *Endymion*—which, by Keats’s own admission, was a

¹ William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” line 9.

failure—that Keats started writing some of his most influential and respected poems. These poems came out of Keats’s revisiting his inspirations, of re-reading Shakespeare, Chaucer and Spenser. Ultimately, some of his best work resulted from the failed attempt that is *Endymion*, and his urge to re-discover his idols, finding in them both comfort and inspiration.

Similarly, when Keats wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes* he was concurrently trying to write another epic, in this case *Hyperion*. His letters, and the process of his work both indicate that he was getting frustrated and exhausted with the work *Hyperion* required, and he decided to do what had worked so well with *Endymion* and other works, and re-think his approach. He took a break from work on the epic and played with an idea given to him by a friend: a poem focused on St. Agnes’ Eve and the traditions surrounding that night. Intriguingly, even though Keats regularly quotes Spenser in letters to friends, and discusses his admiration for the poet, except for “Imitation of Spenser” Keats had not, until *St. Agnes*, used the Spenserian sonnet form. The intentional emulation in *St. Agnes* provides an insight not just into what of Spenser inspired Keats, but perhaps more importantly what emulation *meant* to Keats. Emulating the archaic verse Spenser uses, and advancing Spenser’s definition of chastity to include feminine sexual,² in addition to martial, power, Keats breaks from a traditional model of poetic evolution and offers an alternative means of interpretation and response to influence.³

² In essence, Spenser’s “Chastitie” book of *The Faerie Queene* defines chastity not as avoidance of sex or sexual desire, but faithfulness to both people and ideals. I will argue, and hopefully prove, later in this thesis that Keats’s interpretation of Madeline as powerful and enchanting through her imagination, faith and prayer is simultaneously an updating and advancement of Spenser’s original ideas.

³ He breaks from the Virgilian models of pastoral and epic, taking instead an epic poem as inspiration and creating a lyric narrative that encompasses the imagination in keeping with his Negative Capability theory.

In examining Keats's approach to emulation in *St. Agnes* it is useful to examine a sample of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* in order to trace the connections between the two. In order to do this I have chosen to focus primarily on the "Chastitie" book of *The Faerie Queene* which explores themes of medieval courtly love, sexuality, and purity. *St. Agnes* is interesting partially because of the controversial ambiguity with which Keats handles the courtly love themes, the star-crossed lovers, and the sexuality within the poem. In the third book of *The Faerie Queene* Spenser likewise problematizes traditional views of chastity as asceticism, and re-envisions expected gender roles. The sixth canto focuses on scenes of escape and pursuit, and many of Keats's metaphors and themes echo the events of this canto. While Spenser's women, in general, want to remain chaste and therefore do their best to escape rape or violation, some are pursuers themselves and some are too open about their bodies and their sexuality which creates a sense of confused virtue. In this same pursuit I also examine Spenser's approach to language creation for his mythical world of Faerie, and compare the language work in Spenser to Keats's deliberate archaisms and use of poetic language in *St. Agnes*. Spenser's use of archaic and created language serve as examples of how his philosophy of the world melts into his verse. In order to fully understand Spenser's thought on history and the world a close consideration of his language is vital. Similarly Keats's negative capability theory is represented in the dream-like liminal space that embodies the second half of *St. Agnes*.

Regardless of Keats's desire to honor Spenser, the critical reception of most of his work was fairly brutal. *Endymion* caught the brunt of the critical climate of the eighteen teens and early twenties. Keats himself agreed that *Endymion* failed in its endeavors, but even so the press

was merciless and tore Keats apart.⁴ This was only partly due to the failures in the language and narrative in *Endymion* and was more influenced by the political rejection of Keats's friends, Hunt chief among them.⁵ Keats deeply wanted to be taken seriously, and cared what people thought of his work. The biting criticisms from Lockhart, who had not even finished the reviewed poems,⁶ bothered him, but the response was far less problematic for Keats than his own frustrations in producing something below his standards and presenting it to the world. That frustration led to new approaches to poetry, and eventually led both to *St. Agnes* and many of Keats's most famous and well-received works. Keats always had his fans in Hunt, Hazlitt and others, but even Hunt had difficulty finding good things to say about *St. Agnes* when it appeared in a collection around the time of Keats's death. Some of the primary criticisms of *St. Agnes* were about the flowery language, the over-blown images, and the Keats's refusal to shy away from the sexual, but instead embraced it and presented specifically female sexuality as simultaneously threatening and attractive.

⁴ *Blackwood's* said, among other things, that it was "a pity that...John Keats, author of *Endymion*, and some other poems, should have belonged to the Cockney school—for he is evidently possessed of talents that, under better direction might have done very considerable things," (665) while *The Quarterly Review* has a particularly nasty review, probably from Lockwood, calls Keats "a copyist of Mr. Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd" (205)

⁵ Along with the reviews referenced in the footnote above, there are several critics who have spent significant time tracing the connections between Hunt and Keats, and tying the Cockney school style to Keats's early poetry:
 Richard Cronin, "Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no. 4 (1996). doi:10.2307/450976.
 Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁶ J.G. Lockhart, review of *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*. By John Keats, *The Quarterly Review*, April & December 1818. "Reviewers have been sometimes accused of not reading the works which they affected to criticise. On the present occasion we shall anticipate the author's complaint, and honestly confess that we have not read his work"

I will argue that this context was critical to the later reception of Tennyson, who was almost immediately and continually well-received throughout his life and career. There is no doubt that Tennyson read Keats as voraciously as Keats read Spenser, and Tennyson's early work, like "The Lady of Shalott," is especially reminiscent of Keats's 'flowery' language and mythical dreamy settings. Like Keats and Spenser, Tennyson explored the Arthurian, medieval archetypes in his work, and *Idylls of the King* is generally considered to be the masterpiece effort of that exploration. Looking at Tennyson—both his reception and his approach to language and subject—helps to illuminate the importance of emulation in literary study. Tennyson, like Spenser, used Arthurian legend in *The Idylls* to craft a sense of English identity, but in keeping with his era he sensationalizes and romanticizes the medieval and early modern perspectives on both chastity and English identity. The same theme, and the same general approach to language and style are present in all three works. Tennyson achieved more acclaim, but his version of female sexual power is overwhelmingly negative in the stories of Merlin and Vivien, and *The Idylls* is predominately narrative, rather than lyric. Keats laid the groundwork for Tennyson's career-long investigation of enchanting women, yet Keats provided Tennyson with more than just a manual of style, or some interesting themes: he provided Tennyson with an approach to philosophy. A philosophy that embraced the imagination above all else, and delighted in reinventing both history and the literature of the past.

The Eve of St. Agnes is important not because it is clearly philosophy, but because it seems not to be. The poem's philosophy thinks about thinking, thinks about thought, and thinks about why we are what and who we are. Language is the communication of those thoughts, those deep recesses of desperate understanding, and grasping knowledge. Poetry is the expert

application of language to that philosophy. Poetry, since the Romantic period, has been largely treated as a refuge for the emotional, the spiritual, and the sublime. Keats committed himself to writing poetry that was designed to interrogate and analyze the nature of beauty, the meaning of truth, and the means by which we achieve real enlightenment. Because Keats treated *St. Agnes* as a homage to Spenser, and used story to explore violation, sexuality and love, it seems to be a less important statement than “Ode On A Grecian Urn,” but *St. Agnes*, if given appropriate attention, yields more philosophical value in that it forces the reader to take in, understand, analyze, evaluate, imagine and eventually improve upon the ideas it contains.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM WHENCE HE CAME:

SPENSER, HISTORY, AND KEATS'S EMULATIVE INSPIRATIONS

I

Keats's love for the great poets of the past is well known, and well documented. From the story of Keats rushing home to feverishly write "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" in the course of a few hours,⁷ to his devotion to Shakespeare while working on *Endymion*,⁸ to, especially, his admiration and emulation of Spenser, it is abundantly clear that Keats loved reading poetry as much as writing it. Although Keats was enamored with many great poets and dramatists, I choose to focus on Spenser for three reasons: Spenser's interpretations of female power and chastity (as evidenced primarily by Britomart) which carry through from Keats to Tennyson and beyond; Spenser's approach to history-making through poetry,⁹ and thus his philosophies of English identity which, although not be clearly in evidence in Keats,¹⁰ they do adjust the way we may interpret Tennyson, as I do later in the thesis; finally, Spenser is important to an investigation of Keats because of the intersections between Keats's Negative Capability theory and Spenser's use of lyric ambiguity and tendency towards world-making in his poetry.¹¹

⁷ Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 86–7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 156–7.

⁹ By which I mean both Spenser's desire to craft a poetic English history thereby redefining English identity, and also his specific reference of the works which influence him, like the classical epics and Arthurian legend.

¹⁰ Keats was essentially apolitical in both his poetry and his life, and he seems unconcerned (both in his poetry and in his letters) with restructuring or interpreting Englishness and English identity.

¹¹ *Worldmaking Spenser* (Eds Cheney and Silberman) is a collection of essays which chart and deconstruct Spenser's interest both in making the entire world more English, and in creating worlds in his poems that reflect and comment on English identity.

The poets share a fascination with the mythological, magical and mystical which are clearly present both in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and in Keats's most significant critical precept, his theory of Negative Capability. The importance of imagination, inner vision and an embrace of the ambiguous are paramount in Keats's explanation of Negative Capability.¹²

Keats's debt to Spenser is both widely acknowledged and, paradoxically, pursued only in limited ways by scholars. In this study, I look primarily at two elements of Spenser's writing—one poetic and one narrative: 1) the deliberate use of archaisms to evoke a fictional historical world and 2) the revision and complications of traditional courtly love themes as they relate to gender roles and norms. In pursuing these issues I focus mainly on Book III—especially Britomart's defeat of Guyon, her tale of Merlin's mirror, and her last battle in the Book—and Book V, when Britomart finally gains Arthegall. Although *The Faerie Queene* in its entirety was the inspiration for *St. Agnes*, the third Book on chastity is an ideal site to examine closely because of its reversals of male and female roles within the courtly love tradition. Keats explores similar themes both in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and *St. Agnes*, and the question most useful to the larger discussion of influence is whether Keats, in fact, problematizes these themes more extensively than Spenser, or whether he merely translates them into a language and form more in accordance with the poetic sensibilities of his time. I will establish how Spenser approaches these themes in Book III and completes Britomart's quest in Book V, and I will draw connections between *St. Agnes* and Britomart's quest. These connections lie both in the characters of

¹² Walter Jackson Bate. “Negative Capability; the Intuitive Approach in Keats” (Harvard University Press, 1939). Although an Honor's Thesis from 1939 is obviously not the most recent example of the exploration of Keats's Negative Capability, Bate provides an in-depth and thorough exploration of the theory here, and references this discussion in his biography. There are other papers on the topic, but none focus as directly on the theory alone, rather than the effect of the theory on Keats's work.

Britomart and Madeline as paragons of chaste virtue, and in the ambiguous definitions of desire, pursuit, and ultimately romantic love in both poems.

Spenser plays, through language and narrative, on the correlation between “chaste” and “chased” as both male and female characters are pursued through Books III and V for their virtue and sexual desirability. Chastity, as the other virtues in *The Faerie Queene*, is defined and explored through a single character, in this case the female knight Britomart on her quest for Arthegall. She is both ‘chaste’ and ‘chasing’ in her admiration and love for Arthegall. The ambiguity of chased/chaste in Spenser’s spelling requires that Britomart move in the narrative, that she explore Faerie, and the complexities within it. Her desire for a man drives her to disguise herself, enter a magical world apart from her own, and battle other men in order to eventually find Arthegall and marry him. This is a marked reversal of the expected male/female roles in medieval courtly love romance. In Arthurian legend the tales of knight errants wandering the country-side and pursuing maidens for sexual gratification are common, but in *The Faerie Queene*, the pursuits of the “Chastitie” chapter are markedly different than the tradition from which they’re drawn.¹³ Britomart is only one example of the pursuer, the ‘chaste’ chasing her desire. She, as the paragon of the virtue, is right in essentially all things. Some of the book’s other pursuits are more sinister—Florimell is regularly chased by men who desire her, and women who are threatened by her, and in all of those scenarios she embodies the helpless damsel familiar in the knight errant tradition. Yet, although she is familiarly vulnerable, Florimell is not

¹³ Interestingly, Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” and Keats’s own “La Belle Dame” both offer further interpretations of this knight errant theme. The Wife of Bath uses her power of narrative and sexuality to explore problems inherent in the violation of the knight errant of the maiden in the woods, while Keats flips the familiar narrative of the knight errant, and has the knight ensnared by the fairy maiden—trapped in a liminal space between life and death, Keats’s knight is forever doing penance for his error in judgment.

the pinnacle of purity and chastity, that role belongs to Britomart, and she is the one doing the pursuing, the fighting, and the contemplating.

II

There is a significant connection in the core philosophies of Spenser and Keats. The primary road to understanding this connection lies in the elements of myth and magic in both poets' work. Spenser's theories of art intersect with his philosophy of history as the source of national identity, and to that effect he uses allegory and mythological world construction to introduce an alternative British identity. Keats's theories of art revolve around his Negative Capability theory, which in essence connects Truth to Beauty and therefore suggests that art is ultimately the source of philosophical truth. All of Spenser's work revolves around history, specifically a reinterpretation of the history of England through poetry. Written as a tribute to Elizabeth I, *The Faerie Queene* was designed to be an epic poem that would reshape England's identity through created myth. His creation of Faerie, a mythical land drawn from an amalgamation of legends and traditions, allows him to craft a legendary history of England—one which simultaneously supports his views on what England *is* and of what it *should* be. Spenser's approach to poetry, therefore, is distinctly ideological and his poetry is intentionally designed to communicate his ideology to his audience.

