

Enchantress or Victim?—The Deprived Voice in “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad”

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Received: October 30, 2021

Accepted: December 8, 2021

Online Published: January 17, 2022

doi:10.5539/ells.v12n1p70

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v12n1p70>

Abstract

According to the knight's narrative in “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad”, “la belle dame” is a deceptive temptress, who has a mysterious tryst with him and forsakes him mercilessly. Apparently, in his narrative, he falls victim to the mysterious lady. However, the truth tends to be ignored that the lady is rarely heard in the poem since her voice of resisting the knight's fantasy world is deprived and covered by his narrative. As to the motivations, critics usually attribute Keats's deprivation of female voice to his fear of Fanny Brawne, his charming lover's sexual beauty. However, a close reading of textual details in the poem provides more interpretations of the deprived female voice. First, through the deprivation, Keats suggests his resistance against the power of a female lover as well as a female reader, and thus exhibits his endeavor and ambition to establish a masculine poetic identity among women readers. Besides, it indicates his combat against the anxiety of influence from George Gordon Byron's literary success.

Keywords: La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad, John Keats, deprived voice, female reader, masculine poetic identity, the anxiety of influence

1. Introduction

Although the “Odes” are usually regarded as John Keats's greatest masterpieces, his poems concerning female images such as “Isabelle”, “Lamia”, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, and “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad” (Note 1) are no less impressive. Among them, “La Belle” is the most typical one that incorporates a contradictory feature of romance and anti-romance. To be specific, the temptress in this poem is, on one side, endowed with romantic traits of beauty, innocence, docility, and vulnerability; on the other side, she is portrayed as sexually attractive, lustful, treacherous, dangerous, and even demonic. At the early and middle stage of the Romantic Period, feminine domestication was greatly embraced by society, and women were expected to be obedient, asexual, moral, virtuous, pious, and restrained. Sexual desires were considered inappropriate and dangerous for a decent lady. Those who failed to carry out proper social conduct were publicly scorned and stripped of reputation. Mary Wollstonecraft surveyed the history of women subjugation in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and concluded that “women are, therefore, to be considered either as moral beings, or so weak that they must be entirely subjected to the superior faculties of men” (2001, p. 1414). She also in some way endorsed the opinion that the female sex was “the weakest as well as the most oppressed half of the species” (2001, p. 1422). Despite her efforts in advocating women's rights of sexual freedom, writers like her were in the minority. The notion that women should be passionless, sexual, and sublime was still prevalent. In the early nineteenth century, however, the call for freedom of women was voiced by more writers and freethinkers. They advocated female traits typical of anti-romantic heroines such as rebellion and independence. Keats also suggested an inclination to it in his early poems. In “Oh, Blush Not”, he regarded “blush” as females' natural response to sexual excitement instead of innocence. As presented in his later poems like “Lamia” and “La Belle”, the female characters are portrayed as seducing, mysterious, demonic, and disastrous to the male heroes. Especially in “La Belle”, the dual female traits of romance and anti-romance can be discovered through a close reading of every line.

Many critics maintain that “la belle dame” can find its prototype in Keats's young lover, Fanny Brawne, who possessed similar traits; therefore, the poet tries to express his fear of being captivated by her love through the knight's plaintive tone. Although this view focuses on la belle dame's threatening bewitchment, it fails to notice the tension between her anti-romantic idea of love and the knight's romantic ideal of love. The knight tries to

build his idealized realm of romantic love with her through his narrative voice, while she struggles to resist his yoke and imprisonment with a voice largely deprived. This essay will discuss the duality of the lady's traits and her destruction of the knight's conception of romance. Accordingly, further analysis will focus on how her voice is deprived in the love combat and Keats's motivations behind it.

2. The Knight's Narrative Voice: An Enchantress

2.1 Romantic Traits of "La Belle Dame"

"La Belle" takes its title from a medieval poem, meaning "a lovely lady without mercy". The title itself indicates la belle dame's mysterious and complex quality—cruel beauty, which is manifested repeatedly in the knight's narrative. The poem commences with an unidentified speaker questioning, "O What can ail thee, knight-at-arms (Note 2)/Alone and palely loitering" (Keats, 2001, lines 1–2). The contrast between the chivalric masculine trait of "at arms" and the unusually desolate mental state creates a suspense. The speaker continues to describe the knight's vulnerability: "And on thy cheeks a fading rose / Fast withereth too" (lines 11–12). The metaphor of the fading rose signals death on the knight's countenance, which emphasizes his death-like state of exhaustion. Next the knight, both as the "narrating I" and the "experiencing I", starts to explain how he has been driven to such a disheartening condition. According to his recollection, the experiencing "I" encountered a bewitching lady and was immediately struck by her prettiness like "a fairy's child" (line 14) with "long" (line 15) hair and "light" (ibid) foot—the embellished and sentimental description manifests "my" first impression of the lady as a delicate, nymph-like and obedient figure.

