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THE SOURCE OF KEATS'S "EVE OF ST. AGNES"

Two elements of the story of Keats's *Eve of St. Agnes* have been criticized. These are the introductory scene of the "ancient bedesman,"¹ and the preparation of the feast by Porphyro in Madeline's chamber.² The theory that these two beautiful adornments of the story were the result of the poet's inclination to digression and to excess of rare description, as well as of his weakness in plot-construction, is strengthened by the fact that the first seven stanzas of the poem, containing all the account of the bedesman and his chapel, are not present in the Woodbridge MS of the poet's first draft of the poem;³ while it was the stanzas describing the dainties which Keats selected with peculiar pleasure to read aloud to his host Leigh Hunt.⁴ These two elements, then, are

¹ The ancient bedesman "has personally nothing whatever to do with the tale; he provides contrast to the revelry, which he introduces by hearing it, and he gives also opportunity for describing his haunt in the chapel of the heroine's castle; but the chapel is never used again."—Robert Bridges, *John Keats* (1895, etc.), p. 49.

² "Why he [Porphyro] did this no critic and no admirer has yet been able to divine; and the incident is so trivial in itself, and is made so much of for the purpose of verbal or metrical embellishment, as to reinforce our persuasion that Keats's capacity for framing a story out of successive details of a suggestive and self-consistent kind was decidedly feeble."—W. M. Rossetti, *Life of Keats* (1887), p. 183.

Mr. Palgrave ("Golden Treasury" series, 1901, p. 276) attempted to excuse this latter error of judgment by pointing out that the supper-picture was intended as a poetical contrast to the previous fasting of Madeline. A MS note in the Harvard Library copy of Bridges' *Essay* noted above states that in some versions of the St. Agnes superstitions "the maiden was told she would feast with her lover in her dreams." I have not attempted to verify this doubtful statement, for neither excuse is valid as justifying the supper-picture from the point of view of the plot-construction alone, however beautiful in itself.

³ See *Keats* in the "English Men of Letters" series, by Sidney Colvin, Appendix, p. 229.

⁴ See Palgrave's note, *loc. cit.* A similar embellishment is that of the trading-ventures of Isabella's brothers in *Isabella*, which we know was an addition to the poet's source.

probably later decorations of the story, added for purposes of embellishment, and for this reason not woven into the plot of *St. Agnes Eve*.

If, however, we dismiss these two parts of the poem's machinery, we find the rest of the story remarkably well knit, succinct, and lifelike, and quite undeserving Rossetti's censure of "this extreme tenuity of constructive power in the poem." Mr. Rossetti's summary is so little detailed¹ that I must ask patience in presenting my own summary of the main action of this famous poem.²

It is evening in an ancient castle. Madeline, a lovesick maiden, has been told how maidens on St. Agnes Eve, by fasting from supper, keeping the eyes turned upward and sleeping on the back, shall see their lovers in their visions. She longs to put this to the test, and, amid the gay crowd of revelers at the castle, she sighs anxiously. Meanwhile her lover, Porphyro, has come across the moors in the moonlight for his love. He ventures in, observed only by Angela, an old dame, who warns him that he is among enemies. She leads him for safety into a little room, where he eagerly inquires for Madeline. Angela tells him how the girl proposes to try the charms of St. Agnes that night. At this an idea comes to him, and he whispers his plan. The old woman takes umbrage at his words, but Porphyro swears he will not harm the girl, and at last persuades the old woman to show him into a closet adjoining Madeline's bed-chamber. Hardly is he safely bestowed when Madeline enters; her taper is extinguished, but the moonlight floods the room, colored by the stained-glass casement-window, in glorious colors falling on the girl. She undresses, and "pensive awhile she dreams awake." At length her wakeful swoon is dispelled, and she sleeps from fatigue. The lover comes out of his hiding-place, and gazes enraptured upon the girl, and (having made some preparations) bids her awake, lest he drowse beside her. He does so awhile, musing and gazing on his lady. At last, play-

¹"The story of this fascinating poem is so meager as to be almost nugatory. There is nothing in it but this, that Keats took hold of the superstition proper to St. Agnes Eve, the power of a maiden to see her absent lover under certain conditions, and added to it that a lover, who was clandestinely present in this conjuncture of circumstances, eloped with his mistress."—Rossetti, *loc. cit.* This statement is quite unsatisfactory.

