

Prof. Stefan Hawlin  
 Department of English  
 Chandos Building  
 University of Buckingham  
 Buckingham MK18 1EG  
 stefan.hawlin@buckingham.ac.uk

### Merlin's Debt in Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Lines 170–71

'The Eve of St. Agnes' is finely, beautifully articulated throughout, so it is surprising that the basic meaning of two lines has consistently proved elusive to commentators.<sup>1</sup> Right back in the 1930s M. R. Ridley characterized this as 'the trouble about Merlin', a phrase echoed in a 1980s' article.<sup>2</sup> The problem is this: what exactly is the meaning of the end of stanza 19, lines 170–71 of the whole poem: 'Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt'? In his original draft Keats wrote 'O when on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin paid the demons all the monstrous debt',<sup>3</sup> and then changed it, probably quite quickly—but this does not really help us. The lines should be simple to apprehend, since at least at a first level no complexity seems to be intended, yet glosses usually express various kinds of uncertainty, followed by unsatisfying solutions.

So, in a recent authoritative edition, we have this: 'A puzzling image. Perhaps a reference to the *Fairie Queene*, Book III, Canto III.7–11. In some versions of the Arthurian legends

---

<sup>1</sup> All references are to Jack Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> M. R. Ridley, *Keats's Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development* (Oxford, 1933), 136; Karen J. Harvey, 'The Trouble about Merlin: The Theme of Enchantment in "The Eve of St Agnes"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, xxxiv (1985), 83–94.

<sup>3</sup> See Stillinger, *The Poems*, 306; this holograph can be viewed online on the website of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Merlin is enchanted by Vivien, who as a fay is a “demon”’.<sup>4</sup> A text aimed at undergraduates is more succinct: ‘Keats’s allusion here is unclear; possibly a reference to Merlin’s imprisonment by the Lady of the Lake’.<sup>5</sup> The annotated version of the Stillinger edition highlights one element of the problem:

None of the recorded stories of Merlin fits the specific details of the allusion here. Since Merlin and ‘his Demon’ are categorized as ‘lovers’ (170), Keats must have been thinking of some aspect of Merlin’s betrayal and perpetual imprisonment by his mistress, the Lady of the Lake (sometimes called Nimue or Vivien).<sup>6</sup>

Jeffrey N. Cox, in the Norton edition, tries to summarize what he sees as the scholarly state of play:

[Leigh] Hunt in *Imagination and Fancy* [1844] . . . admitted that he did not understand this reference. Allott suggests an allusion to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, 3.3.7–11, where Merlin is imprisoned in a cave by his false love, the Lady of the Lake; the Lady of the Lake is, in some versions of the Arthurian stories, Vivien, who enchants Merlin and imprisons him in a cave or tree. As a fairy and enchantress, the Lady of the Lake / Vivien is a ‘demon’. Keats owned a ‘Hist. of Arthur’ according to

---

<sup>4</sup> John Barnard (ed.), *John Keats: 21st-Century Oxford Authors* (Oxford, 2017), p. 617.

<sup>5</sup> Michael O’Neill and Charles Mahoney (eds), *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (Oxford, 2008), 429.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 456–57.

Brown, which Rollins identifies as an 1816 edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* called *The History of the Renowned Prince Arthur, King of Britain*.<sup>7</sup>

We could multiply examples. One early gloss is useful, since it highlights a particular aspect of the confusion: should we consider Merlin's 'Demon' to be Vivien, or Merlin's own alleged father, an incubus? This is Margaret Robertson, in her annotated Keats. The lines refer

to the old legend that Merlin had for father an incubus or demon, and was himself a demon of evil, though his innate wickedness was driven out by baptism. Thus his 'debt' to the demon was his existence, which he paid when Vivien compassed his destruction by means of a spell which he had taught her. Keats refers to the storm which is said to have raged that night, which Tennyson also describes in *Merlin and Vivien*. The source whence the story came to Keats has not been ascertained.<sup>8</sup>

This at least suggests a different direction of thought, though it is not, as we shall see, wholly satisfying. Presumably Robertson would explain the MS emendation from 'the demons' to 'his Demon' as simply the vague recollection of evil concerned with Merlin's birth then coming into clearer memory and focus.