Spenser's theory of history is evident in his work, and has been explored in depth by Renaissance scholars. The fact of the construction of *The Faerie Queene* itself and Spenser's combination of language and world creation is a quest to present a new legend of England as actual history reflects his theory. Andrew Escobedo's *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England* sketches the attitude towards history in England in the early modern

period, and connects the advances in historiography at the time with the opinions and theories of early modern poets, with a strong focus on Spenser and *The Faerie Queene*. The ambiguity of the definition of history in Spenser's time created significant difficulties for poets and historians alike. That ambiguity is what connects Spenser and his work to Keats's Negative Capability theory directly, even though the use of allegory seems to suggest he was trying to exert certainty on an uncertain past. Spenser was a master of ambiguity, and even (as with *The Shepheard's Calender*) when Spenser seems to be concretizing an idea or an image and connecting it to something clearly 'real,' he is adding layers of ambiguity that insist the reader look beyond the obvious surface. Just as Keats's Negative Capability requires that the poet, and the poem's audience, entertain the impossible in the recesses of their minds, Spenser uses allegory and satire together to call both into question and force the reader, not the poem, to challenge their own conceptions of these forms—as when Arthur is frustrated at the incomplete histories offered to him, a clear jab at historiographers who were attempting to base English history on Arthurian legend. Arthur, not any other character, being frustrated with this approach suggests that even the legends and poems are uncertain about the best way to approach the integration of history and literature. This underlying air of uncertainty challenges the seemingly straight-forward allegory epic.

Spenser's epic was composed during a time of "historical loss"¹⁴ throughout England, especially when comparing English history to Greek or Roman history. As a result of this missing history there was also a gap in English identity, and major breakthroughs in

¹⁴ Andrew Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Escobedo uses the term "historical loss" specifically in reference to the problems in historiography prevalent in the Elizabethan period.

historiography, combined with a national commitment to developing this identity led to poets like Spenser striving to produce an epic for England, as Homer and Ovid had for the Greeks and Romans. Spenser, unlike some of his contemporaries, did not feel that the new advancements in historiography—at the time primarily antiquarian and humanist research—were sufficient for the creation of an English identity that befitted what he saw as the greatness of his country. He wanted more than the historians were offering and attempted to provide it himself. Escobedo ties this frustration to Spenser's portrayal of Arthur in Book Two of *The Faerie Queene*:

Spenser's Prince Arthur, reading a history of Britain from its founding to the reign of his father, finds himself deeply disappointed to discover that the narrative suddenly ends... [This] combination of Arthur's presence and imperfect ancient records keenly reflects the Elizabethan attempt to formulate a national history out of the Arthurian narratives, especially to the degree that Spenser imagines such a history emerging from the material remains of ancient Britain¹⁵

As Escobedo shows, at the time many historiographers were reviving the Arthurian legend as a possible epic origin story of the nation, and though Spenser uses Arthur in *The Faerie Queene* and draws from that tradition, he clearly wanted something more than that. Escobedo's discussion explicates Spenser's use of Arthur to highlight the problems with depending on antiquarian research for the story of English identity. *The Faerie Queene* as homage to Queen Elizabeth I is a piece of his vision, but throughout *The Faerie Queene* there are episodes that reflect and clarify Spenser's historical theory and vision.

Escobedo focuses on three distinct moments in *The Faerie Queene* that highlight Spenser's treatment of history: Merlin's prophecy, the "*Briton Moniments*," and Paridell's description of history to Britomart in Book III. Escobedo argues that this last moment "smooths away the *historiographic* controversy surrounding Geoffery's chronicle by turning history into

¹⁵ Ibid., 45–6.

epic fiction.”¹⁶ Providing Geoffery of Monmouth’s British history could be,¹⁷ as Escobedo argues, a “smooth[ing] of controversy,” but given the eventual conclusion of Paridell’s speech:

But all the while, that he these speaches spent,
Vpon his lips hong faire Dame *Hellenore*,
With vigilant regard, and dew attent,
Fashioning worlds of fancies evermore
In her fraile wit, that now her quite forlore:
The whiles vnwares away her wondring eye,
And greedy ears her weake hart from her bore:
Which he perceiuing, euer priuily
In speaking, many false belgardes at her let fly¹⁸

It is fairly clear, here, as Hellenore is seduced by the epic nature of Paridell’s history, that this kind of fictionalizing is dangerous. Paridell’s origin story has, at its core, an unreliable narrator who has as his main goal the seduction of a woman, not the fair and accurate account of a nation’s birth. Escobedo points out that this section “reminds us of the the promise of poetry—its ability to create golden worlds—and its danger, its seductiveness, its meretricious polysemeity,”¹⁹ but he focuses on the poetry itself, on the larger nature, and leaves out the unreliability of Paridell as historian. Although the poetry itself is potentially the source of the problem, ultimately the poet and the audience are the ones made responsible for the critical investigation of that history, not the poetry itself. Spenser believes the poem has the power to create worlds, and define historical origins, but he also makes clear the responsibility of the people involved in the history-making experience. Paridell wants to win the girl, Hellenore wants

¹⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷ Escobedo shows in this section that Spenser presents Monmouth’s history as representative of the problems inherent in basing historical research (historiography) on ancient texts, or “briton moniments,” as Spenser puts it. The Arthurian section is also indicative of Spenser’s opinion on a limited interpretation of historical evidence and information.

¹⁸ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Penguin English Poets (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin, 1978), III.ix.52. This and all subsequent references to *The Faerie Queene* refer to this edition.

¹⁹ Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton*, 185.

to get the best man, and so from a failure of chastity—which in this case ought to have been a faithfulness to the integrity of history, as Britomart demonstrates elsewhere in the book—both of them distort and problematize the fictional epic. Spenser’s tendency to the ambiguous here reveals a kind of charge to the audience: “question me” it says, inviting careful consideration of the identity that comes from any part of Spenser’s epic. As in his *Shepheardes Calender* when he provides an extensive *Glosse* that forces the reader to re-consider the moral of each Aeglogue, his histories in *The Faerie Queene* are made ambiguous by the teller, the listener, or the source—forcing the reader to accept responsibility for history and for identity, not just the historian, the poet, or the past itself. Spenser therefore hands his readers not just a history, but a way of thinking about history, and expects them to consider it deeply. Otherwise, the reader is Hellenore, entranced and seduced, and therefore blinded to flaw.

Keats's chief philosophical statement is widely accepted to be his Negative Capability theory. Bate summarizes Negative Capability as Keats's “insistence not merely that the use of the Imagination is the more efficacious means of arriving at truth but that it is actually the only way by which truth can be grasped.”²⁰ In essence, Keats believes that art is the means to truth because it requires the artist and the audience to concern themselves with the imagination, not merely the rational mind. For Keats this requires that poetry be willing to stretch into the world of the magical and mystical, to dwell in a liminal space that allows for all possibilities, and even impossibilities, in order to get to truth. Ultimately that belief in and respect for the imagination encourages emulation of Spenser’s approach to history: a history that is not static or based in dates and facts, but is instead built around an imagined sense of existence—in Spenser’s case a

²⁰ Bate, “Negative Capability; the Intuitive Approach in Keats.”

nation. Spenser's creation of Faerie gives Keats a mythical world of the imagination in which roles and language can be bent to describe and discover truth without the "irritable reaching after fact" that he so disdains.

Although the letter in which Keats coins the term Negative Capability is quoted regularly, it serves to look at it precisely:

The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth . . . at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poetry the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.²¹

The kind of thinking embedded in this passage has fascinated and puzzled scholars for good reason—in these three sentences Keats identifies the transcendent and timeless nature of the best poetry. This is at once a defense of art as intellectually necessary, and a philosophical path to truth. His first sentence connects true art with "Beauty and Truth" as reified philosophical ideals. "Truth," here is not the mathematical truth of $2+2=4$, or the natural truth that the sky is up, but Truth in a larger sense—the Truth we reach only through deep study and intense understanding of our inner selves as well as our outer world. "Beauty" here is the beauty of real truth, the sense that something is, in fact, true and that sense yields a sensation of intense satisfaction—the aesthetic experience of capital B "Beauty." Keats then connects these two concepts to the great artists he most admires, and explains that the minds of these men can imagine *anything*, not

²¹ Unless otherwise noted, all letter selections are from this edition: John Keats, *Selected Letters; Edited by Robert Gittings*, 2nd ed., Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). *Letter to George and Thomas Keats*, December 21, 1817. 41-2

merely the logical, rational or even possible. It is in this imagining of the impossible, the abject refusal to allow one's mind to be confined to what makes sense, actually or ideally, and embrace non-sense, non-rational thought is to embark on a myriad of dreams, and to encounter possibilities once thought impossible. In that imaginative space the poet, or the poem's reader, because if a poet is truly great he will force the reader to consider impossibility with him, that the mind is relieved not *just* from rational and reasonable, but also from action. Thought can just 'be,' not a reflection of an event, or a feeling, or an experience, not a preparation for an act, but an immersion in the coalescence of truth and beauty, an experience in its own right.

In this willingness to imagine the impossible the poet perceives, and can visualize, the point of "Truth" beyond the rational, using an intelligent intuition to grasp forms of truth and beauty beyond what a scientific or rational mind can conceive of. Keats says "Coleridge would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude"—a claim and phrase that has received intense scholarly discussion. Much of which seems to miss the core of Keats's argument here—that Coleridge avoids verisimilitude, preferring reality, but in doing so misses the greater reaches of his own imagination. This is evident in Coleridge's work, for example in "The Eolian Harp" when Sarah calls Coleridge back from his reverie, and he admonishes himself for reaching beyond what he *ought* to have. It is precisely that willingness to go *beyond* what one ought to reach for that makes Keats's work transcendent. He captures and focuses on that "fine isolated verisimilitude" and basks in it, inviting the reader to explore a liminal space reserved only for the mind, a place that the physical form cannot go. That space, Keats argues, is where truth and beauty are one and the same, and we can perceive and experience both simultaneously, but only if one is willing to let go of logical fact as a defining factor of truth. Keats's Negative Capability theory meets

Spenser's historical philosophy on this key point: it is the *mind* that must comprehend truth—and whether the question is one of history, art, or even science, the only way to real truth is a willingness to abandon a necessity of hard fact and logical rationality, and embrace the visceral essence of beauty and truth as one.

III

There are three kinds of language that Spenser utilizes: (1) the popular and familiar language of the early modern period, with its many spelling variations (2) actual middle and old English language, for example “eke” for “also,” (3) deliberate and invented archaisms constructed from an understanding of the patterns of old and middle English designed to *sound* old without actually *being* old. In this respect Spenser remains more sophisticated than Keats, who mainly did only the third of these things. This may be a result of Keats's fairly limited education, or it may be a creative turn to language that in essence thumbs its nose at the idea that you *must* be familiar with the language patterns existent in the history of English, as well as the conventions of ancient and medieval Latin and Greek, in order to play with language in a historical fashion. It is a rejection of a perceived necessity for the purely factual in the exploration of history.

In order to create a sufficient verisimilitude Spenser had to provide a language for his created mythological world. Given his desire to create a new history for England, a definition of English identity, it makes sense that he would combine early modern, medieval and invented spelling and grammatical constructions to enrich the atmosphere. Some of these grammatical and spelling adjustments serve to support the continuity of his stanza and rhyme scheme, especially in the syntax of individual lines, but others serve to create ambiguities that are not inherent in the words themselves. His tendency to create words is not unique to him—Shakespeare, of course, coined many words around the same period—but the *kind* of word creation he practiced forces a

reader to pay close attention to the language itself, as well as to the meaning of words, in relation to his themes.

Spenser's play on the double potential meaning of a word—for example “farre” for fair and far, “hole” for whole and hole— displays the ambiguities inherent in the concepts the word describes.²² If a “fair” maiden is inherently “far,” then the only way to think of this quality is to simultaneously consider beauty and distance. This suggests that beauty is always out of reach, always something pursued but not caught. Spenser's choice to save Britomart and Arthegall's meeting and union until the fifth book, despite following her quest throughout the third book, bolsters this notion. If Arthegall is fair to Britomart he must also be far from her, so far that it takes a disruption of the quest to get the final realization of beauty and marital love. Similarly if Amoret made “whole” also means that there is a “perfect hole” there is an automatic conflict in the idea that a *virginal* chaste woman can ever be complete. Spenser's spelling variations therefore serve to showcase double meanings and ambiguities, like, as Goldberg notes, the play on “hole” and “whole” with Amoret:

Amoret's riven heart had been restored to her, and she was once again, Spenser's text says, “perfect hole” (xii.38.9). In the new ending the ambivalence of “hole” is more fully taken into account . . . “perfect hole”—a paradox that nonetheless satisfies continuing structural demands in the text's language, imagery, and theme.²³

The restoration of Amoret's love both completes her and turns her into an empty void. The love itself is not the uniting force it is expected to be, but instead takes something away from Amoret. Similarly, Keats may be taking that kind of language play a step further with imagery. There's a

²² Martha Craig, “The Secret Wit of Spenser's Language,” in *Essential Articles for the Study of Edmund Spenser*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, The Essential Articles Series (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1972), 313–33.

²³ Jonathan Goldberg, *Endlesse Worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 3.

double meaning in “they gain/ the maiden’s chamber, silken, hush’d and chaste;/ where Porphyro took covert, pleas’d amain.”²⁴ Here Angela has led Porphyro successfully to Madeline’s bedchamber and “they gain” the room, which, without any spelling variation, can mean both to possess and to enter. Obviously the room is supposed to belong to Madeline but if Angela and Porphyro take ownership of it by entering it, she has been violated before she even makes it up the stairs. Porphyro is “cover’t” which can mean both that he hides himself—which on its own is ambiguous, depending on whether he’s hiding to avoid being caught by Madeline’s family or hiding to attack or surprise Madeline—and that he has covered himself in the clothing in the closet—disguising his gender as well as his presence. This ambiguity calls into question Porphyro’s motives and the power roles within both the sexual and physical relationships in the poem.

Martha Craig has done significant close work with the language in the third book of *The Faerie Queene*, providing evidence that the assumptions made about Spenser’s language usage ignore pertinent elements that make his work more revolutionary than it may, at first, appear. Craig traces the significance of Spenser’s language, demonstrating how sound, as much as spelling, echoes the meaning, metaphor and allegory in his work. She provides the generally held scholarly opinion in the mid-twentieth century on Spenser’s language: “Spenser’s archaism seems superficial and specious, consisting more in odd spellings and grammatical forms than in a genuine rejuvenation of obsolete words that are needed because they are particularly meaningful or expressive.”²⁵ She goes on to debate this widely held opinion and show that Spenser’s choice

²⁴ All selections from Keats’ poetry are from this edition: John Keats, *Complete Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982).
The Eve of St. Agnes, lines 186–8.

