An Antecedent to *The Eve of St. Agnes*: Bowden, Newman and *St. Bartholomew's Eve*

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Early in November 1818, John Henry Newman and John Bowden published the first canto of a collaborative poem entitled *St. Bartholomew's Eve*, though the completed work (in two cantos) appeared only in 1821. Since Keats wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes* between 18 January and 2 February 1819, a 'window of opportunity' for sight of that first canto opens in the two-and-a-half months between its publication and the composition of his own poem, even though we have no external evidence for his having read it. His chief contact with Oxford, Benjamin Bailey, had resigned from the University on 22 April 1818, and was a curate in Carlisle when the Newman/Bowden text appeared. However, it is at least possible that Bailey received a copy from an Oxford contact, and forwarded it to Keats. The cumulative internal evidence for such a transaction is in my opinion plausible. I am not suggesting that the derivative (but accomplished) poetry of *St. Bartholomew's Eve* made any real impression on Keats, but rather that it seeded his imagination with ideas of a verse romance, and lodged some gritty particles that would issue in the formation of pearls. Faint support for this notion can be found in a letter to Richard Woodhouse written on 18 December 1818 (midway through the 'window' period) which contains a reference to 'meretricious romance verse'.[1] That at least shows the idea of medieval narrative was milling in his mind. And even if Keats did indeed see *St. Bartholomew's Eve*, I would argue that it figures in *The Eve of St. Agnes* not in adaptation or allusion, but rather in moments of 'absorption'. Edward Wilson recently made this distinction in an article on literary influence. Having drawn attention to the fact that both Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin employ the unusual epithet 'crouching' to describe a

1 *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, 1958), i. 412.

telephone, he makes it clear that the debt of the poet to the novelist was probably subliminal:

> However, there is no conscious recollection in the poem (or, as we have seen in the Pym-Larkin correspondence) of the source of the image, such as is found, say in Larkin's 'Sad Steps' where the title recalls with deliberate irony 'With how sad steps, O Moone, thou climb'st the skies' (the opening line of sonnet 31 in Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*). The image of the crouching telephone has been not so much remembered as absorbed.[2]

I shall accordingly focus this article on a comparable set of 'absorptions' (verbal or thematic echoes distinctive enough to suggest indebtedness, but falling short of deliberate invocations or incorporations). There are several moments in *St. Bartholomew's Eve* which, because they can be set against modified analogues in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, point to the likelihood — if not to the certainty — that Keats might have read its first canto.

Let us begin with the saints' feasts common to the titles of the two poems. They attest the power of Regency medievalism, reviving the image of a Church so powerful as to orient all human experience to its calendar. Newman and Bowden, even though they were writing about a famous historical event — the Massacre of the Huguenots on 24 August 1572 — chose the picturesque way of alluding to it, and even recalled the ecclesiastical anticipation of a major feast on its 'eve'. Keats followed the same 'dating' procedure in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *The Eve of St. Mark.* (It is worth remarking that the habit of ecclesiastic al dating later became a sort of badge mannerism among the Tractarians and their successors.)

Then there are the proems of each romance in turn. Bowden, who wrote the introductory part of *St. Bartholomew's Eve*, follows the standard Augustan montage with starts with a dawn, describes its effect on land- or city-

2 Edward Wilson, 'Philip Larkin's "Aubade" and Barbara Pym's *A Glass of Blessings*', *Notes & Queries*, 40 (1993), 505-06.

scape and then cuts to an interior setting. A telescopic version of this sequence also shapes Stanza 1 in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, except that night is substituted for day. Much more significant, however, is the priestly foil that both authors supply for the love stories that are about to unfold. Here is Bowden's account of Catholic ceremony:

> — Hark! the slow summons from its echoing tower
> With sullen peal proclaims the matin hour;
> Now through each massive aisle and long arcade
> The dark-stol'd fathers move in dull parade;
> Count the slow bead; or kiss the sacred wood,
> Piously false, or credulously good.
> Its sacred notes the full ton'd organ pours,
> Till the rapt soul on bolder pinions soars; —
> Soft strains ascending from the swelling choir
> Float on the gale, and breathe seraphic fire;
> While clouds of incense curling toward the sky
> Roll over head, a fragrant canopy. [3]

And here is Keats's description of the Beadsman at the start of *his* poem:

> Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
> His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
> Like pious incense from a censer old,
> Seemed taking flight for heaven, without a death,
> Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.
>
> 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 sculptured dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
> Imprisoned in Black, purgatorial rails.
> (ll. 5-15)[4]

3 John Henry Newman, *Poems* (London, John Lane, n.d.)

4 All quotations from Keats are from *The Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (London, Longman, 1970, repr. 1975).

Even allowing for the fact that both Bowden and Keats would have been familiar with the contrast between calm outer ceremony and inner turmoil in Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*, one can see that certain 'allotropic' elements unite the passages. Both present religious exercise as something slow and laborious ('dull parade'; 'Count the slow bead'; 'by slow degrees'); both foreground the Virginal devotion of the rosary, and both introduce incense as the outward and visible sign of sanctified thoughts. Both, moreover, use the image of constrained self-denial to offset the impetuous tempo of the love stories that follow, and both use the heavenly (rather than earthly priorities) of celibate votaries as foil for passionate attachment. It is possible that Keats's image of effigies more detached from human passion than even the Beadsman himself, might have been hinted by the fact that Florence in *St. Bartholomew's Eve* is described as being 'Still as some form of monumental stone', a line that also recalls a Porphyro 'pale as smooth-sculptured stone' (l. 297). But be that as it may, a far more striking parallel can be drawn between the disengagement of the two heroines from the action taking place around them. Here is Bowden's Florence:

> Now all is hush'd — no more the organ's sound
> Thro' the arch'd nave re-echoing rolls around.
> The crowds disperse — but still that fair one knelt,
> As tho' she still on things celestial dwelt.
> Alike unheeded by her vacant eye
> The incense fail'd; the pageant flitted by;
> Still as some form of monumental stone,
> She saw not, mark'd not, there she knelt alone.
> Then as one awaken'd from a wildering dream
> She seem'd to muse o'er some uncertain theme,
> Gazed for a moment round, while short surprise
> With beauteous wildness lit her azure eyes.

