But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new phoenix’ wings to fly at my desire.

Jan. 22, 1818

When I have fears that I may cease to be
When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean’d my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charactery.
Hold like rich garner’s the full ripen’d grain;
When I behold, upon the night’s starr’d face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love:—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Jan. 1818

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.
So wist thou blind:—but then the veil was rent,
For Jove uncertain’d heaven to let thee live,
And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is a budding morrow in midnight,
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befell
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.

1818

The Eve of St. Agnes

St. Agnes’ Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a cold;
The hare limp’d trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman’s fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pius incense from a censer old,
Seem’d taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his prayer he said.

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan.
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur’d dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Empirion’d in black, purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat’ries:
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails.

To think how they may ache in icy hoods and maims.

Northward he turneth through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music’s golden tongue
Flatter’d to tears this aged man and poor;
But no—already had his deathbell rung;
The joys of all his life were said and sung.
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes’ Eve:
Another way he went, and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his soul’s reprieve.

That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;
And so it chanc’d, for many a door was wide,
From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft.
The silver, snarling trumpets gan to chide;
The level chambers, ready with their pride.
Wore glowing to receive a thousand guests:

1. St. Agnes, martyred ca. 303 at the age of thirteen, is the patron saint of virgins. Legend has it that if a chaste young woman performs the proper ritual, she will dream of her future husband on the evening before St. Agnes’s Day, January 21. Keats combines this superstition with the theme of young love thwarted by feudal families and tells the story in a sequence of Spenserian stanzas. The poem is Keats’s first complete success in sustained narrative romance. For the author’s revisions while composing stanzas 26 and 30 of The Eve of St. Agnes, see “Poems in Process,” in the NAEL Archive.

2. One is who is paid to pray for his benefactor. He “tells” the beads of his rosary to keep track of his prayers.

3. I.e., when he thinks.
The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,
Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,
With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts.

At length burst in the argent revelry,
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,
Numerous as shadows haunting fairly
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay
Of old romance. These let us wish away,
And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,
As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright;
As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Not look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline:
The music, yearning like a god in pain,
She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train
Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain
Came many a tip-toe, amorous cavalier,
And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain;
But she saw not: her heart was otherwhere:
She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.

She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short;
The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs
Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd resort
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,
Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort,
Save to St. Agnes' and her lambs unshorn,
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

So, purposing each moment to retire,
She linger'd still. Mean time, across the moors,
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,
Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he, and implores
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,
But for one moment in the tedious hours,
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been.

He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords
Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:
For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,
Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,
Whose very dogs would excreations howl
Against his lineage: not one breast affords
Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,
Save one old beldame, weak in body and in soul.

Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,
Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,
To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,
Behind a broad hall-piller, far beyond
The sound of merriment and chorus bland:
He startled her; but soon she knew his face,
And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,
Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!

"Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish Hildebrand;
He had a fever late, and in the fit
He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:
Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit
More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!
Flit like a ghost away."—"Ah, Gossip dear,
We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,
And tell me how."—"Good Saints! not here, not here;
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier."
When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,
If one of her soft ringlets I displace,
Or look with ruffian passion in her face:
Good Angela, believe me by these tears;
Or I will, even in a moment's space,
Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,
And brand them, though they be more fang'd than wolves and bears."  

"Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,
Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll;
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,
Were never miss'd."—Thus plainting, doth she bring,

A gentle speech from burning Porphyro;
So woful, and of such deep sorrowing,
That Angela gives promise she will do
Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.  

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespied,
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
While legion'd fairies pac'd the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.
Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.  

"It shall be as thou wishest," said the Dame:
"All cates* and dainties shall be stored there
delicacies
Quickly on this feast-night: by the tambour frame;"

Her own late thou wilt see: no time to spare,
For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer
The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,
Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."  

So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.
The lover's endles hours slowly pass'd;
The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear
To follow her; with aged eyes aghast

3. A sieve made to hold water by witchcraft.
4. I.e., uses magic in her attempt to evoke the vision of her lover.
5. I.e., whether good or ill befalls her.
6. Probably the episode in the Arthurian legends in which Merlin, the magician, lost his life when the wily Vivien turned one of his own spells against him.
From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,
Through many a dusky gallery, they gain*
The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;
Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd to remain.*
His poor guide hurried back with agues* in her brain.