²⁵ Craig, “The Secret Wit of Spenser’s Language,” 313.

to “devise” an “artificial language”²⁶ that is a conglomeration of typical early modern words and spellings, middle English usages common to Chaucer, and his own language variations serve to craft his mythological world. Therefore, the widely held opinion that these archaisms were essentially “superficial and specious” cannot hold, because the scholars previous had not considered the use of these words by their intended purpose. Instead, they had assumed that Spenser was using them to evoke meaning, rather than evoke a sense of place and identity. She shows that the implications of Spenser’s intent had, in the mid-twentieth-century, been largely ignored by scholars. It is valuable to note the intersection between these twentieth-century scholarly views of Spenser’s language as “decorative” and nineteenth-century responses to Keats’s language as flowery and overly romantic. Craig’s consideration of “Spenser’s philosophic realism, his belief that truth is not found in the everyday or in immediate surroundings, the ‘world of appearances,’ but in a realm of ideas that are only partially and imperfectly reflected in the everyday world”²⁷ compliments my earlier explication of Keats’s Negative Capability theory.

IV

The primary similarity in theme that I explore from Spenser, to Keats, and eventually to Tennyson revolves around eros, gender and chastity—and is best seen through the lens of traditional courtly love in Romance. Medieval Romance’s view on chastity was traditionally rooted in Catholicism, and therefore the virgin, as a representative of the Virgin Mary, was idealized. Spenser’s interpretation of chastity is more protestant, likely leaning towards

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 318.

Calvinism, and therefore rejects virginity as the ideal representation of chastity.²⁸ Spenser's third book is titled "The Third Booke of the Faerie Queene: contayning, the legend of Britomartis. Or Of Chastitie." Given that the previous books have focused on Temperance and Holiness, the expectation is that, as with Guyon and the Red Crosse Knight, we will see examples of chastity upheld, chastity threatened, and chastity defended so that we may understand what chastity truly is. Yet when we discover the paragon of chastity she is A) a woman, B) a knight, C) disguised as a man and D) in pursuit of a man she desires romantically and sexually. As a result the expectation of medieval, and therefore typically Catholic purity, virginity and femininity are instantly challenged and made ambiguous by the allegorical representative of chastity itself. This is further complicated by the work's dedication to Gloriana, or Elizabeth I, the "Virgin Queen" who, while protestant, clearly saw her own virginity as desirable. Spenser can't, therefore, in an homage to her, reject virginity as any sort of virtue, but he clearly neglects to connect it to the idea of chastity. Spenser's surprise definition of chastity as a non-ascetic trait is typical of his writing. He uses the *Glosse* in his *Shepheardes Calender* to force readers to question the certainty that seems clear in reading of the specific month. Similarly he sets the reader up to expect a traditional view of chastity—a pure, virginal refusal of temptation into carnality—and quickly pulls the rug out from that view because the 'chaste' woman is 'chasing' her desired man.

²⁸ Andrew Hadfield, "Spenser and Religion—Yet Again," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 51, no. 1 (2011): 26. Hadfield connects Spenser with Calvinism and directly comments on Calvin's attitude towards Catholic values of virginity: "Calvin, like most Protestants, was eager to challenge the values of the late medieval Church, in particular the stress that had been placed on virginity as the ideal state of human existence."

Harry Berger, in “*Faerie Queene* Book III: A General Description,” explains and contextualizes the third book of *The Faerie Queene* as a discussion of Spenser’s revision of courtly love traditions by including strong female characters, female desire and a thrust of chastity towards marriage, rather than a kind of ascetic self-denial of pleasure and desire. This is similar to what Keats does in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, and what he plays with in ambiguous ways in *St. Agnes*. Berger says of Spenser, “the problems posed by the opposition of chastity and eros in III seem to be those which can be resolved by happy *sexual* union: chastity has little to do with insight and second sight, with knowledge and consideration of the other person (the beloved) as a second self.”²⁹ So, in essence, Berger argues that the existence of Eros as a force which is not necessarily destructive in the *Chastitie* book allows the possibility of chastity as a means to an end, instead of an end in itself. Britomart’s desire to find and marry Arthegall, and her position as the hero of the book, encourages a new definition of chastity—that of the pursuit of marriage, the faithful commitment to a rightful partner, not the avoidance of sex or sexual desire.

Keats, as I intend to show in chapter two, also complicates the issue of purity and chastity in *St. Agnes*. Specifically he does so via a switch in power dynamics from Porphyro to Madeline in later section of the poem. Britomart is an inspiration for Madeline, and although Madeline is initially portrayed as the gentle and reserved epitome of femininity she is still the agent of change, and her dream initiates the shift in worlds and tone within the poem. Spenser introduces Britomart with: “Shew’dst thou, then in this royall Maid of yore,/ Making her seeke an

²⁹ Harry Berger, “*The Faerie Queene* book III: A General Description,” in *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 89.

vnknowne Paramoure/ From the worlds end, through many a bitter stowre”³⁰ — Britomart, here, is a “royall maid of yore” just like Madeline, ultimately, is in *St. Agnes*. She must seek an “unknown paramore” just as Madeline seeks, through ritual, to discover her potential future husband.

Perhaps the most important connection between the third book of *The Faerie Queene* and *St. Agnes* is the parallel between Britomart and Madeline. On first glance these heroines seem diametrically opposed—except for their faithful natures. Britomart is a knight, with the full force of magical destiny behind her, driving her towards her desired husband. She defeats some of the greatest knights of Faerie on the battlefield—primarily with her magic spear, but also through ingenuity and talent. The enchantment of the spear merely levels the playing field. Britomart is an extremely unfeminine character, while Madeline appears to be a quiet, virtuous shrinking violet of a victim. Madeline, in one interpretation, is merely trying to do her religious duty and observe propriety in every way, and she is taken advantage of by Porphyro in her bedchamber. Yet, as pious and virtuous as she seems, she, like Britomart, quests after marriage—the end of her virginity. She follows rites and rituals designed to give her a vision of her ideal mate so that she can marry him. To be married is, inherently, the opposite of *virginal* chastity, yet in both poems the female protagonist wants marriage above all things, thereby supplying a definition of chastity based on faith, rather than sexual purity. These are not Diana’s huntresses, forever kept pure and virginal for the moonlit hunt, nor are they the Virgin Mary, able to conceive through no sexual enjoyment whatsoever, but instead lust after commitment, sexual gratification through marital faithfulness. Madeline’s only defining characteristics are her feelings about men and

³⁰ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, III.iii.21–23.

marriage, and she follows Porphyro quite willingly out of her bedroom and into the night, running away with him to elope, even though it causes the destruction of her entire family. These are not the actions of a weak-willed virgin girl, but of a rebellious teenager filled with desire for the man she loves. Madeline also, ultimately, holds all the sexual power in *St. Agnes*, as is evidenced by the power of her sleeping form, and then her dream rising up and enveloping not only Porphyro and herself, but the entire household with its power.

Britomart discovers her quest by finding Merlin's mirror and seeing Arthegall through it. The mirror is hidden in a closet, which immediately connects to *St. Agnes*. Both the suitors are hidden in the closet, although in Britomart's case it is merely the *image* of the suitor rather than the physical man as in Porphyro's case. Britomart's gender, like Porphyro's, is disguised as she quests for Arthegal. Porphyro's maleness, though, isn't just generally disguised, he is actually 'in' Madeline's clothes as he hides in the closet. That image of him in her closet suggests that he's gotten into her clothing—a sexual double entendre, but also that his gender is actually switched via cross-dressing. Britomart dons her armor and pretends to be a man primarily to protect the self-image of the men she defeats in battle, but Porphyro is almost unwittingly thrown into circumstances that turn him *into* Madeline while he watches her sleep. Instead of him invading with masculine force, he is emasculated into Madeline's form in the closet, enchanted and entranced by her prayers and visage, and finally overcome and overwhelmed with the force of her dream.

Berger also points out that Britomart is a martial hero, tying the elements of eros to war and violence. Her role as a female knight, as strong and warlike as the men who surround her, suggests that strength, violence and sexual desire are not only the domain of men, but also can be

that of a truly chaste and virtuous woman. When Britomart defeats Guyon at the beginning of the Book, more questions are immediately raised surrounding the nature of chastity, femininity and violence:

Let not thee grieue dismounted to haue beene,
And brought to ground, that neuer was before;
For not thy fault, but secret powre vnseene,
That speare enchaunted was, which layd thee on the greene.

But weenedst thou what wight thee ouerthrew,
Much greater griefe and shamefuller regret
For they hard fortune then thou wouldst renew,
That of a single damzell thou wert met
On equall plaine, and there so hard beset;
Euen the famous *Britomart* it was,
Whom straunge aduenture did from *Britaine* fet,
To seeke her loue (loue farre sought alas,)
Whose image she had seene in *Venus* looking glas³¹

The spear that Britomart uses is “enchanted” so it is “not” Guyon’s “fault” that he was “brought to ground.” Even as Spenser allows the Book’s primary virtue to be embodied by a woman, and allows a woman to undertake a quest, she is strong enough to defeat Guyon because of enchantment, not because of who and what she is. Not to mention that the strength comes from an “enchanted” *spear*, a specifically phallic symbol. Yet, in the next stanza the speaker shows that were Guyon to know that it was a woman who had bested him he would have been even more ashamed. Therefore there is an inherent ambiguity as to whether Guyon should or should not be embarrassed at his defeat. Directly after the introduction of Britomart as a character, we have the word “*Britaine*” tying Britomart to the nation not just as the place of her birth, but as a personification of the nation itself. This suggests that Britomart represents Elizabeth I, as the female personification of England, as both a martial hero and a virgin in search of her lover. That

³¹ Ibid., III.i.7–8.

connection between Britomart and the nation itself may be an attempt to reconcile virginity as something potentially valuable (as Elizabeth I obviously saw it, at least publicly), with Protestant definitions of chastity as faithfulness, not ascetic abstinence. Still, that power comes from an enchanted phallic symbol, originally fashioned by a man, so the power behind it is masculine.

Like Britomart, Madeline in *St. Agnes* has a violent magical power erupt from her. Madeline's power, though, comes from her imagination, her dreams, her desires. Her power is distinctly feminine, and is violent primarily *because* she acts on sexual impulses. Keats, therefore, adjusts the feminine hero significantly from Spenser's model—even so, the speaker in *The Faerie Queene* strongly suggests that Britomart “met on equall plaine” with Guyon and therefore supports the possibility that Madeline, not Porphyro, is actually the controlling force in *St. Agnes*. As Britomart stands ready to do her (we assume final) battle in the quest, the world literally rips apart in front of her:

Nought therewith daunted was her courage proud,
but rather stird to cruell enmity,
expecting euer, when some foe she might descry.

With that, an hideous storme of winde arose,
with dreadfull thunder and lightning atwixt,
and an earth-quake, as if it streight would lose
the worlds foundations from his centre fixed;
A direfull stench of smoke and sulphure mixt
ensewd, whose noyance fild the fearefull sted,
from the fourth houre of night vntill the sixt³²

These images are echoed in Madeline and Porphyro's fleeing from the castle, and in comparing the world ripping, wind arising, “dreadful thunder and lightning atwixt” to “an elfin storm from faery land” and in showing “The arras, rich with horseman, hawk and hound,/ [that] flutter'd in

³² Ibid., III.xii.1–2.

the besieging wind's uproar"³³ to the storm in *Faerie Queene*, it becomes clear that Madeline is the agent of change within the poem, effectively creating a gender power-switch—Madeline as parallel to Britomart, as strong as a man in her ability to manipulate the world. This storm ripping through the atmosphere shows up at the end of Tennyson's *Idylls* as well, but in a very different way, and with a very different result. The powerful woman in Spenser, and in Keats, is an agent of positive change, and her desire for her beloved is pure and chaste, even as she chases him into imagination and myth. Tennyson's powerful women are dangerous, threatening, and therefore the picture we have in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of chastity as virginity, of powerful sexual women as dangerous, may have come not from the medieval or early modern periods, but from the Victorians, especially from Tennyson. The mythical past woven by Spenser shows up to clarify questions of sexuality and rape surrounding the first half of *St. Agnes*. One major difference between Britomart and Madeline is that Britomart is allowed to narrate her own tale. Madeline's story is told for her by the speaker of the poem, as are the stories of all the characters in *St. Agnes*. This is a significant shift away from Spenser and perhaps is Keats's major innovation in response to a lyric tradition instead of a burgeoning narrative tradition.

VI

Many connections between *St. Agnes* and *The Faerie Queene* have already been elucidated in this chapter, but there are some connections between Keats and Spenser beyond the narrow world of *St. Agnes* that demonstrate how profoundly Spenser's ideas influenced Keats's work. Berger discusses an image of Amoret and Scudamore essentially melting into one another which "suggests both their desire to freeze eternally into that posture and their urge to melt into

³³ *St. Agnes*, 343, 58–9.

unconsciousness.”³⁴ In Keats's “Grecian Urn” the lovers are, in fact, frozen “eternally” in their pre-marriage state, and in *St. Agnes* Madeline and Porphyro seem to “melt into unconsciousness” as the dream—a vision that takes place in a state of unconsciousness—overtakes their waking reality and seems to “melt” their world. Clearly there is an element of Spenser’s desire narrative throughout Keats's work.

Silberman points out that each book of *The Faerie Queene* is a new intellectual problem to suss out through the narrative. This intellectual gamesmanship mirrors what Spenser frequently did in other works, like *The Shepheardes Calender*, and with that knowledge in mind it seems pertinent and useful to ask what intellectual problem Keats is working through in *St. Agnes*. Especially if Keats thought, as Silberman argues, that the books in *Faerie Queene* serve primarily as pieces of an intellectual puzzle. One possible problem with that is Keats's Negative Capability, which assumes that to turn Beauty/Truth into a logical or rational problem is to potentially or even definitely (as he says about Coleridge) escape the importance of that fundamental nature. Even so, we can ask what problem is being worked out in *St. Agnes*. Is it a problem that revolves around sexuality, seduction and power? Is it about the conflict between the old and the new? Is the death of the old—Angela, the Beadsman, Madeline’s potentially antiquated family—necessary to make way for the new movement of poetry? Or is he cautioning against losing the old, as the disaster of rejecting the past is an unknown? Any of these questions could be the focus of the poem, therefore, unlike Spenser, Keats either refuses or neglects a singular focus, but instead allows questions to circulate throughout, woven into the language and energy of the poem. Ultimately, the ambiguity of the ending—a major point of contention for

³⁴ Berger, “*The Faerie Queene* book III: A General Description,” 90.

scholars—reinforces the likelihood that Keats actively emulates Spenser’s approach to ambiguity as opposed to Spenser’s singular, and perhaps too rational, focus. The poem instead encourages the reader to explore the possibilities in his own mind, embracing a multitude of possibilities, and thereby inviting the kind of Negative Capability he deems so important.