²Omitting, of course, the two elements already considered.

ing an ancient melody close to the girl's ear, he awakens her. She stares at him affrightedly, but he sinks on his knee. She mistakes him for the substance of her dream, "the vision of her sleep," and moans forth words to her dream-Porphyro, begging him not to leave her. Enraptured at these words of love, he "melts into her dream," and the lovers spend the night together. A storm rises ere morning, and, urged by her lover, his "bride" Madeline escapes with him across the moors.

Here is a detailed story, with a considerable number of happy turns, narrated in thirty-five stanzas loaded with masses of rich description and metaphor. To achieve such compactness is certainly no little feat for a poet of Keats's digressive inclinations. It is quite at variance with the rambling discursiveness of *Endymion*. *Isabella*, practically the same length as *St. Agnes Eve*, is closely modeled on an older story. The amount of constructive imagination needed to build this tale from the St. Agnes superstition seems beyond anything yet shown by Keats in original work.

We may gain some help in seeking an explanation of this fact from Keats himself. In a letter of date October 18, 1818, four months before our poem was written, Keats says: "I have written independently, without judgment: I may write independently, with judgment, hereafter." These words, à propos of what he himself called the "slipshod" *Endymion*, seem to indicate that the poet proposed to model his work more carefully thereafter, using "judgment"—that is, the standards of other poets. A second hint is found in the poem itself. May not the poem be made up of

shadows haunting fairily
The brain, new stuff'd in youth, with triumphs gay
Of old romance?

That Keats was at this period interested in old romance is shown by his poem *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*, a rendering of one of the novels of the *Decameron* of Boccaccio. Keats probably read this story in the Italian prose of the original. He had expressed his admiration for the Italian language as opposed to the French in a letter to Fanny Keats, September 10, 1817. His intention to learn Italian is expressed in a letter to J. H. Reynolds,

April 27, 1818. In a letter to John Taylor, September 5, 1819, he says he is "revising *St. Agnes Eve* and studying Italian."

But more than all this is the evidence furnished by Reynolds, who tells us that Keats and he had planned a series of poetical tales from Boccaccio, of which *Isabella* was written as the first.¹ He himself wrote two such tales. It is certain, then, that Keats was during the year 1818 highly interested in romance, and in Boccaccio in particular. It is scarcely possible that so enthusiastic a reader as Keats would content himself with the *Decameron* alone. He would almost certainly dip into some of the prose romances of the entertaining Italian.

All this prepares us to give due weight to the significant parallel here drawn between Keats's story, as outlined above, and the most famous scene in the prose romance *Filocolo*, by Boccaccio; the scene in the tower at Alexandria. That this episode, one of the few bright spots in a long and dull narrative, was in itself attractive enough to arrest the attention of a narrative poet is evident from Chaucer's use of it in *Troilus and Criseyde*.²

An outline of the episode in the tower at Alexandria³ will show the likeness at once. I quote mainly from Mr. Young's summary.

The enamored Florio, under his new name, Filocolo, has followed Biancofiore to Alexandria. Having ingratiated himself with Sadoc, the guardian of the tower in which Biancofiore with her attendant, Glorizia, is confined, Florio arranges to be conveyed into the tower by concealing himself in a basket of flowers. On the appointed day, a gala-day, Florio gets into the tower, and when he is deposited in one of the rooms in the tower, he at once demands of Glorizia to be led to Biancofiore. Glorizia explains to him that he cannot immediately see her, on account of the dangers from scandal and too sudden joy to the lady. Therefore Glorizia arranges to conceal Florio in an adjoining chamber, from

¹Keats's works, ed. H. B. Forman, Vol. II, p. 43 (ed. 1883). The preface to Reynolds' volume, *The Garden of Florence*, is there quoted. "The stories from Boccaccio (*The Garden of Florence* and *The Ladye of Provence*) were to have been associated with tales from the same source intended to have been written by a friend," etc.