I want to backtrack to Stillinger's earlier point and to amplify it. The issue with any reading that sees the lines as a reference to the relationship between Merlin and Vivien (or Nimue) is that the comparison in the poem seems to imply a positive reinforcement of Porphyro's plan, and seems to be comparing the meeting of the lovers to a well-known

---

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey N. Cox (ed.), *Keats's Poetry and Prose* (New York, 2009), 450.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Robertson (ed.), *Keats: Poems Published in 1820* (Oxford, 1909), 226–27.

incident that happened at night-time. Neither criterion fits within the story of the Merlin–Lady of the Lake relationship. If Robertson, for example, were completely right, how does Merlin’s demise, imprisoned under a stone by Vivien, really settle the ‘debt’ for his dark origins? My argument is that most variants of the solutions above do not work for two reasons. Firstly, why does Keats introduce such a seemingly negative allusion at a point in the narrative where everything else is positive? Secondly, the lines make clear that one night, i.e. *this* night of Porphyro and Madeline, is being compared to *another* special and specific night, and it is a night that can be thought of as both specific *and* positive. This is what the context seems to require.

The following solution is advanced slowly. It is always going to be hard to overturn a long-standing view on a well-known text, even when the prior thinking—as outlined above—openly acknowledges its problems and limitations. Also, of course, changing the reading of lines 170–71 changes the reading of the poem. A lot is at stake. Hence, my argument proceeds step by step, at least in part by an attempt to reconstruct the thought-process that created these lines.

\*

First, the lines’ context. At line 136 Porphyro has a ‘sudden’ thought: that he will hide in Madeline’s bedchamber and fulfil her fantasy of true love. Angela is horrified, assuming he intends something lustful or underhand. Via a ‘woful’ speech, full of ‘deep sorrowing’ (160), Porphyro persuades her that his intentions are honourable, so that she decides to help him do ‘whatever he shall wish’ (162):

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. (163–71)

In the next stanza Angela speaks to agree details of the plan, and ends by swearing that, after all this, Porphyro *must* wed Madeline, or ‘may I never leave my grave among the dead’ (180). The first step of my argument, then, concerns the positive nature of this overall context.

Considered in simple terms, the scenario here is romantic and lovely: the beldame and the passionate lover are devising a plan to bring young love to fruition, against the odds of cruel families and cruel world. If there was really something primarily negative in the allusion to Merlin then it goes against this drift. As readers here, moving towards the close of stanza 19, we are naturally assuming that something positive is intended by the allusion, *not* that we are suddenly being jerked into a world of negativity. Porphyro has the opportunity to win his ‘peerless bride’ (167); the bedchamber, with the dreams of St Agnes and the mystery of his actions, will be a place of romance and light enchantment, ‘while legion’d fairies’ (68) pace the bedspread—or, in the MS version, ‘round her pillow flow’;<sup>9</sup> and then: ‘Never on such a night have lovers met . . .’—since, we naturally assume, another-such pair of lovers met on some other special night. Context, in other words, suggests a moment of high romance. This, surely, is the drift of the passage, confirmed by what is probably a memory of *The Merchant of Venice*. The phrase ‘such a night’ (170) is the focus of the conversation between Lorenzo and Jessica at the beginning of Act V, where it appears eight times. Keats marked parts of

---

<sup>9</sup> Stillinger, *The Poems*, 306.

this passage in one of his copies of Shakespeare: in the following extract he underlined all but the first four words:

LORENZO           The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,

When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees

And they did make no noise—in such a night

Troilus, methinks, mounted the Trojan walls,

And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents

Where Cressid lay that night. . . .

In such a night

Stood Dido with a willow in her hand

Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love

To come again to Carthage.

(5. 1. 1–6, 9–12)<sup>10</sup>

My second step of my argument concerns the thought-process behind lines 170–71. Keats has generated the idea of a high-romantic comparison: his lovers, and their special meeting on ‘such a night’, are like these other lovers, whoever they are. He wants to heighten the sense of romance by comparing his relatively unknown lovers with lovers the reader might

---

<sup>10</sup> *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Gary Taylor and others (Oxford, 2016), p. 1265. Keats’s copy of Shakespeare is at the Houghton Library, Harvard, and can be viewed online. In this scene his other markings are ll. 53–61 (underlined), l. 65 (underlined), ll. 69–90 (side-marked), ll. 101–110 (side-marked), and ll. 123–24 (underlined). R. S. White discusses these markings in relation to music: *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare* (London, 1987), 59–63; see also Caroline Spurgeon, *Keats’s Shakespeare* (London, 1928), 5.

know, elevating them and confirming their (fictional) reality. Immediately there is a limitation. He cannot, like Shakespeare, range across the lovers of antiquity. As appropriate to the poem, he must find lovers who fit with his densely-textured medievalism, the determinedly historicist evocation of the poem. Commentators assume that Keats had access to one of the three editions of the *Morte d'Arthur* that came out in 1816–17. Hyder Rollins, glossing the entry 'Hist. of K. Arthur' in Charles Brown's 'List of M<sup>r</sup> John Keats's Books', believes it is *The History of the Renowned Prince Arthur, King of Britain, with his life and death, . . . In two volumes* (1816), a lightly modernized version of Caxton's text of Malory.<sup>11</sup> For our purposes it does not matter which of the three editions Keats knew. Malory was natural reading for someone creating a medievalist poem. What Keats needed to find, or to remember, were appropriate medieval lovers and an appropriate night to compare to his lovers and their night. Hence, step three. Which pair of lovers fitted his needs?