Although many scholars have touched on the obvious connections between Spenser and Keats, Greg Kucich has done the most exhaustive work on the value of that connection. Kucich covers Keats's ambition to be like the great poets, and in doing so outlines some of the problems that plagued Keats throughout his career. To attempt to rise to the level of the greatest poets of history is to set oneself up for a continuous feeling of inadequacy, and Kucich shows in several areas how Keats's early writing belies this self-conscious fear; he describes Keats's feelings at the time as “Icarian anxieties”³⁵ a phrase which evocatively illustrates both Keats's ambition and his doubt. Kucich presents Keats's turns to Spenser as providing a soothing influence, increasing his confidence and encouraging his approach to language. Kucich says that Keats has a “‘spiritual kinship’ with Spenser’s sensuousness,”³⁶ suggesting that it is Spenser’s lush language that appeals to Keats. Kucich’s discussion is primarily focused on Keats's early work, as is much of the scholarship on the Spenser/Keats relationship, and indeed the early Keats reveled in lush and sensuous language. Thus Kucich compares Keats's first reading of *The Faerie Queene* with Leigh Hunt’s saying that Keats approaches it “with perhaps less delicacy and more boyish glee.”³⁷ The more “mature” Keats, on the other hand, is more occupied with “Spenser’s gorgeous

³⁵ Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 141.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

world of imagination.”³⁸ As Keats outgrows Hunt’s sentimental approach to language, he becomes more and more intrigued by Spenser’s imagination, again tying his feelings about Spenser to his theory of Negative Capability and to Spenser’s willingness to fictionalize history, and so to embrace the poetic as a primary means of historical investigation and identity creation.

³⁸ Ibid., 153.

CHAPTER THREE

CHASTITIE REIMAGINED:

A CLOSE READING OF *THE EVE OF ST. AGNES*

I

After Keats's major works had been studied in depth, *St. Agnes* gained new attention from scholars, especially Jack Stillinger, who has published extensively on the poem.³⁹ As Stillinger and others have argued, *St. Agnes* is rich with many of the elements that have earned Keats his coveted place among the great English poets. The language of the poem, like that of “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” conveys in its dream-like rhythms and evocative imagery a time long past, or perhaps a history that only exists in the imagination. Like *Hyperion* and *Lamia*, the poem is longer and more narrative than the Odes, but like “Ode on a Grecian Urn” explores the philosophy of aesthetics through a historical lens. *St. Agnes* in many ways combines all of Keats's best qualities as a poet, and provides critics substantial material for study. My focus in this chapter is primarily on Keats's use of archaic language and his interpretation of chastity and sexuality through a revision of courtly love themes and gender power role reversals, but I also explore how the study of *St. Agnes* furthers a discussion of influence in relation to Keats's contemporaries, especially Coleridge.

Although Keats's poetry is immensely romantic, that romance frequently investigates the meaning of beauty, rather than the experience of romantic love per se. Keats's focus, in his

³⁹ Among Stillinger's important work on *St. Agnes* is his “The Hoodwinking of Madeline” essay, in which he began a decades-long debate that continues in my work here as to the nature of Madeline and Porphyro's relationship. His other work includes *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*, a breakdown of the myriad readings of *St. Agnes* available in the general scholarship.

narrative poetry, is on romantic and erotic relationships akin to the traditional courtly love themes present in Chaucer and Spenser, but these relationships exist primarily to be reinvented and reinterpreted. In *St. Agnes* he reworks medieval courtly love themes, and the meter, rhyme scheme and general construction of works that inspired him—especially *The Faerie Queene*—by reversing the traditional gender power roles beyond Spenser’s cross-dressing female knight. *St. Agnes* is an echo of the past and a projection of the future, crafted through a tightly structured lens of carefully constructed language and keen poetic awareness.

It is remarkably easy to read Keats and lose oneself in the complexities and beauty of his language. He is, inarguably, a poet who can wrap words around any subject and make that subject essentially mystical. It is far more difficult to home in on the problematic parts of Keats's work, to untangle the web of language he creates and pick out what doesn't work, what doesn't resonate, and then to figure out why. *The Eve of St. Agnes* serves as an ideal case study because it contains the thrilling command of language common in Keats's later work, yet also contains some of the sentimental aspects of his work that came under a great deal of (possibly well-deserved) criticism from peers and critics.

II

The contemporary critical response to *St. Agnes* is rooted, primarily, in Jack Stillinger's work on the poem. His *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes* explores the critical history of the poem, from Leigh Hunt all the way through to critics and students from the late twentieth century. All of the readings that Stillinger summarizes have one major thread in common: no one knows quite

what to make of the combination of dream, sex and power in the poem.⁴⁰ Although no single interpretation dominates the scholarship, there is agreement that the poem is ultimately about desire, imagination, and ambiguity. But while quite a few readings explore desire, and while Stillinger's outline of critical attitudes includes a set on myth and legend, none of the interpretations he references explore the intersection of these concerns. It is just such an intersection that consideration of *The Faerie Queene* allows and even encourages—and the linkages between the two works offer new perspectives on a poem that has yielded a great deal of critical debate.

The primary source of disagreement on the poem surrounds Madeline and Porphyro and their power dynamic. Stillinger, in disagreement with Earl Wasserman's romantic interpretation, argues that Porphyro's intentions towards Madeline are inherently sinister, and that Porphyro essentially rapes Madeline after spying on her in her bedroom.⁴¹ Perhaps in reaction to Stillinger's interpretation, some critics have argued that Madeline, as a pre-cursor to La Belle Dame, is actively seducing and pulling Porphyro to her in order to enthrall and enchant him. The primary points of proof for Stillinger's interpretation revolve around the poem's references to the Philomel myth, and the primary points of proof for the opposite interpretation stem from the

⁴⁰ Even so, there are more recent scholars who have touched on, or vastly elucidated, this question of the dream elements of the poem. Rosenfeld, notably, uses Miltonic dreaming to elucidate Keats's use of dream imagery in his poetry, specifically *St. Agnes*. She says "The integration of Madeline and Porphyro into a physical and spiritual unit at the end of the poem can be seen as symbolic of this state of integration which precedes, or indeed enables, poetic creation" (48). This interpretation of the poem's ending adds to my assertion that the transcendent nature of *St. Agnes* is due primarily to Keats's dedication to "fancy" in the writing of the poem—or, rather, instead of his flippant "fancy," a full travel into his own philosophy of Negative Capability. Because love, sex, dream, the self, the real, and the true are all merging together into one at the end of the poem, so too are emotions, thoughts, impossibilities (or dreams) in the mind of the poet in the process of poetic creation.

⁴¹ Jack Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in *The Eve of St. Agnes*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Eve of St. Agnes; a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Allan Danzig (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

references to Merlin and Vivien, which occur at around the same time in the poem.⁴² So while both cases rely on matters of literary influence, in neither case do the critics consider either Merlin's role in *The Faerie Queene* as the creator of Britomart's mirror, nor Keats's adjustment to the Philomel myth—where instead of the raped woman flying away free with a beautiful song, she “die[s], heart stifled in her dell.”⁴³ Keats, I will show, is deliberately using these historical pieces to complicate and add ambiguity to an apparently simple narrative.

Walter Bate says of this poem that “the coalescence of economy and richness . . . helps to set the *Eve of St. Agnes* . . . apart from every other romance in English.”⁴⁴ Bate says this primarily in defense of “St. Agnes,” which in the early part of the twentieth century had received little to no positive attention, and a bit of negative attention. There are several possible negative views of *St. Agnes*, but ultimately only one critique of the quality of the poem is of specific interest to my exploration here: that the narrative frame of the poem is too much of an emulation. Instead of being an homage, or an echo, it is seen as being a pale copy of the emulated works, containing all of the saccharine fairy tale essence of *Faerie Queene* but without the sophistication. Yet that view ignores the core revelatory nature of Keats's approach to the (possibly) doomed lovers. Keats doesn't just tell a pretty story, he takes the traditional elements

⁴² In addition to these allusory references, Heidi Thomson connects the song Porphyro sings, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” with an interpretation of *St. Agnes* that veers away from rape, and into consent. Thomson connects this “ditty” with a poem thought in Keats's time to be by Chaucer, in which the “La Belle Dame” is not the later “Dame” from Keats's eponymous poem, but is instead a woman who “refuses to be seduced by her lover's pleas” (338). Given that the later “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is essentially a reversal of the “Wife of Bath's Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales*, it makes sense that Madeline and Porphyro are an early version of the knight and the maiden, but instead of reversing the roles, they're fluid and changing depending on the circumstance.

⁴³ *St. Agnes*, line 207.

⁴⁴ Bate, *John Keats*, 441.

of medieval courtly love, and weaves in his own perspectives on love, sex and beauty. The very thing that many critics find reprehensible about the poem—the flowery language and fairy tale style—is precisely what makes the poem’s final turn to ambiguity and dark imagery (potentially arising from the transition from a pure chaste state to a state of erotic desire) so much more intriguing.

The conception of *St. Agnes* in Keats's writing life came out of frustration. He had been working on *Hyperion* for some time during the autumn of 1818, and was, as he frequently became with his longer works, stuck and frustrated. Looming over everything else was the painful decline and death of his brother Tom, who passed away on December 1, 1818 after a long struggle with tuberculosis. He had also been ill, and was stuck at home in damp weather, and turned to the suggestion of a friend for a new kind of writing, something to shock him out of his doldrums and get him working again. He focused on the traditions of the Eve of St. Agnes, and set out to explore what that tradition suggested to him.⁴⁵ He also returned to Spenser as inspiration, something he had been reluctant to do for some time in his break from Hunt and the Cockney School in both his style and companionship. Of the writing of *St. Agnes* Keats said in a letter to his publisher John Taylor:

As the marvellous is the most enticing and the surest guarantee of harmonious numbers I have been endeavouring to persuade myself to untether Fancy and let her manage for herself—I and myself cannot agree about this at all. Wonders are no wonders to me. I am more at Home amongst Men and women. I would rather read Chaucer than Ariosto...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—two or three such Poems, if God should

⁴⁵ Ibid., 435. “Another week had passed. His sore throat began to disappear. But his inability to do anything with *Hyperion* really worried him...He had long since discovered that he could jolt himself back into continuing work if, for a short while, he wrote something very different...between mid-December and January 18 or 19, Isabella Jones suggested that he try a short romance...of the Eve of St. Agnes.”

spare me, written in the course of the next six years, would be a famous gradus ad Parnassum altissimum⁴⁶

His desire to “untether Fancy” has been referred to repeatedly in the scholarship and discussion of *St. Agnes*, yet in context it becomes clear that Keats was actually in some conflict about the potential sentimentality of the poem’s direction. That sentimentality, of course, is exactly what critics have taken issue with in Keats's work, from the time *Endymion* was first published to the current day. Even so, he chooses to “diffuse the colouring of St. Agnes eve throughout a poem” and he sees the potential greatness in a series of poems of this kind.

St. Agnes presented some challenges to Keats that his shorter poems did not—primarily the length of the poem combined with the use of the Spenserian stanza. The rhyme scheme is particularly challenging because, as Stillinger notes, “Keats had to devise *forty-three* sets of *b* rhymes.” Keats typically took very little time and very few drafts to complete a shorter poem, but with *St. Agnes* there were several drafts, the first containing “false starts, backtrackings, cancellations, and rewritings in the margins and above and below the lines everywhere in the manuscript.”⁴⁷ The language clearly gave him trouble, but perhaps these “backtrackings” forced him to spend more time carefully hinging together his message with his language, and as a result the finished product is amorphous and ambiguous while maintaining a solid grip of the rhyme, rhythm and deliberate archaism in the language. Keats also made some daring choices in *St. Agnes* in respect to the characterization of sex and gender power-roles. *St. Agnes* is obviously a precursor to “La Belle Dame” in both the dream-like archaic language, and the play on women’s power.

⁴⁶ “To John Taylor, 17 November 1819.” From: Keats, *Selected Letters / John Keats*, 316.

⁴⁷ Jack Stillinger, *Reading the Eve of St. Agnes: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19.

III

Despite his limited exposure to Latin and Greek, Keats had a natural ear for verse and was able to quickly master many of the most challenging poetic forms, including the Spenserian stanza. In fact Keats's first poem was "Imitation of Spenser," which really only imitates Spenser's rhyme scheme and stanza structure, rather than Spenser's archaic language and expansive metaphors. In this sense "Imitation of Spenser" is not, actually, an echo of Spenser at all, but *St. Agnes* is, and deliberately so. Keats's reworking of Spenser's approach to language is revolutionary in that it combines the mythic ambience of Spenser with the dream-like resonance Keats is famous for.

Keats's use of the Spenserian stanza and meter lulls the reader into a trance-like state, only to snap him back to attention later in the poem. Laura Betz breaks down the language in *St. Agnes* and connects Keats's linguistic choices to the sense of enthrallment that permeates the poem. She sets out to build on Frye's definition of "charm" poetry, and make "the case...that [Keats] quite literally writes verse that works as a charm."⁴⁸ Yet it should be noted that the enchantment, as in "La Belle Dame," is sinister at the edges. The enchantment of the poem's language has the same kind of effect on the reader as Madeline's dream has on Porphyro—it disrupts and enthralls and unsettles. Betz centers her argument around the disruption in stanza twenty-four, when the rhyme changes. She says that "the screeching halt of the poem's fast narrative motion at the opening line of stanza 24 all but announces 'something important is about to occur'"⁴⁹ and indeed, something important is occurring—both in the story and in the language.

⁴⁸ Laura Wells Betz, "Keats and the Charm of Words: Making Sense of "The Eve of St. Agnes"," *Studies in Romanticism* 47, no. 3 (2008). doi:10.2307/25602151. 301.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 307.