Arrive at

Her foot's ring hand upon the balustrade,
Old Angela was feeling for the stair,
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,
Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware.
With silver taper's light, and pious care,
She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led
To a safe level matting. Now prepare,
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;
She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd* and fled. Frightened

Out went the taper as she hurried in;
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died;
She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin
To spirits of the air, and visions wide;
No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
Paining with eloquence her balmy side;
As though a tongueless nightingale* should swell
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

A casement* high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garnished with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.*

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules* on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she kneels for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,

8. I.e., like an angel sent on a mission.
9. An allusion to Ovid's story, in the Metamorphoses, of Philemon, who was raped by Tereus, her sister's husband. He cut out Philemon's tongue to prevent him from speaking of his crime, but she managed to weave his story and make herself understood to her sister, Proceae. Just as Tereus was about to kill both women, Philemon and Proceae were metamorphosed into a nightingale and a swallow.
1. I.e., among the genealogical emblems (heraldries) and other devices (emblazonings), a heraldic shield signified by its colors that the family was of royal blood.
2. The Pre-Raphaelite-inspired painter Daniel Maclise represented this moment in Keats's romance in his painting of 1868, Madeline after Prayer.
3. In a confused state between waking and sleep.
4. Various interpretations; perhaps held tightly, cherished (or else kept shut, fastened with a clasp), like a Christian prayer book ("missal") in a land where the religion is that of the heathen gods ("swart Paimins").
He ceased—she panted quick—and suddenly
Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:
Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
There was a painful change, that night expell'd nearly
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep:
At which fair Madeline began to weep,
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;
While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
Who knelt, with jointed hands and piteous eye,
Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

"Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
Made tuneful with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear;
How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
Those looks immortal, those complaining dear!
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go."

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far
At these volupituous accents, he arose,
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbling star
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet,—
Solution' sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown' sleet:
"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"
'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:
"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—
Crue! what traitor could thee hither bring?
I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
Though thou forsakest a deceived thing:—
A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."
And they are gone: ay, ages ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old
Died palsy-twych'd, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves⁴ told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

Jan.—Feb. 1819
1820

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell¹

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:
No god, no demon of severe response,
Deigns to reply from heaven or from hell.
Then to my human heart I turn at once—
Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;
Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!
O darkness! darkness! ever must I moan,
To question heaven and hell and heart in vain!
Why did I laugh? I know this being’s lease—
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:
Yet could I on this very midnight cease,
And the world’s gaudy ensigns⁵ see in shreds.
Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,
But death intenser—death is life’s high meed.⁶

Mar. 1819
1848

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art¹

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature’s patient, sleepless eremite,²
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablation³ round earth’s human shores,

4. The prayers beginning Ave Maria (“Hail Mary”).
1. In the letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, into which he copied this sonnet, March 19, 1819, Keats wrote: “Though the first steps to it were through my human passions, they went away, and I write with my Mind—
and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart...I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep. Same I went to bed and same I arose.”
2. The thought developed into this sonnet, which Keats drafted in 1819, then copied into his volume of Shakespeare’s poems at the end of September or the beginning of October 1820, while on his way to Italy, where he died.
3. Wild, untamed (originally, a wild hawk). heavy fermented drink made with honey.
4. Rhine wine and the sleep-producing mead (a 3. Acknowledges a member of the household.

1. While on a tour of the Lake District in 1818, Keats had said that the austere scenes “refine one’s sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and steadfast over the wonders of the great Power.”
2. Hermit, religious solitary.
3. Washing, as part of a religious rite.
La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
   Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge is wither’d from the lake,
   And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
   So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel’s granary is full,
   And the harvest’s done.

I see a lily on thy brow
   With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
   Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
   Full beautiful, a fairy’s child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
   And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
   And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look’d at me as she did love,
   And made sweet moan.

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

She found me roots of relish sweet,
   And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
   “I love thee true.”

She took me to her elfin grot
   And there she wept, and sigh’d full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
   With kisses four.

And there she lulled me asleep,
   And there I dream’d—Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dream’d
   On the cold hill’s side:

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
   Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
They cried—“La belle dame sans merci
   Hath thee in thrall!”

I saw their starv’d lips in the gloam
   With horrid warning gaping wide,
And I awoke and found me here
   On the cold hill’s side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
   Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither’d from the lake,
   And no birds sing.

Keats's earlier version of the poem, as transcribed by Charles Brown. The version published in 1820 begins, “Ah, what can all thee, wretched wight.” Keats imitates a frequent procedure of folk ballads by casting the poet into the dialogue form. The first three stanzas are addressed to the knight, and the rest of the poem is his reply.

3. Keats commented in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, “Why four kisses—you will say why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fair said ‘score’ without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play.”