Actually there was an apposite parallel on the very first pages of the *Morte d'Arthur*. King Uther Pendragon is wildly in love with Igraine, the wife of his vassal, the Duke of Cornwall. He has gone to war over the lady, besieging the castle of Tintagel where she had been placed for security by her husband. In love-anguish and depression, Uther solicits Merlin's aid. Merlin agrees to facilitate the relationship on condition that, should a child result, he will be given that child to bring up: 'for it shall be your worship, and the child's avail as much as the

---

<sup>11</sup> H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers and More Letters and Poems of the Keats Circle*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA, 1965), I, 259. The edition to which he refers is *The History of the Renowned Prince Arthur, King of Britain; with his life and death, and all his glorious battles. . . . In two volumes* (London: Printed for Waller and Edwards; J. Richardson; J. Nunn; Law and Whittaker; [and 12 others], 1816). References in my text are to this edition.

child is worth'.<sup>12</sup> Merlin then uses magic to give Uther the appearance of the Duke of Cornwall, so that he is able to enter the castle, as the assumed lord, and sleep with Igraine (who thinks she is sleeping with her husband). Arthur is conceived and, after the death of her husband in war, Igraine marries Uther 'with great mirth and love'.<sup>13</sup>

The parallels between Uther–Igraine and Porphyro–Madeline are obvious. In both stories the seducer takes advantage of the cover of night to sneak into a castle that he is forbidden to enter, that he enters at risk of his life. In both he is helped by someone to whom he confides his deepest desires. In both he comes into the lady's bedchamber when she thinks she will be alone, but she welcomes him because of an enchantment. In both, modesty and chastity mean that the lady cannot consent to the sexual relationship unless enchantment is used. In both, the lady is deceived, but after the deception willingly agrees to marry her seducer. Uther, sneaking in in the enchanted guise of another man, and Porphyro sneaking in as his own enchanted image in a dream, are closely allied. So, we come to step four.

From the argument above we are agreed that Keats wants to write something like 'Never on such a night have lovers met, . . . since that magical night on which Uther Pendragon and Igraine met to conceive King Arthur'. This was his train of thought, but then various problems presented themselves. Firstly, and simply, the length of the line: to explain all that in the space left in the stanza was going to require great brevity. Secondly, he did not want to be too explicit, partly so as not to give away his story or spoil the surprise of the bedroom scene, partly because he did not want unnecessary sexual frankness so early in the narrative. Both suspense and modesty meant he needed circumlocution. So, we come to step five.

---

<sup>12</sup> *History of the Renowned Prince Arthur*, 3; this is bk 1, chap. 2 in most editions of Caxton's text.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



Keats knew from Malory that the Lady of the Lake refers to Merlin as ‘a devil’s son’,<sup>14</sup> and presumably from somewhere—perhaps Spenser or Geoffrey of Monmouth, or perhaps just popular knowledge—he knew the back-story.<sup>15</sup> Merlin was popularly supposed to have been conceived by the action of an incubus or demon who, in the guise of a young man, slept with his mother, with the intention of creating an Antichrist. Merlin’s mother confessed her pregnancy to Blaise, a wise man, who understanding what had happened to her and its implications, resolved to christen the baby at the moment of its birth so as to frustrate the devil’s plans. Merlin was duly baptized, and this foiled the devil’s intention that he would become the Antichrist. I agree to this extent, in other words, with Robertson, that the ‘monstrous debt’ (171) is Merlin’s own monstrous or unnatural existence. Merlin would not exist were it not for the demon’s ‘monstrous’ action of rape on his mother, yet he nonetheless owes a debt of life to that demon. He cannot ‘repay’ him by being the Antichrist, as was the original intention. At this point we get Keats’s additional quick thought: that when Merlin facilitates the conception of the future King Arthur this was Merlin’s restoration of goodness: he creates in effect an ‘Anti-Antichrist’ to cancel the ‘debt’ he owes.