This stanza focuses *only* on the setting, not the characters, and for a moment the reader is thrust out of the action, away from the story, and into the manor itself. This is out of place in a poem so focused on lovers, dreams, thoughts, and imagination, rather than the physical world and its objects.⁵⁰ Betz explains that this shift is “overpowering” to “the reader with the physical effects of words” and repeated sounds which slow down and essentially “paralyze the reader.”⁵¹

In other words, Keats’s language midway through the poem puts the reader to sleep—puts the reader into the same trance as Madeline, and the same state Madeline’s dream places Porphyro in. The experience of reading the poem becomes as Porphyro’s experience coming out of the closet and becoming absorbed into Madeline’s sleep. Given Keats’s Negative Capability, it makes perfect sense that his language would coax, invite, and finally force the reader into an imaginative trance, designed as a liminal space in which anything could happen. The ambiguity of the poem from that point on supports this idea—critics can’t quite agree on what’s happening in the poem after stanza twenty-four. The action, so clear up to this point, becomes muddled and confused, but still evocative and lovely. In this middle section the point of view shifts three times, as though a camera were shifting out and around. First on the casements in twenty-four, then from the moon onto Madeline in twenty-five, and finally back to Porphyro in the closet watching Madeline in twenty-six. All the major players are illuminated in this section, and it’s as if the language has paused to let us catch our breath, taking in the scene, before plunging back in quickly to Porphyro and Madeline’s tryst.

⁵⁰ There are readings of the poem that draw attention to these objects; Daniela Garofalo argues that the poem’s display of artifacts is a critique of commodity culture in which Keats “oppose[s] the promise of luxury objects with a form of romantic love that depends on lack” (354).

⁵¹ Betz, “Keats and the Charm of Words: Making Sense of “The Eve of St. Agnes””. 307.

IV

In much of Keats's work he explores liminal space and the relationships between beauty, dream, death and sexual desire. That liminal space is obviously connected to his Negative Capability, the purely imagined world inside one's head that leads finally to real Truth. Liminal space can either be entirely positive, as in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where the figures are both living and not living, and therefore represent truth through art, or it can be essentially negative, like the knight in "La Belle Dame," imprisoned in a space between life and death. In *St. Agnes* the liminal space is between waking and sleep, between dream and reality, and as such is ambiguous about its goodness or badness. Madeline's dream creates both a nightmare and a fevered lover's tryst, and it never becomes clear whether this is ultimately good or bad. *St. Agnes* opens with a sweet love story and an innocent maid, but it quickly ventures into an odd dreamlike place from which it can't escape. Porphyro and Madeline's relationship is the reimagined spectre of typical medieval romance, except that there is a reorganization of the traditional roles and character aspects familiar in Spenserian verse. The poem describes the experience of "thoughtful Madeline"⁵² who follows in a long-held tradition for young unmarried ladies to fast, then go to bed and gaze heaven-ward waiting for St. Agnes to bless them with a vision of their husband-to-be. Madeline comes to her bedchamber and falls into a deep sleep; Porphyro wakes her up, intending to get her to run away with him and elope. The ethereal, in-between nature of Madeline's dream-state catches Porphyro off-guard and the trope of the bedroom-farce lover's tryst turns foreboding and violent. The lovers run away, amid a

⁵² *St. Agnes*, line 55.

nightmarish set of images, and then the poem ends with no real resolution, leaving the reader unsettled and a bit confused.

Madeline represents the stereotypical medieval romantic maiden—she's described as pure and is painted by Porphyro's imagination as his "seraph"⁵³—and he is the hermit waiting for guidance from God. Actually, Porphyro's role is deeply complicated in the poem. Many critics, notably Stillinger in "The Hoodwinking of Madeline," have simply written him off as an agent of sexual violence. He is a young man with conquest on his mind, and he comes to Madeline for the express purpose of having sex with her—with or without her consent. Yet, the way he reacts to Madeline once she's in bed, asleep, is reverent. He sets a table for them with the sweets and cakes Angela gave him, and then attempts to wake her—not exactly the actions of a rapist: "Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite! / Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake!"⁵⁴ He actively tries to wake her, and sees her as the ultimate religious bliss. Madeline is literally an angel to Porphyro as she sleeps and dreams the saintly vision she has prepared herself for. Porphyro is not an agent of sexuality but instead the pious hermit—while Madeline sleeps. Madeline's purity overwhelms and enrobes Porphyro: "Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye, / Fearing to move or speak,"⁵⁵ turning him from an inappropriate erotic force in her bedroom to a worshiper mimicking the Beadsman at the start of the poem. The biblical allusions are obvious, but then Madeline is wakened prematurely, and it is as if the world of dreams has followed her and takes over the bedchamber and Porphyro with it: "Into her dream he melted."⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., line 276.

⁵⁴ Ibid., lines 176–7.

⁵⁵ Ibid., lines 305–6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., line 320.

Her dream is “impossible to melt,”⁵⁷ and so *he* must melt instead, overtaken by her dreaming state and piety. Madeline’s imagination is more powerful, ultimately, than the strong young man in her bedroom. He is literally consumed by her dream, and what happens next could be real or her dream, suggesting that her unconscious mind has a mystical power that engulfs Porphyro’s entire being. This odd moment steers the poem in a completely unexpected direction and the images switch suddenly from soft and holy to cold and paralyzing there are “iced gusts” from the “elfin storm from faery land,”⁵⁸ and the supernatural images follow the couple, transforming them from the virtuous hermit and chaste angel to romantically charged refugees fleeing from the natural world into, potentially, Spenser’s mythical Faerie. Given that Porphyro has “melted” into Madeline’s dream, it remains unclear whether the “elfin storm” is real or dreamt, and whether the destruction following their escape is real or the hidden fears Madeline has in response to potentially sinful desires.

Stillinger’s painting of Porphyro as the rapist/peeping-tom only works if Madeline is, in fact, chaste and pure in a traditional sense—an ascetic sense—instead of chaste in the way Spenser’s Britomart is chaste—desirous of marriage and the sexual satisfaction that comes with that marriage. Stillinger’s reading also relies on Madeline’s weakness, yet a comparison between Madeline’s imaginative strength and Britomart’s physical strength suggests otherwise. As my earlier connections to *The Faerie Queene* show, Britomart and Madeline are parallel characters, which suggests Madeline is not as weak as she seems. Certainly her mental power is stronger than that of Porphyro, strong enough to conjure spirits and disrupt the entirety of her household.

⁵⁷ Ibid., line 283.

⁵⁸ Ibid., lines 327 and 43.

This makes sense if she is parallel to Britomart, because then it is her desire that opens the portal to Faerie, bringing the “elfin storm” to carry Porphyro away to marriage. Her quest is mental, while Britomart’s is physical, and so the journey Madeline embarks on must be in her mind, but her mind is so powerful that it actually overtakes the real world, carrying Porphyro along with her, and disrupting the rest of her life in its wake. Ultimately she is the agent of change and movement, not Porphyro. The readings of the poem that insist Madeline is a femme fatale, as is La Belle Dame in Keats's later poem, also ignore Madeline’s desire—to marry Porphyro. La Belle Dame wants to punish her rapist; Madeline wants to unite sexually with Porphyro. It is so deeply her desire that she actually warps reality to achieve it. In essence, any primarily violent reading of the poem is tempered and brought into serious question when considered in relation to the *Faerie Queene*.

V

The legendary allusions in the poem supply the ambiguity that has thrown readings in opposite directions. Like Spenser, Keats uses Arthurian legend, specifically the story of Merlin, to convey a sense of magic and history. *St. Agnes* refers back to Arthurian legend directly: “Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.”⁵⁹ These lines, referring to the story of Merlin and Vivien in which the magician loses his lore, and his life, to a cunning sorceress, foreshadow the odd switch in tone to come. This allusion could well be an indication that either Madeline unknowingly, or Angela purposefully, allows, via beguilement, the later destruction of the household. Before that moment, about midway through the poem, all the images have either been directly of the lovers and Madeline’s

⁵⁹ Ibid., lines 170–1.

household, or have been indicative of Madeline's vision quest dedicated to St. Agnes, but when the dream takes over, so do the literary allusions.

The complication here is that Merlin, in *The Faerie Queene*, is the manufacturer of the mirror which shows Britomart her quest's focus in Arthegall. Merlin and Porphyro seem to be parallels, but we know from consideration of Spenser that Porphyro is Madeline's goal, as Arthegall is Britomart's. We also know from Spenser that Merlin creates the means by which Britomart comes to Faerie, and therefore a reference to Merlin and Vivien at this point in *St. Agnes* is not simply indicative of the presence of a beguiling woman, but of the force of magic itself. It also suggests support for interpretations like Stillinger's, and provides an added dimension of ambiguity to any reading of *St. Agnes*. If Porphyro is pulled through the mirror made by Merlin, and Porphyro is Merlin beguiled by the sorceress, perhaps the destruction alluded to at the end of the poem was the intention the whole time. Or, perhaps, Poprhyro's intentions are as muddled and confused as the dream he is sucked into in the middle of the poem.

A few stanzas after the Merlin evocation there is an allusion to the story of "Philomel" from *Metamorphosis* which, in effect, places Madeline in the position of being violated and set free simultaneously. Ovid's Philomel is raped, and in an attempt to conceal the rape her brother-in-law cuts out her tongue. When Philomel manages to communicate, without words, to her sister what happened, she and her sister are transformed into birds—a nightingale and a swallow—and are able to fly away and avoid death. Obviously Madeline goes to bed that night hoping to be transformed into a wife with St. Agnes' blessing. Instead, she becomes "a tongueless nightengale" who "should swell / Her throat in vain, and die heart-stifled, in her dell."⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ibid., lines 206–7.

Arguably this is, in fact, what's happening, even as Porphyro's apparent intentions mutate. He seems, at some moments, just a love-sick boy that wants to be near this lovely young girl, not the intruder coming to overpower the maiden. Even so, he is a foreign agent of masculinity in a woman's room, and the sensory shift indicates something has changed for Madeline because of the presence of Porphyro—who is literally in her clothes. The allusion to *Metamorphosis* therefore indicates that the power roles in the male to female relationship are shifting, and that there's an imbalance in the general nature of things. Porphyro's violation of Madeline's chamber, and his intoxication with her beauty, leads her to be transformed not into a wife, but into a kind of bird, flying away from her home and her faith. Yet there is still a sense of hope for her. In his use of "Philomel" Keats references both the ambiguity common in early modern sonnet sequences and the tradition of retelling Classical stories with an updated twist—as is commonly seen in Chaucer.

These two large allusory references—Philomel and Merlin—actually illuminate the ambiguity of the imagery and the situation in the poem. Porphyro's intentions are unclear. There is a risk to him, as with Merlin, of being in an inappropriate place, being discovered, and conceivably being killed. There is also a risk of being enchanted, and having his power stripped from him. Several times in the poem he is overwhelmed and overtaken by Madeline's beauty, or her purity, or his own sexual desires for her. There is also, though, the Philomel allusion presenting the possibility that he is an agent of male sexual violence, and that there is no good reason for him being in the bedchamber of a virginal girl. Porphyro is betraying both his and her family by violating her sleep, even if he doesn't actually violate her body. The interrupted dream is the stealing of her speech, her agency, and the effect of that interruption is utter destruction to

faith and to both their households. Perhaps there is also the influence of Angela as a witch-agent encouraging Porphyro to steal Madeline's purity, an interpretive possibility which would tie in with the allusion to Vivien. As I will discuss shortly, Angela is a problematic character who is further problematized through linkages to Coleridge's poem *Christabel*. There are many conflicts in this poem, and the obvious conflict between faith or purity, and magic or sexuality, is one of the major themes.

The purity of the faithful begins the poem, as the Beadsman walks the grounds and utters soft prayers he "Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death, / Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith."⁶¹ This image of the hermetic faithful beadsman is contrasted with Porphyro's youthful lust. Yet, the power of religious faith is contained in Madeline, and that sense of religious devotion seems to inhabit Porphyro through Madeline's innate chastity and piety. Madeline's agency is supported by her piety, and an allusion to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci,"⁶² (not Keats's later poem, but the poem on which that piece is possibly based) is further evidence that Madeline is the one in power, not Porphyro. Porphyro plays a song by this name on Madeline's lute to wake her, and it is as if the song itself enchants the situation. Also, possibly, that the song is the agent of the violation, bringing in both sorcery and violation. This allusion creates the sense of the magical damsel that charms and beguiles the knight or young man into doing impure and inappropriate things. The song itself indicates a change in mood, and Madeline is bewitched, and is in turn bewitching to Porphyro. The lovers are enchanted by one another, with no obvious guilty party, but rather there's a series of tales evoked by the lute's song that

⁶¹ Ibid., lines 8–9.

⁶² See footnote 4 for additional information on this song.

creates the violation and the enchantment that leads both to the lovers' freedom, and to the house's destruction. This sense of a historical literary chain creating the conflict in the poem is indicative of Keats's own conflict in loving what came before, and wanting to create something new out of his literary experience.

The primary movement in the poem after the opening appearance of the beadsman is one of dampening. Vision, hearing, thought, feeling—all are stifled and muffled once inside. The cold, sharp imagery of the first few stanzas serves as an alternative to the muffled interior of Madeline's world. The world outside the castle is "bitter cold" but Porphyro comes "across the moors . . . with heart on fire."⁶³ He is sharp and clear and driven, until he comes into the castle and encounters Angela. The atmosphere of the poem is reassuring, clear, focused suggesting that order exists and is reinforced by the setting. Until Madeline's dream seeps into reality, when things become confused and enchanted. Yet, I find that all the imagery inside of the castle is muffled, dimmed, and that both Madeline and Porphyro are encouraged by "old dames"⁶⁴ to limit their perspectives. They are encouraged to not look, to look only in one place, to not listen, to listen only to one thing, to hide, to be still, to do many things to avoid paying attention to something. An illusionist must get the audience to look at something *other* than the trick at hand, which is precisely what it seems like Angela is doing. She appears to be infirm and unable to do things well, and so appears trustworthy, but she plays a particularly interesting game with Porphyro, encouraging him to leave, and to not think about bad things, but when an idea is mentioned it gets into the listener's head. Angela seems to have cast some sort of feverish spell

⁶³ Ibid., "bitter cold" on line 1, "heart on fire" on lines 74–5.

⁶⁴ Ibid., line 45.

over the castle to create an ideal environment for Porphyro and Madeline to bring the supernatural in and destroy the family.