²This point was established by Mr. Karl Young in an article published in *Modern Philology* for July, 1906. Scholars are indebted to Mr. Young for calling attention to this important work.

³Libro IV, Vol. VIII (Moutier, Firenze, 1829), pp. 165-83.

which he can observe Biancofiore and her attendants in their merry-making, and promises later to conduct him from the side-chamber and conceal him behind the curtains of Biancofiore's bed, where he must await his lady's going to sleep before revealing himself. Glorizia warns him that Biancofiore will be severely frightened when she wakes, but that her fear will soon give way to joy. Glorizia then tries to arouse the melancholy Biancofiore, sighing in the midst of the festivities, to take part in the celebration of the day, and comforts her by recounting a dream in which she saw Florio appear in Biancofiore's chamber, while Biancofiore was asleep in her bed, and that she woke and made great joy. Thus comforted, the girl and her maids celebrate the day with flowers and music, though Biancofiore often heaves great sighs; Florio looks on through a little hole from the adjoining chamber. At night Glorizia arranges Biancofiore's bed and conceals Florio behind the curtains. While Biancofiore prepares for bed, Glorizia arouses her feelings for Florio by suggesting now the possibility, and again the impossibility, of his coming. Glorizia goes so far as to hint that some other man might please her—a suggestion indignantly repudiated. When Glorizia leaves her, Biancofiore lies down, but only after she is exhausted by sighs for Florio does she give herself up to sleep. Florio advances and caresses her as she sleeps, and gazes with impassioned love upon her. The room is filled with magic light as bright as day, from two magic carbuncles. Florio addresses the girl in loving words, bidding her wake and enjoy her love. Biancofiore, however, does not awake until Florio clasps her in his arms. When she wakes she mistakes him at first for the Florio about whom she is that very moment dreaming, and so remains half-asleep. Growing more awake, she cries out to her dream Florio: "Who takes thee from me?" Florio at last convinces her of his identity, and, after a ring is given and vows interchanged, the lovers retire and spend the night together.

A comparison of these summaries shows that the following story is common to both:

A maiden, longing for her lover, and sighing in the midst of others' joy on a feast day, is prepared for the coming of her lover

by being told of dreams in which her lover appears in her bed-chamber while she is asleep in bed. She pays no heed to the music and festivities of friends, but sighs continually.¹ The lover gets into her castle (the *torre* of Boccaccio contains a hundred rooms) with danger to himself, unobserved by all save an old woman, friendly to the lovers. (Glorizia is addressed as *madre* by Biancofiore, p. 159, etc.) The lover at once demands the whereabouts of his lady. A plan is arranged between the two, that the lover shall be hidden in the room of the maiden, while she comes in, undresses, and goes to sleep. The lover must not harm the girl. The girl comes into her room, undresses,² and gets into bed, the lover looking on from his place of concealment. The room is lighted by strange light, so that the lover may see the beauties of his love.³ The girl, wakeful at first, finally sleeps from fatigue.⁴ The lover comes from his place of hiding, views his love asleep, and, sinking beside her on the bed, in words of love bids her awake. This she does not do. Under stronger measures⁵ the maiden wakes, at the very moment when she is dreaming about her lover. She mistakes her lover for the lover of her dream,⁶ and addresses him in sad words, begging him not to leave her. The lover finally succeeds in waking her, and the

¹*St. Agnes*:
vii. She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams.
viii. Amid the timbrels. She sighs

Filocolo, p. 169: "Biancofiore . . . piena di malincolia, etc.

P. 172: . . . con quelle . . . sonando con usata manodolce strumenti . . . Biancofiore . . . gittando spesso grandissimi sospiri, etc.

²In both works detail of the undressing is given, and the girl loiters over it.

St. Agnes, xxvi:
. . . . Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake. . . .

Filocolo, p. 174: Biancofiore e Glorizia se ne vennero nella camera per dormirsi; . . . e Biancofiore che una cintoletta di Florio aveva, quella tenendo in mano, altro che baciarla non faceva, e in questa maniera dimorando . . .

³Red light in both: "warm gules" in *St. Agnes*; the light from carbuncles in *Filocolo*.

⁴*St. A.*, xxvii: And soul fatigued away.