In Keats’s thinking Merlin revenges himself on the demon who conceived him with such evil intentions by using his inherited magical powers for a good purpose, reversing the intention of creating the Antichrist by using magical deception to create a hero to stand against evil. Uther’s seduction of Igraine parallels the incubus’s seduction of Merlin’s mother, at least in the use of deceptive magic to conceive a child. Really, though, just as the infant Merlin was rescued by Blaise and baptized, and so achieved good magical powers, so

---

<sup>14</sup> *History of the Renowned Prince Arthur*, 106; this is bk 4, chap. 1 in most editions of Caxton’s text.

<sup>15</sup> For example, from Geoffrey of Monmouth VI viii, or *Faerie Queene*, III.iii. st. 13. Cf. also *Orlando Furioso*, 33.9: ‘Di Merlin dico, del demonio figlio’.

now Merlin turns Uther's lust into a good thing that not only results in a proper marriage but also in the conception of Arthur. Merlin has thus 'paid his Demon [his father]' for the 'monstrous' manner in which he himself was conceived. This is Keats's meaning. Parsing lines 170–71 in explicit terms, we get this: 'Never on such a night have lovers met, / Since Merlin overturned the evil of his own birth (i.e. by facilitating the relationship of Uther with Igraine, and hence the birth of Arthur)'.

We have spelt things out slowly and explicitly, but this is not of course how the lines were written: as the alterations in the original draft make clear, Keats was thinking and writing quickly and associatively. There was a density of implication in his lines. The single point that most favours the reading advanced here is that there is clearly no intention of obscurity. Other lines show elements of the thought-density we encounter here—for example, 'Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray' (241)—but these lines are just loose enough to prove amenable to gloss. Here instead, condensing a fast thought into a small space, concision tipped over into difficulty. If this argument is correct overall, it will of course be very significant for how we read the poem as a whole. This is not something that can be discussed here in a short space, but I venture these preliminary thoughts.

The fact that the lines have proved impenetrable because of over-concision is not really a blemish on the poem, or, to put it another way, once their meaning is apparent what they add to the clarity of overall pattern and articulation more than compensates for their awkwardness. One implicit background to stanza 19 becomes the opening of the *Morte d'Arthur* and the story of Uther and Igraine. Our awareness of this entails a distinct rebalancing of the terms on which we read the poem. In some respects, it frees up some aspects of the poem to be simpler. For me, it brings out more clearly one strain in Keats's high-romantic intentions: what he was trying to make clear is that though his lovers are new and unknown—no one had previously heard of Madeline and Porphyro—they fit into the

wider pattern of Arthurian romance, and hence all that that world suggests, particularly in terms of chivalry and ideas of good and evil. Our finding backs up the rooted historicism of his creation, his determination to evoke an exactly medieval world.

One last matter intrudes—curiously, very little thought about in the standard criticism. Was a potential child conceived on this night of passion? Angela and the Beadsman die respectively of old age and of a stroke at the end of the poem (375–78). This brutal flourish, as often noted, is a self-reflexive gesture by which Keats seems to question or indeed annul the sentimentality of the very kind of romantic scenario he is engaged in constructing. But what if, as she creeps from the castle, Madeline is with child? Uther and Igraine’s ‘such a night’ created Arthur. Who has resulted from this other night? If, even slightly, this thought-pattern lies behind Keats’s shaping of his work, then the poem’s binaries of youth and age, romance and negation, passion and death, are even starker than is usually supposed, but on the scales of their balancing love and life are being subtly pushed down just that little bit more.

STEFAN HAWLIN

University of Buckingham





## Stefan Hawlin

---

**From:** zzNotes.Queries <notes.queries@oup.com>  
**Sent:** 24 October 2018 10:45  
**To:** Stefan Hawlin  
**Subject:** Merlin's Debt in Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes'

Dear Stefan,

The editors would like to accept your August 13 revised copy of 'Merlin's Debt in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes"' for publication.

In order to publish your article, Oxford University Press requires that you complete a licence agreement online. Your link to the online licensing will be provided to you by the Production Team at Oxford University Press, in the form of an email from [NOTESJ.oup@cenveo.com](mailto:NOTESJ.oup@cenveo.com). I think you are likely to hear from the OUP in late March / early April, and proofs will follow at a later date. Please check your proofs carefully as post-production corrections can only be approved for major content errors.

Best wishes,  
Alicia

Alicia Black  
Editorial Assistant, Notes and Queries  
[notes.queries@oup.com](mailto:notes.queries@oup.com)

Notes and Queries  
Wolfson College  
Linton Road  
Oxford, OX2 6UD  
UK



This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Notes and Queries following peer review. The version of record  
Hawlin, S. Merlin's Debt in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes, Lines 170-71", 2019 is  
available online at: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/notes-and-queries-14716941?cc=gb&lang=en&>.