IV

Although there are quite a few obvious nods to the past in *St. Agnes*, there is also a connection to Coleridge's *Christabel*. Keats, as noted in the previous chapter, had many issues with Coleridge's approach to the philosophy of poetry. Even so, Coleridge could be a master of the dream-state in his own poetry, and the connection between *Christabel* and *St. Agnes* suggests additional interpretations of *St. Agnes*. Stillinger examines some of the connections, chief among them the seduction of a young, innocent maiden: "The protagonists, Christabel and Madeline, are innocent maidens. The seducer-antagonists, Geraldine and Porphyro, while different in gender, are alike depicted in terms of witchcraft and magic enchantment."⁶⁵ I think Stillinger's connection here is almost right, but Christabel's perception of Geraldine's transformation from old woman to beautiful enchantress suggests that the seduction comes from a desire to supplant the maiden, not sexually possess her. In stanzas 50 and 51 Christabel is shocked by her vision of Geraldine:

a vision fell
 Upon the soul of Christabel,
 The vision of fear, the touch and pain!
 She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again—
 (Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee,
 Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?)

Again she saw that bosom old,
 Again she felt that bosom cold

⁶⁵ Jack Stillinger, *Romantic Complexity: Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 48.

The vision passage suggests either that Geraldine is magically disguised as young and beautiful, and is in fact secretly old, or that she's not really alive. Like Keats's *La Belle Dame*, she may be otherworldly and therefore neither young nor old, neither alive nor dead. Either way, the suggestion is that Christabel sees her as she is, rather than how Geraldine wishes to be seen, but only Christabel and the reader have that experience, so Geraldine's ability to bewitch the household continues. Therefore I think the parallel character to Geraldine in *St. Agnes* is *not* Porphyro, but is instead Angela/St. Agnes herself. Angela is a corresponding old, feeble-seeming woman, who serves, by her very presence, to disarm the young woman. Britomart, in *Faerie Queene*, has her own version of this nurse, but Britomart's nurse is the purer form of this character, with no ill intentions, and her nurse both arms and aids Britomart throughout her quest. Angela lets the foreign influence, Porphyro, into Madeline's bedroom, supposedly against her better judgement, but her presentation in the poem is ominous: "Porphyro upon her face doth look, / Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone / Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book." Angela hides her secrets in the "riddle book" of her mind, where Porphyro can't reach them. He believes she's helping him, and believes she loves Madeline and has her best interests at heart. Point of view in the poem is important here, as we see Angela through Porphyro's eyes until the end of the poem. It is Porphyro, not the speaker of the poem, who views her as a benign force in the household, and so Angela's true nature is not revealed.

Geraldine, in *Christabel*, cons her way into Christabel's home, and then sneaks into Christabel's bed. The parallel moment to this is not Porphyro's "warm, unnerved arm"⁶⁶ sinking into Madeline's pillow, but instead Madeline's vision as "she dreams awake, and sees, / In fancy,

⁶⁶ *St. Agnes*, line 280.

fair St. Agnes in her bed.”⁶⁷ Geraldine, as St. Agnes, is a force of mystical power in the poem, and it isn’t Porphyro who gets into Madeline’s bed, but St. Agnes herself. This connection then provides another level of ambiguity for the ominous imagery that begins with Madeline’s dream. It isn’t until Madeline gets into bed and begins to dream that the imagery becomes dark and foreboding, and this reference of the dangerous magical woman in the bed of the maiden provides an interpretation that supports Madeline and Porphyro *both* as victims of a destructive outer force. This leads us to the end of the poem, and perhaps the largest question about Keats’s intentions.

VII

Perhaps even more divisive in the criticism of this poem than uncertainty over the overall story arc is the question of what happens at the end. Do Porphyro and Madeline escape the confines of their family’s feud to live happily-ever-after, a “*Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending”?⁶⁸ Does Porphyro drag Madeline out of her safe childhood home into a world violence and masculine domination, as a reading of Porphyro as rapist would suggest? Does Madeline lead Porphyro out of the relative safety of the house into a faerie world where he will, like the knight in “*La Belle Dame*,” spend eternity paying for his sinful intentions? My reading, based on the influences contained within the poem, says that none of these is quite right. To reiterate the stories directly referenced and emulated: 1) Merlin’s destruction by Vivien’s seduction; 2) Philomel’s rape and transformation to a nightingale; 3) the poem believed, in Keats’s time, to be Chaucer’s about “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*”—referenced as the song that Porphyro sings to Madeline as she sleeps; 4) the “*Chastitie*” book of *The Faerie Queene* with Britomart as martial

⁶⁷ Ibid., lines 232–3.

⁶⁸ *Reading the Eve of St. Agnes: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*, 36.

hero and paragon of chastity—ever headed towards marriage and sexual satisfaction; 5)

Christabel's entrancing Geraldine in the maiden's bed, seducing and slowly transforming the young girl in order to supplant her. Add to these influences the ambiguous language and imagery in the fragmentary last stanzas, and you have a complex web of stories often conflicting with one another.

Describing Keats's response to his friend Richard Woodhouse, Ragussis notes that "Keats was satisfied that the poem divided Woodhouse, that it caught him between a final sense of darkness and an otherwise predominant sense of warmth."⁶⁹ This supports my conclusion that Keats deliberately makes the ending as ambiguous as possible, in keeping with the traditions of seventeenth century lyric (like Spenser). Ragussis also points out the importance of remembering that this story is told by a distinct narrator, and though the point of view of the story may shift from Porphyro to Madeline to Angela, to the house itself, one primary teller is dancing through all these varying points of view. He makes a compelling argument that the narrator of the poem is engaged in the process of romance creation: "his romance is a poetic dream of long ago, of ancient chivalry and young love, and the poem asks in what sense this dream is true."⁷⁰ This idea indicates both deliberate ambiguity in the poem, and a desire to rework perceptions of chivalry, chastity and gender power roles. Keats evidently believed that eighteenth-century poets had over-romanticized and moralized chastity and purity. "St. Agnes," in its ambiguity and unsettling tonal shifts asks its audience to question what chastity really means, what love is, what chivalry is, and

⁶⁹ Michael Ragussis, "Narrative Structure and the Problem of the Divided Reader in *The Eve of St. Agnes*," *ELH* 42, no. 3 (1975). doi:10.2307/2872710. 378.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

with the historical influence on this poem pulled to the surface, it's likely that Keats is correcting a misconception of idealized love and sexual attraction.

Obviously there is also Keats's philosophical opinion of the imagination and his stated intent to “let loose Fancy” in the letter to John Taylor. What nature of “fancy” has he let loose at the end of *St. Agnes*? Clearly there is an element of destruction in this force, as evidence by the dark language of the last few stanzas, as well as via the Philomel, *Christabel* and Merlin references. Yet there is also an element of hope and new identity from the poem's primary source, Spenser. *The Faerie Queene*'s purpose was to provide England with a myth that would give the nation an identity suiting its glory, and so any poem written from that tradition must either keep with it or reject it entirely. There is no clear rejection of Spenser in “St. Agnes,” but instead there is an embrace of Spenser and the English literary tradition—from Ovid to Chaucer to Arthurian legend to Spenser and finally to Coleridge. A poem that embraces and references all those great works *must* be embracing the tradition unless it clearly seeks to reject all of their elements. Keats does not do that, instead he relies on his literary history to bolster and embellish his story, and allows his Negative Capability to fly with Madeline and Porphyro out of the front door and out into the night. A night filled with imagination, art and beauty, which can only lead to truth, at least according to Keats.

CHAPTER FOUR

A NEW INTERPRETATION:

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO KEATS AND TENNYSON, AND ECHOES OF SPENSER IN

THE IDYLLS OF THE KING

I

Investigating the influence of historical poets on Keats's work reveals new truths about the work, answers critical questions, and ultimately makes the reading of the work richer for critic and student alike. In the interest of advancing the question of influence, I now look to Keats's influence on the poets who came after him—chiefly Tennyson. Tennyson is particularly interesting because Tennyson has the same kind of lush language as Keats, and draws, in his *Idylls*, on the same Arthurian tradition that Spenser reinterprets in *Faerie Queene*. The connections between Tennyson and Spenser don't end with the use of Arthurian legend (a fairly common thing in both the early modern and Victorian periods), but are also evident in the poets' approaches to poetry as a means of history and identity invention and reconstruction. Tennyson, especially in *Idylls*, sees himself as a kind of prophet of English identity—just as Spenser sought to offer an ideal picture of Englishness and British history.⁷¹

Keats, in his time, was not generally liked by the critics who wrote for the major reviews, and although the effect on Keats by critics may be somewhat exaggerated—Keats's friends blamed the terrible reviews of *Endymion* for Keats's death—they certainly mattered to him. His fear of falling into obscurity was likely bolstered by the *Blackwoods* review of *Endymion*, and

⁷¹ Catherine Stevenson discusses at some length how Tennyson viewed himself as a prophet as I'll discuss later on in this chapter.

that fear pushed him to break from the mold of the Cockney school—the political and artistic philosophies of Leigh Hunt figuring prominently among these poets—and become the poet who would, in just twenty years, inspire the future poet laureate of England. Tennyson, on the other hand, had a generally positive reception, even though his poetry is in many ways similar to that of Keats. Looking at these differences in critical response provides another dimension of influence—the influence of a historical poet on the mind of the reading public. I will argue that Tennyson’s reception was so much better than Keats’s because Keats had already laid the groundwork for the type of poetry that Tennyson wrote. In this sense, Tennyson’s debt to Keats was not just in the inspiration Keats provided him, but in the softening of the hearts and minds of critics. Ironically, the massive difference in critical response allowed Tennyson a comfortable life, one that was possibly too comfortable as his work moves sideways, rather than forward. Keats was pushed by the negative reviews to advance his poetic style and ability from one poem to the next.⁷²

II

Early discussions of the relationship between the poets focused on details of style and diction. Felix Grendon noted a century ago that Tennyson was “led . . . to emulate his master [Keats] in the over-luxuriant use of epithets and fine words.”⁷³ Grendon also offered an early,

⁷² Hassett and Richardson quote Hallam as saying of Keats and Tennyson that “They are both poets of sensation rather than reflection” (291). They tie the “swooning sensitivity” common to Keats and Tennyson to an image of the poets as “feminine or effeminate, child-like or childish, hyperesthetic or morbid” (291).

⁷³ Felix Grendon, “The Influence of Keats Upon the Early Poetry of Tennyson,” *The Sewanee Review* 15, no. 3 (1907). doi:10.2307/27530858. 286.

adulatory perspective on the notion that it was partially because of Keats that Tennyson enjoyed such early success:

from "the pure, the blushful Hippocrene" of Keats's verse [Tennyson] imbibed divine inspiration, and...the witchery of his epithets, the consummate perfection of his form, and the exquisite melody of his verse, were due, in large part, to a loving and diligent study of the works of his ill-fated predecessor.⁷⁴

Grendon points out long lists of words used repeatedly by both poets, including a substantial number of compound words that create a fuller sense of setting. Some of these settings are reminiscent of Faerie in Spenser, and are often otherworldly. "The Lady of Shalott," he speculates, "might have been designed as a counter-portrait to the 'wretched wight' in 'La Belle Dame.'"⁷⁵ Examining the similarities in these two shorter works provides ground to expand the comparison to show the influence of *St. Agnes* on Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*—his re-telling of Arthurian legend in the same vein as Spenser's Arthurian interpretation in *The Faerie Queene*. Comparing the language style of "The Lady of Shalott" with that of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," it seems likely that Tennyson was emulating Keats's approach to language:

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes clearly,
 Down to towered Camelot;
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers " 'Tis the fairy
Lady of Shalott'"⁷⁶ (lines 28-36)

⁷⁴ Ibid., 285.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 293.

⁷⁶ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott," lines 28–36.

Compare the rhythm, the shortened last line, the metaphor of the song that carries the magic of the weaving spell through the poem to Keats's shorter stanza from "La Belle Dame Sans Merci":

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A fairy's song⁷⁷

Though Tennyson is telling a slightly longer story, and thus is more concerned with maintaining a consistent rhythm for a longer period, the basic rhythmic structures are similar. Both are iambic tetrameter, except the last line which in Tennyson is five syllables, still in iambic, and in Keats is trochaic dimeter. Keats's late poem has a regular and defined rhythm, even in the rhythmic breaks, whereas Tennyson varies his rhythm to fit the narrative. The narratives here are also very similar: the wild woman's song is the vehicle for the enchantment that ensnares the knight, while the Lady of Shalott weaves and sings to maintain the enchantment that keeps her alive. Both the Lady of Shalott and Keats's "palely loitering" knight are kept in a liminal space, neither living nor dying. The effect of Keats's shortened endings are far more structurally relevant to the subject of the poem than Tennyson's are, partially because of the regularity and consistency of Keats's verse.

Most striking, perhaps, in this investigation of influence is how Spenser's effect on Keats echoes through to Tennyson in *Idylls of The King*, which shares thematic and linguistic elements with both *St. Agnes* and *The Faerie Queene*. Marion Sherwood notes that "Early critics discerned in [Tennyson's] work a 'desire to imitate the old English lyrical poets,' hailed him as a successor

⁷⁷ John Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," lines 21–4.

to ‘the great generation of poets which is now passing away.’”⁷⁸ Sherwood, and the critics she cites, connect Tennyson directly to the traditions of both Keats and Spenser, and indicate that Tennyson shares with Spenser a desire to reinterpret English identity and—as evidenced by his fame, respect, and success in England—succeeded in furthering the project started so long before him by Spenser. Tennyson’s poetry helps to define what it ultimately means to be English, and like Spenser and Keats he accomplished this by drawing on the history and literature of England and providing new interpretations of English identity, the nature and usefulness of art, and the role of literature in historiography—he does this primarily in *The Idylls of the King*. Sherwood also discusses “how Tennyson uses aspects of the medieval past to explore new models of Englishness, to celebrate contemporary and historical figures, and to create a ‘model for the mighty world.’”⁷⁹ This account sounds strikingly like what Spenser did with *The Faerie Queene*. Tennyson’s expansive re-telling of the Arthurian legends is akin to *The Faerie Queene* in its approach to a mythological history, yet the complications of gender, sexuality and identity that begin in *Faerie Queene* with Spenser are reminiscent of both the Merlin and Vivien reference in *St. Agnes* and Tennyson’s elaboration of the “Merlin and Vivien” narrative in the *Idylls*.