And here, for comparison, is Madeline:

> At length burst in the argent revelry,
> With plume, tiara, and all rich array,
> Numerous as shadows haunting fairily
> The brain, new stuffed 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 winged St. Agnes' saintly care,
As she had heard old dames full many times declare ...

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline.
The music, yearning like a God in pain,
She scarcely heard; her maiden eyes divine,
Fixed on the floor, saw many a sweeping train
Pass by — she heeded not at all; in vain
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,
And back retired — not cooled by high disdain,
But she saw not; her heart was otherwhere.
She sighed for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.

She danced along with vague, regardless eyes,
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short.
The hallowed hour was near at hand. She sighs
Amid the timbrels and the thronged resort
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport.
(ll. 37-45, 55-67)

Common to both passages is the sense of the outer world as faint epistemological datum, something entirely marginal to the intense inner life of the heroine. Thus in Bowden 'the pageant flitted by' and in Keats the revelry is 'numerous as shadows haunting fairily'. Both Florence and Madeline shift in and out of reality with the same timorous sense of its alien claims. Florence 'Gaz'd for a moment round, while short surprise/With beauteous wildness lit her azure eyes', and is later credited with a 'fluttering breast', while Madeline reveals much the same discomposure when she enters her chamber:

She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove frayed and fled.

Out went the taper as she hurried in;
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died.
She closed 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.
> (ll. 198-205)

Porphyro's love for Madeline supplants conventional religious adoration, as when he offers himself as a hermit dedicated to her worship: 'Thou art my heaven and I thine eremite'. Of course this is a standard trope of Courtly Love for which Keats need not have consulted Bowden, but is worth remarking that Florence too is the object of displaced religious feeling:

> Fair Florence knelt; Oh! little might he guess
> Who view'd that sylph-like form of loveliness,
> Who mark'd that blue eye fix'd as tho' in prayer,
> That thought of earth had dimm'd the lustre there!
> For such she was, as fancy loves to paint
> Some cloister'd vot'ress, or sequester'd saint,
> Gazing on night's pale queen, with raptur'd eye,
> And thoughts that mount toward their native sky.

There, too, is the association of virginity and moonlight that forms a leitmotiv in *The Eve of St. Agnes*.

Later in *St. Bartholomew's Eve*, Bowden provides the following description of a chapel:

> 'Twixt tapering mullions there the noon-tide ray
> Thro' darken'd panes diffus'd a softer day;
> From time-worn walls each pillar seem'd to start,
> In rich luxuriance of Gothic art;
> While crumbling shafts with flowery chaplets crown'd
> In mournful grandeur strew'd the hallow'd ground.

This can be set alongside a comparable moment in *The Eve of St. Agnes*:

> A casement high and triple-arched there was,
> All garlanded with carven imageries
> Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot grass.
> (ll. 208-210)

In her annotation to this stanza, Miriam Allott (p. 466) has cited a passage from Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

Through slender shafts of shapely stone
By foliaged tracery combined;
Thou would'st have thought some fairy's hand
'Twixt poplars straight the ozier wand,
In a many a freakish knot had twined.

There is a marked difference, however, between Scott's and Keats's architectural imaginations. Scott is accurate, for he is describing the pattern of a tracery design and *comparing* it to foliate forms; Keats on the other hand has introduced actual garlands of fruits and flowers. Since the encarpus or carved swag is a feature of Renaissance not of Gothic architecture, one could plausibly suggest a connection with Bowden at this point, though *he* restricts the 'flowery chaplets' to the *capitals* of his columns. Since this was a feature of the Decorated style (exemplified, for example, in the Chapter House at Southwell) he manages to preserve an historical decorum which Keats's luxuriating imagination chooses splendidly to ignore.

Finally, we can trace points of contact between Bowden's treatment of Bertrand, and Keats's of Porphyro:

With looks of wonder, not unmix'd with awe,
The silent band his steps departing saw.
Now they behold them thro' the portal's gloom,
His visage shaded by the sable plume;
Now thro' the fretted cloisters, deep and dread,
The vaulted roof returns his heavy tread.
Faint and more faint the lessening echoes thrill,
Then, lost in distance, cease — and all is still.

Keats also chooses to present Porphyro's progress by a combination plume and doorway 'He followed through a lowly arched way/Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume' (ll. 109-10), and, towards the end of the narrative, likewise follows Bowden in fading out sound effects into a dramatic silence:

The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

And they are gone — ... (ll. 368-70)

None of these parallels in itself offers convincing proof of influence; taken together they reinforce each other and at least present the possibility. And since every instance shows the superior vividness and intensity of the Keatsian analogue, the connections we draw between *St. Bartholomew's Eve* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* must be registered as Wilsonian 'absorptions' rather than allusions.