Filocolo, p. 177: . . . Con fatica dopo molti sospiri s' adormento.

⁵It is much to Keats's credit that he substitutes here for Boccaccio's debased picture, the poetic device of the lute playing.

⁶*St. A.*, xxxiv.
Her eyes were open, but she still beheld
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep,
etc.

Filocolo, p. 179. Ma l' anima che nel sonno le pareva nelle di colui stare, nelle cui il corpo veramente dimorava, non la lasciava dal sonno sviluppare, parendole in non minore allegrezza essere che paresse a Filocolo che lei teneva. Alla fine . . . tutta stupefatta si destò, dicendo, oimè, anima mia, chi mi ti togliè? etc.

lovers spend the night together. The love is made an honest thing by the vows and ring in one case, by the term "my bride" in the other.

The elopement of the lovers in *St. Agnes Eve* is not in *Filocolo*, though the romance too has a happy ending. Keats wisely changed the story at this point to make the episode a complete unit. The scene in *Filocolo* is an episode in a long story. Save for one other point—namely, the connection of this story of a lover coming to a dreaming girl, with the St. Agnes superstition—one could hardly find a closer parallel.¹ And, in view of the insistence upon the element of the girl's dream in the *Filocolo*, and the preparation for the dream by Glorizia's narrative of a similar dream, it is not difficult to surmise what has happened; either Keats, intending to write a story of St. Agnes Eve, remembered the *Filocolo* story which he had recently read, on account of its dream-machinery; or else, intending to tell a version of the *Filocolo* scene, with its splendid opportunities for the display of his descriptive gift and his warm feeling for romance, he was reminded of the St. Agnes rites by the same dream-machinery, and, having looked up the superstition,² joined it to the story. That Keats was not averse to improving on his source is shown by his addition to the trading ventures of Isabella's brothers, for descriptive purposes, in *Isabella*.³ But the order in which these elements of the story came to the poet's mind is immaterial, and does not affect the contention here first advanced, that for most of the numerous and essential details of the charming episode of

¹ It would be easy to show, for example, that there are many more parallels here than between *Filocolo* and the scene in *Troilus and Criseyde*; yet this scene is indubitably Chaucer's source.

² According to Palgrave, a chapbook "gives the legend in detail; furnishing obviously the outline of our poem" (p. 276). He finds this chapbook quoted in Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, under January 21, St. Agnes' day. (It is in the 1795 edition, and in Ellis' reprint in *Bohn's Antiquarian Library*, 1849.) Palgrave is wholly misleading here; the chapbook merely tells girls to fast, and not to allow kissing on that day, and to go to bed in a clean shift, and a clean night-cap, and lie straight, and keep both hands under the head, say a prayer to St. Agnes, and fall asleep as soon as possible, upon which the lover will come. There is nothing that "furnishes the outline of the Porphyro story." Keats may have learned of the custom from this source, however, though the recommendation about looking upward is not here.

³ See st. xix of this poem, and Palgrave's note in his edition, p. 275.

Porphyro and Madeline, Keats is indebted to the *Filocolo* of Boccaccio.¹ He might have said of this as of the *Isabella*:

But it is done—succeed the verse or fail—
 To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet;
 To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,
 An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.

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¹I am inclined to think that Boccaccio may have been one of those who gave to Keats his love of mediaeval richness of description of colors, precious stones, and the details of beauty. On pp. 138-42 of the edition of the *Filocolo* already quoted is a description by Dario, friend of Filocolo, of the magic tower in which Biancofiore is confined. The passage, too long to quote entire, begins: "La torre dove le donzelle dimorano, come voi nel nostro porto entrando poteste vedere, è altissima tanto, che quasi pare che i nuvoli tocchi, e si è molto ampia per ogni parte: e credo che il sole che tutto vede mai si bella torre non vide, perocch'ella e di fuori di bianchi marmi, e rossi, e neri, e d'altri diversi colori tutta infino alla sommità maestrevolemente murata e lavorata: a appresso ha dentro a se per molte finestre luce, le quali finestre divise da colonnelli non di marmo ma d'oro, tutti si possono vedere, le porti delle quali non sono legno ma lucente cristallo."