There are essentially three main critical perspectives on this book of the *Idylls*. First is the general opinion that *The Idylls* are a re-telling of Mallory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. This, obviously, is in keeping with Spenser’s approach to *The Faerie Queene* and Keats’s to *St. Agnes*—to take a

⁷⁸ Marion Sherwood, *Tennyson and the Fabrication of Englishness* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

historical great work and add something of the poet's own vision to it to make it new again.⁸⁰

The second revolves around morality and Tennyson's treatment of Christian values in his interpretation of Arthurian legend.⁸¹ Finally, there are the women. Enid, Vivien, Elaine and Guinevere fascinate critics as representatives of both idealized chastity and purity, and exaggerated villainy and seduction.⁸² My primary concern is with the first and third critical approach to *Idylls*, as those approaches follow most directly from my earlier discussion.

III

The *Idylls* start not with Arthur, but with Guinevere. Although the dedication refers to Arthur, it's the desire Arthur has for Guinevere, or Guinevere's father's reverence of her, that begins the story: "And she was fairest of all flesh on earth, / Guinevere, and in her his one delight."⁸³ This makes Guinevere the subject of the narrative, as though it is Guinevere's error in

⁸⁰ See Aaron Heisler's "The English Destiny of Tennyson's Camelot" for an in-depth exploration of Tennyson's use of archaism in "The Coming of Arthur," and an argument on how Tennyson removes the Celtic roots of Arthur in his retelling of the legend through linguistic choices. William Kennedy, in his "Tennyson and Other Debtors to Spenser's 'Faerie Queene,'" specifically connects Spenser's elaborate descriptions of fountains and gardens to Tennyson's treatment of the same things in "Shalott" and "Maude" among many others. Kennedy further connects Claribell in *Faerie Queene* to Tennyson's poem "Claribell." Also see Catherine Phillips' "'Charades from the Middle Ages?' Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and the Chivalric Code" for a historical perspective on the treatment of the Middle Ages in Tennyson's time, suggesting that Tennyson was turning to a standard authority period for his epic, and not simply pulling from Mallory.

⁸¹ Again, Phillips' discussion of Victorian opinions and debate on Christian morality in *Idylls* neatly sums up a piece of this critical discussion. Also Noelle Bowles's "Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Anglican Authority" offers an overview of the relationship between Arthur and the Anglican Church. Arthur, Bowles argues, is historically either a pagan or Roman Catholic king which makes him an unlikely choice for a national hero of a predominately Protestant nation—yet both Tennyson and Spenser embrace him as the ideal.

⁸² See Ingrid Ranum's "Tennyson's False Women: Vivien, Guinevere, And the Challenge To Victorian Domestic Ideology," for an overview of how Enid, Vivien, Guinevere and Elaine are archetypes of Victorian womanhood—good and bad—and traces their relationship to Victorian domesticity. Stephen Ahern's "Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson's *Idylls*" further complicates the issue of the "false" Tennysonian woman, as Guinevere is defined in relation to her lovers, Arthur and Lancelot, in *Idylls*.

⁸³ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Idylls of the King*, lines 4–5.

chastity, or faithfulness, that ultimately destroys the Eden that was Camelot, and the purity embodied in Arthur. Like *Faerie Queene*, the poem is imbued with the connection between England as a nation and the queen of that nation as an emblem of ultimate purity. In the course of *The Idylls*, though, Guinevere will be tempted and fail to live up to the deified status of Gloriana. Guinevere also has essentially no agency here, as she is defined by the men who look at her, rather than by her actions, desires, beliefs or motivations. Ahern argues instead that “Tennyson presents Guinevere as an agent in her own right, as a strong character who struggles against a society that typecasts her within narrowly defined boundaries,”⁸⁴ but Ahern’s argument is based on his interpretation of “Guinevere’s side of the story”⁸⁵ and an assumption that she is more complex and human than emblem or exemplar of womanhood/nature. Yet, even in his argument that Guinevere is *more* than allegory, he defines her by what she is *not* in comparison with Enid—the ideal submissive woman—and Vivien—the worst conniver of women—and indicates that Guinevere is neither extreme. Still, she is defined by those around her, rather than what she says, does, thinks, and feels—she is an attempt at a Gloriana-type character, but is instead a weaker version of that glorious queen.

In the *Morte D'Arthur*, Arthur and Mordred are both conceived via deceptive means—they are, in fact, born as a result of witchcraft and enchantment. Igraine marries Uther after

⁸⁴ Stephen Ahern, “Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson's 'Idylls',” *Studies in Philology* 101, no. 1 (2004). doi:10.2307/4174780. 91.

⁸⁵Ibid., 96.

Uther pretends, with Merlin's aid,⁸⁶ to be her husband and then kills her actual husband. Arthur is tricked into sleeping with Morgan La Fey, and that trickery eventually results in his death. This sense of violation/rape, and associated moral degradation, is echoed in the description of Cameliard: "So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear / came night and day, and rooted in the fields, / and wallowed in the gardes of the king."⁸⁷ The use of "wallowed" here connotes a sense of degradation, and the mix of beasts together also suggests impurity. The movement to the metaphor of the wolves, and the direct reference of both the origin mythos of Rome and factual British and Roman conflict, are examples of how Tennyson, like Spenser and Keats, combines historical fact and legendary fiction. Like Spenser also, Tennyson has a British hero save a British king, even as that same king cries out for Roman aid. It is this heroism that wins Guinevere's love for Arthur. Arthur is a "simple knight among his knights,"⁸⁸ simply a man doing his duty for his country. Unlike Spenser's sensationalizing and deifying of Elizabeth, Tennyson pulls back on the legends of Arthur to remake him as a "simple" man, the kind of man

⁸⁶ William Blackburn, "Spenser's Merlin," in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, Arthurian Characters and Themes (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), 345. This is reminiscent of one of the origin stories of Merlin as summarized by Blackburn: Blackburn summarizes Merlin's origin story as related by Robert de Boron:

In Robert's account, the devils are enraged by Christ's descent into Hell and his deliverance of the righteous Jews. They conspire to bring about the perdition of mankind by means of an infernal parody of Christ: a prophet half man and half demon. Their stratagem is simple: one of the devils bankrupts a wealthy man in order to seduce his daughters. Two of them are ruined; the third daughter's piety protects her, until one night when she forgets to say her prayers, and the demon mounts her as she lies asleep. The girl confesses, is shriven, and resumes a life of militant piety. When the child is born, he has a hairy body and the gift of prophecy, but the devils have no power over his will. The child is, of course, Merlin

This tale of lustful, vengeful, violation of a pious maiden seems to be echoed both in various places in *Faerie Queene* and also in *The Idylls*. Merlin is the product of the woman's *strength* and *faith* rather than the product of some unholy union, he is powerful precisely because he has free will, and that free will came from his mother's chastity in the medieval sense: faithfulness to an ideal.

⁸⁷ *Idylls*, lines 23–25.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, line 51.

any typical Englishman could be, and in doing so echoes Spenser's concern for national identity through myth. This is also seen in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* when he provides Colin as a kind of British Everyman.

The obvious next step in analysis is the presentation of the women in *Idylls*. As earlier stated there are four women in *Idylls*—Vivien and Guinevere as representations of femininity gone awry, and Enid and Elaine as examples of purity and virtue—with whom critics are mainly concerned. This problematizing of the role of the woman in *Idylls* is directly familiar from Keats's "La Belle Dame" and *St. Agnes*, but unlike Keats, Tennyson returns to a familiar simplification of the woman as paragon—either of virtue or vice. Vivien is only scheming, only cruel, only duplicitous in her characterization. When she meets Guinevere in the hall of Camelot she appears to be genuine and appealing: "Here her slow sweet eyes / Fear-tremulous, but humbly hopeful, rose/ Fixt on her hearer's"⁸⁹ but in just ten lines, when Guinevere walks away, Vivien reveals herself:

She past; and Vivien murmured after 'Go!
I bide the while.' Then through the portal-arch
Peering askance, and muttering broken-wise,
As one that labours with an evil dream,
Beheld the Queen and Lancelot get to horse.

'Is that the Lancelot? goodly—ay, but gaunt:
Courteous—amends for gauntness—takes her hand —
That glance of theirs, but for the street, had been
A clinging kiss—how hand lingers in hand!
Let go at last!—they ride away—to hawk
For waterfowl. Royaller game is mine.'⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ibid., lines 83–5.

⁹⁰ Ibid., lines 96–106.

As Vivien has convinced Guinevere that Vivien is no threat, Vivien delights in the likely adulterous feelings between Lancelot and Guinevere, and plots to seduce the Queen's husband. Spenser has evil women too, like Cymoent who violently pursues Florimell. Spenser's evil women, though, are ambiguously evil, not straightforwardly so. Cymoent is a protective mother, and her motivations for pursuing Florimell come from a desire to protect and avenge her son, in fact, a faithfulness to her son, a kind of motherly chastity. Vivien is just bad, she has no redeeming qualities, but instead is the force of evil feminine sexuality. She insists that it's women's nature to be as she is, a seductress:

‘I sit and gather honey; yet, methinks,
Thy tongue has tript a little: ask thyself.
The lady never made *unwilling* war
With those fine eyes: she had her pleasure in it,
And made her good man jealous with good cause.⁹¹

Her entire existence is designed as a threat to men. Guinevere is more problematic, more ambiguous, but ultimately she is wrong and causes grief to king, knight and kingdom. It is Guinevere's fault that Camelot falls, as it was Eve's fault that Paradise fell. Tennyson seems to be going backwards with his characterization of women in *Idylls* from Spenser's strong female combatant, concerned with sexual marital fulfillment, and Keats's gentle yet powerful Madeline and confusing but potentially destructive Angela. Tennyson's women are clear—good or bad, right or wrong, failing to echo the intriguing ambiguity of Spenser and Keats. Even so, Vivien is the *only* person powerful enough to take down Merlin. The wisest, ultimately most powerful, man in Camelot is destroyed by the seduction of a wily sorceress, which does suggest that Tennyson at least gives his women strength, if not sufficient complexity.

⁹¹ Ibid., lines 599–603.

William Blackburn traces both the history of Merlin in English literature, and the interpretation of Merlin present in *The Faerie Queene*. This is especially interesting because Blackburn points out that “Before Spenser, Merlin is a prophet, a magician, an artificer; he is all those things in *The Faerie Queene*, but he is also something more: a figure for the poet, and so of central importance to the treatment of art in the poem.”⁹² Blackburn shows how Merlin is the ultimate example of the ambiguity that Spenser delights in throughout his poetry, and demonstrates that the connection of Merlin and the mirror in which Britomart sees Arthegall further complicates illusion, truth and art in the poem as a whole. Blackburn also ties Spenser’s interpretation of Merlin to an overarching tendency in Spenser to revise historical literature, to enhance it in order to provide larger meanings. He borrows from the past, but transforms even the most familiar characters to drive home his interpretations of British identity and the purpose of art as a historiographical tool.

Catherine Stevenson’s discussion of Tennyson’s use of Merlin connects directly to the ways in which Spenser used Merlin. She argues that “The Merlin of the 1856 ‘Merlin and Vivien,’ however, is not only any artist but also a prophet/bard, a member of a family of such figures who appear in Tennyson’s poetry for fifty years...[this Merlin] embodies Tennyson’s reflections on the aesthetic limitations of bardic art on the personal costs of prophetic vision.”⁹³ Stevenson suggests that Tennyson is, in essence, using Merlin precisely the way Spenser used him—as a commentary on art, poetry and aesthetics through metaphors of illusion and

⁹² “Spenser’s Merlin,” in *Merlin : A Casebook*, ed. Peter Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson, Arthurian Characters and Themes (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), 342.

⁹³ Catherine Barnes Stevenson, “Druids, Bards, and Tennyson’s Merlin,” in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 361.

enchantment. If Merlin is a bard, and he creates illusions and enchantments through his songs, then there is a clear thread running from *The Faerie Queene* with Merlin's mirror⁹⁴—an enchantment that presents Britomart with truth—to *St. Agnes* with Porphyro's enchanting song (he, then, is a bard figure), or even the reflection of this enchantment in the language of the poem itself and the speaker of the poem in a bard role, and finally to the Merlin of Tennyson who "Had built the king his havens, ships, and halls, / was also Bard, and knew the starry heavens" (II. 165-68). Stevenson argues Tennyson very specifically connects himself to his conception of Merlin. Tennyson, as poet, does, in fact, create the world in which not only Arthur, but all the characters of *The Idylls* dwell. As Merlin, Tennyson sees himself as prophetic—especially in his "early poems, which evidence a providential view of history, the prophet is clearly the agent of the controlling order."⁹⁵ Stevenson compares Tennyson's Merlin to Davies' druidic bards rather than Malory's Merlin. Tennyson, like Spenser, looked into history and reflected on it in order to construct his Merlin; rather than simply plopping Malory's long-accepted Merlin into *The Idylls*, he draws on British legend and history to create a new kind of Merlin.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Constance W. Hassett and James Richardson, "Looking at Elaine: Keats, Tennyson, and the Directions of the Poetic Gaze," in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland, 1996), 287-303. Hassett and Richardson tie the mirror in "Lady of Shalott" to Madeline's dream, as I have tied Merlin's mirror to that same dream. Ultimately all three poems intersect at the image of a desire—whether that desire is a man, a woman, or a potential history, all three poets are clearly exploring image and space. The image reflected in a mirror is an image of possibility, and although the dream in *St. Agnes* is not a literal mirror, as it is in "Shalott" and *Faerie Queene* the same reflection of self and desire is still present in all three poems.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁹⁶ Further, Stevenson explains that "Merlin explicitly refutes the title, "Devil's son," given in *Morte D'Arthur*" (365) which clearly connects not just to Mallory but back to Robert and Spenser. Tennyson's Merlin is yet another Merlin, a new interpretation built on the foundations of British literature and legend.

As may have been evident from the earlier investigation of Vivien, the “Merlin and Vivien” section focuses more on Vivien than Merlin. It is, in essence, Vivien’s quest to steal the secret of a certain charm from Merlin. This charm:

if any wrought on anyone
with woven paces and with waving arms,
The man so wrought on ever seemed to lie
Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower⁹⁷

and Vivien intends to use that charm on Merlin to steal his power. This image, of a man transformed by a woman’s seduction, is present both in *St. Agnes* and in “La Belle Dame,” a woman’s desire for a man can be dangerous, even when meant, as in Madeline’s case, innocently. Vivien, on the other hand, like La Belle Dame, is specifically intending to use the charm or enchantment at her disposal to strip Merlin of his power, his manhood. Just as Guinevere is, in essence, defined by the gaze of men, so Merlin is defined in this section by Vivien’s designs on him. Similarly Porphyro is defined by Madeline’s love for him, and either Angela’s trust or devious designs. The end of the section is especially powerful, and is, I think, reminiscent of the ending of *St. Agnes*. Here, Vivien has made an oath that she truly loves Merlin, and insists that if she lies she will be struck dead by heaven. Heaven seems to oblige when the storm arrives and lightning strikes a tree close to them. She cries out and appeals to Merlin’s virtue:

‘O Merlin, though you do not love me, save,
Yet save me!’ clung to him and hugged him close;
And called him dear protector in her fright,
Nor yet forgot her practice in her fright,
But wrought upon his mood and hugged him close.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ *Idylls*, lines 204–7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, lines 932–6.

suddenly she appears soft, and broken, and vulnerable, and that vulnerability is compelling to Merlin. Yet, we're warned, she hasn't changed, this is in keeping with the sketch of Vivien that's been presented throughout the section. The vulnerability here is reminiscent of Madeline's sleepy vulnerability, but Keats leaves Madeline's intentions innocent, her power used unwittingly, while Tennyson's Vivien, as is shown at the end of the section, is both devious and malicious. Merlin is moved by her vulnerability, and his weaknesses are exposed as a result:

The pale blood of the wizard at her touch
Took gayer colours, like an opal warmed.
She blamed herself for telling hearsay tales:
She shook from fear, and for her fault she wept
Of petulancy; she called him lord and liege,
Her seer, her bard, her silver star of eve,
Her God, her Merlin, the one passionate love
Of her whole life;⁹⁹

She names him, and in naming him all the powerful names for Merlin takes possession of him in the language of the poem. Even in the midst of apology, even as she seemingly compliments Merlin for all the things he is famous for and made strong by, she strips him of power by making him "*her seer, her bard, her silver star of eve, / Her God, her Merlin*" this repetition of the possessive makes clear that in confessing and apologizing she is, in fact, claiming all those things and more that make him who he is. The storm, as in *St. Agnes*, takes over and provides imagery that is both erotic and evocative of decomposition:

Bellowed the tempest, and the rotten branch
Snapt in the rushing of the river-rain
Above them; and in change of glare and gloom
Her eyes and neck glittering went and came;
Till now the storm, its burst of passion spent,
Moaning and calling out of other lands,
Had left the ravaged woodland yet once more

⁹⁹ Ibid., Lines 937–43.

To peace; and what should not have been had been,
 For Merlin, overtalked and overworn,
 Had yielded, told her all the charm, and slept¹⁰⁰

The storm here is obviously a metaphor for sex, “its burst of passion” is “spent,” it is “moaning and calling out” and the forest is “ravaged” by the storm’s passions. It, of course is not just sex, but sex that “should not have been,” and it leaves Merlin powerless, “overtalked and overworn,” so that he reveals the charm to his ultimate destruction. She seems, in a moment, trustworthy and repentant, but in giving in to desire Merlin is lost:

Then, in one moment, she put forth the charm
 Of woven paces and of waving hands,
 And in the hollow oak he lay as dead,
 And lost to life and use and name and fame.

Then crying ‘I have made his glory mine,’
 And shrieking out ‘O fool!’ the harlot leapt,
 Adown the forest, and the thicket closed
 Behind her, and the forest echoed ‘fool.’¹⁰¹

Vivien, who has violently reacted to being referred to as a harlot, is named such by the speaker of the poem, and takes Merlin’s power via seduction. She first possesses him with language, and then with sexual desire, and finally with “charm,” and leaves him, similarly to La Belle Dame’s knight, “as dead” as the forest who has been “ravaged” echoes her denouncement of him. Merlin is made a “fool” by Vivien’s deceit, and is metaphorically raped and left for dead. Tennyson, unlike Keats, is not ambiguous about the dangers of allowing oneself to be seduced by sexual desire. Vivien is only bad, seduction is only dangerous, and storms bring not justice, as first suggested, but pseudo-death by charm.

IV

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., lines 944–53.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., lines 954–72.

Tennyson, especially early in his career, clearly emulates Keats. He did so perhaps in spite of Keats's reputation. Keats was very poorly received at the beginning of his writing career. This was due, in large part, to his associations with Leigh Hunt who was unpopular with several publications because of his political ideals, and because of his flowery, but simplistic, poetic style. Keats clearly emulated Hunt when he began writing—in fact Keats's first poem, "An Imitation of Spenser" was more Huntian than Spenserian, given the Cockney School's love affair with flowery Spenserian language—and as a result he was lumped in with Hunt as being part of the Cockney school of poetry. Critics took issue with the simple, soft style of this verse because it illustrated the problematic politics held by its authors. Even though Keats separated himself from Hunt and the Cockney style early on, the ghost of Hunt's influence followed him in criticism until long past his death.

The harsh critiques from *Blackwood's* and *The Quarterly Review* deeply bothered Keats, who strove not just to write poetry, but to write poetry that would be read, understood, and appreciated for its beauty. Perhaps the most important difference between Tennyson and Keats was that Keats was writing to be read as much as to say what he believed was important. Keats was dedicated to proving that writing poetry could be just as useful, if not more so, as surgery.¹⁰² Keats also felt a deep responsibility for his siblings, and wanted desperately to provide for them financially, so being a marketable success was extremely important to him. Perhaps as a result,

¹⁰² Bate, *John Keats*, 117. Bate lays out how concerned Keats was with proving his guardian, Abbey, wrong about the value of poetry, and the importance of a career as a poet:

Abbey's account, as recorded by John Taylor: He communicated his Plans to his Ward but his Surprise was not moderate, to hear in Reply, that he did not intend to be a Surgeon—Not intend to be a Surgeon! why what do you mean to be? I mean to rely on my abilities as a Poet—John, you are either Mad or a Fool, to talk in so absurd a Manner. My mind is made up, said the youngster very quietly. I know that I possess Abilities greater than most Men, and therefore I am determined to gain my Living by exercising them

then, of the vehemently negative early reviews of his work, Keats was pushed to depart from Hunt's style and develop new approaches to his poetry. This is the point at which many twentieth-century critics claim Keats abandoned Spenser, but it was the "imitation" element that Keats abandoned, in favor of the emulation that is so successful in *St. Agnes*. It is remarkable how quickly Keats's work advanced in quality, and it is potentially due to the harsh treatment he received in the press. The poem which received the most exceptionally harsh criticism was *Endymion*, his 4000-line epic set in classical antiquity.

Before discussing the critical reception of *Endymion*, it is useful to examine Keats's Preface, in which he expresses his disappointment in the end product of the project: "Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public." What Keats is referring to is his long and painful struggle writing this poem. He set out to write "4000 Lines of one bare circumstance...and fill them with Poetry."¹⁰³ Unfortunately though he reached his 4000 lines, and based them on "one bare circumstance," he faltered many times putting the poem together and was never able to achieve the epic standard he set for himself. He also was reluctant to publish it at all, but his publishers had already paid him at least one advance on the work, and he was forced to publish due to financial circumstances. Keats continues:

the reader...must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The first two books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year's castigation would do them any good; —it will not: the foundations are too sandy.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 71. All of the biographical data in this section comes either from Bate's biography, from Keats's letters, or from the preface referenced.

Most of this is quite clearly Keats's regret at not being able to force *Endymion* into the shape he imagined it would take. He again says he is unsure that this work ought to be published at all, but then he admits defeat, because he is aware that continuing to push it for a year or more would fail to benefit either him or the poem. Keats then goes on to address his likely critics:

This may be speaking presumptuously, and may deserve punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it: he will leave me alone, with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms of course, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.

Here he admits the failings of the poem, and points out that the failure of the work is far more painful than any criticism could be. He further praises the pursuit of critics who “look with a zealous eye” as being important and valid to the continuing success of English literature. Keats is not defending himself against critics here, but attempting to avoid pointless repetition when he is aware of the poem's existing faults. At the end of the Preface Keats, again, admits the immaturity of the poem, admits the impediment his ambition was to the work, and warns the reader of the “bitters” to come in the following pages. After reading through Keats's regretful Preface, one must expect the following poem to not measure up to any positive expectations. Therefore it is curious that *The Quarterly Review* so cruelly tore it apart in their 1818 review.

There are two primary publications that negatively reviewed Keats's work. Blackwood's is the most well-known, but it is *The Quarterly Review* that brutally singles Keats out, instead of generally criticizing him along with the rest of the Cockney school.¹⁰⁴ Their 1818 review of Keats's *Endymion* begins with a scathingly critical eye:

¹⁰⁴ The review in the *Quarterly* was most likely in response to a positive review Hunt had recently published in the *Examiner*.

we...honestly confess that we have not read his work. Not that we have been wanting in our duty—far from it—indeed, we have made efforts almost as superhuman as the story itself appears to be, to get through it; but with the fullest stretch of our perseverance, we are forced to confess that we have not been able to struggle beyond the first of the four books¹⁰⁵

While Keats himself was deeply displeased with the progress of *Endymion* and, in fact, did not even want to publish it, the reviewer immediately confesses to being literally unable to get through the work. The review then goes on to cast Keats as staunchly in the Cockney School:

It is not that Mr. Keats (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody)...that [he] has not powers of language, rays and fancy and gleams of genius...but he is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry; which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language.¹⁰⁶

The reviewer admits that “it is not that Keats...has not powers of language...and gleams of genius,” yet critiques that use of language by only really examining Keats’s work through his supposed emulation of Hunt:

This author [Keats] is a copyist of Mr. Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype, who, though he impudently presumed to seat himself in the chair of criticism, and to measure his own poetry by his own standard, yet generally had a meaning. But Mr. Keats had advanced no dogmas which he was bound to support by examples; his nonsense, therefore is quite gratuitous; he writes it for its own sake, and, being bitten by Mr. Leigh Hunt’s insane criticism, more than rivals the insanity of his poetry¹⁰⁷

Here the review accuses Keats of writing “for its own sake” implying a negative view of creating art for the sake of putting art into the world. Indeed, this could well be a fair critique, given Keats’s belief in the sublime power of art and poetry.

¹⁰⁵ J.G. Lockhart, review of *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*. By John Keats, *The Quarterly Review*, April & December 1818, 204.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 205.

Yet even acknowledging the personal attacks from the press, *Endymion* had done something sublime for Keats. It had shown him that his skill was not, necessarily, in writing Homeric epics, but in crafting nearly perfect small lyrical works. In moments of frustration working on *Endymion* Keats wrote some of the seminal pieces scholars consider his best work. This precise tendency to depart from longer works and focus on shorter ones was, as I said earlier, how *St. Agnes* came to exist in the first place.

V

The year directly following Tennyson's death, and seventy-one years after the death of John Keats, the same publication that brutally ripped apart *Endymion* sang the praises of England's poet Laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson. This review of Tennyson's general achievements was as gratuitous as the Keats review was vitriolic. *The Quarterly Review* says that "Tennyson rose above the region of parody, of satire, of depreciatory criticism,"¹⁰⁸ which is certainly true, as Tennyson took his poetry very seriously. On the other hand the *Review* also says "no English poet has manifested a wider command of his poetic gift,"¹⁰⁹ which would imply that Tennyson was, in fact, better than Spenser, Chaucer or Shakespeare in his "command" of poetry. The *Review* also specifically compares Tennyson to the poets who came before him, like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats, and pronounces Tennyson the best of all of them. Although Tennyson is, unarguably, a highly accomplished poet, the claims the *Review* makes border on the ludicrous:

No English poet has in fact possessed a more complete command of his genius in its highest form. In none, certainly, can fewer passages be found which are trivial or

¹⁰⁸ "The Poetry of Tennyson," *The Quarterly Review*, 1893, 2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

imperfect. No crudities of imagery like those of Byron, nor cloudy word-phantasms such as those of Shelley, nor fanciful affectations like those of Keats, nor versified prose such as those of Wordsworth, mar his equality of treatment ¹¹⁰

The idea that Tennyson avoided “fanciful affectations” and Keats did not, simply makes no sense. Very clearly the lushness of Tennyson’s language, and his willingness to go beyond the needs of the poem to luxuriate in flowery descriptive language not necessary for the narrative voice of the poem, are the very definition of “fanciful affectation.” Tennyson’s early poetry especially reads like a junior version of Keats, with an attempt at the same lushness of setting, but without the economy of language. This is not to say that the *Review* ought not to have praised Tennyson, but to say that Tennyson is essentially the greatest English poet of all time verges on the absurd. What this article does show, however, is how much the perception of the Cockney style of language had changed in seventy years. Tennyson was able to enjoy, throughout his long career, the praise of the same publications that had so vehemently ridiculed Keats’s style.

Although Tennyson manages to mature in thirty years of writing, Keats goes from youthful failure in *Endymion* to complex, mature success in *Hyperion* and *Lamia* in less than two years. Tennyson had the luxury to take ten years (about six years longer than Keats’s entire career) to cultivate the emotion, philosophy, and artistic comfort he required for “In Memoriam.” Perhaps Keats thrived on controversy, while Tennyson struggled with it, but perhaps that is also because Tennyson was presented only with personal difficulty, and not public or professional failures. On the other hand, perhaps Tennyson began with so much strength because of his experience with Keats’s work:

In one of the earliest reviews, by Lockhart, of the volume containing “The Lady of Shalott,” Tennyson is pronounced to be “a new prodigy of genius, another and brighter

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

star of that galaxy or milky way of poetry of which the lamented Keats was the harbinger” . . . Owen says: “When one fully understands the invention and imagination of 'Hyperion,' one begins to appreciate how incalculable was Tennyson's debt to Keats¹¹¹

What is most intriguing about the excerpt is that Lockhart, the reviewer who spoke so highly of Tennyson's first volume, is also the critic who wrote scathing reviews of Keats's writing style in *Blackwood's*, which shows that a change occurred in public opinion about what categorized good and bad verse, just in time for Tennyson, but a little too late for Keats.

¹¹¹ Grendon, “The Influence of Keats Upon the Early Poetry of Tennyson”. 285.

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VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Sarah Curtis

sarcurt@siu.edu

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Arts, English, May 2009

Thesis Title:

Revealing Influence: Exploring British Identity, Sexual Power, and Lyric Ambiguity in
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Major Professor: Dr. Scott McEathron