2.2 Anti-Romantic Traits of "La Belle Dame"

La belle dame, nevertheless, was not as gentle and docile as "I" had expected, which could be noticed in her expression and manners. In contrast to a "fairy's child", her "wild" (line 16) eyes seemed to convey anti-romantic sexual desire.

The seductive attempt is further exhibited in her following disobedient behavior. First, she fed "me" with "roots of relish sweet" (line 25) "honey wild" (line 26), and "manna dew" (ibid). Honey in Keats's poems is often a figurative reference to sexual longing, as suggested in the honey-feel ecstasy in "Endymion" and the provocative sensuality of "honeyed" night in "The Eve of St. Agnes". "Manna" is also a figurative word taken from the Bible, referring to the food that God provides for Israeli people to help them survive desert life. The heavenly word endows the lady with somewhat supernatural power, which strengthens her mysterious and complex features. After feeding food, as the "experiencing I" narrates, "She took me to her elfin grot" (line 29), "lulled me asleep" (line 33), and there "I" had the nightmare. It can be seen that in the knight's viewpoint, "la belle dame" actively directed him to her sealed, most private place and intentionally enticed him to sleep in such a way as he was hypnotized by her motherly "touch and look together with sounds of cooing and lullabies" (Williams, 1966, p. 71). Then in the nightmare, "I" was horrified by the male chorus of pale kings, princes, and warriors, whom all accused "la belle" of being merciless, enthralling, and even demonic. "Pale" is used three times in the two lines to emphasize the male chorus's terror and the lady's devouring power. Eventually, "I" woke up only to find "me" "alone and palely loitering" (line 45) in bleak surroundings, which echoes the desolate mental state at the beginning of the poem. All in all, from the knight's narration, he was victimized by a female seductress of dual traits, who was supposed to be severely condemned by the stereotyped notion of the Romantic Period.

3. The Deprived Voice of "La Belle Dame"

Is "la belle dame" really an enchantress as the knight perceives? It cannot be ignored that the male narrative perspective of the poem makes his narration less reliable since her voice is mainly deprived and true feelings are concealed. Despite the lack of her utterance on the narrative level, the suggestiveness of abundant details contributes to exclaiming her voice and Keats's hidden intention.

3.1 How Is She Silenced?

How is la belle dame hushed? From the moment of the knight's encounter with her, he strives to claim and possess her as his own. At first sight, what attracts his attention is her scattered image—hair, foot, and eyes, and this demonstrates his inclination to deny her complete individuality and existence as a human being. From a feminist viewpoint, he merely regards her as a desirable and obtainable object or possession. The lady's subordination and inferiority as the "other" highlight the knight's status as a male subject, which implies the inevitability of her silence. His following behavior further exemplifies superiority, "I made a garland for her head/And bracelets too, and fragrant zone" (lines 17–18). It proves that he intends to occupy her as his object of pleasure through embellishment. The "garland" "bracelets" and "fragrant zone" are not only accessories but also symbols of male captivation and imprisonment. With the decorations the knight endeavors to "dominate her by

domesticating her wilderness and bringing her within his world of romance” (Schulkins, 2014, p. 118). In the next line “she look’d at me as she did love” (line 19, Note 3). The uncertainty and ambiguity confirm that he is constructing his imaginary world of romance and trying to incorporate the lady into his imagination. His attempt, however, is not accomplished, for he is greeted by her mysterious response of “sweet moan” (line 20). On the surface, the oxymoron of the two words expresses simultaneously her fixed feelings of contentment and anguish. On second thought, “sweet” and “moan” might come from different focalizations—“sweet” describes the knight’s joyful announcement of victory in the construction of his imaginary and idealized romantic realm where he can claim her as his puppet to satisfy sexual desire, while “moan” expresses the lady’s voiceless rebellion against domestication and imprisonment.

The knight’s following action of putting her on his “pacing steed” (line 21) is also a sign of his masculine chivalric identity. Although in “I love thee true” (line 27) la belle dame’s voice is for the first time heard, it is said “in langue strange” (line 26), which implies their unsuccessful interaction. That is to say, her telling of love is a dysfunctional “problematic speech act” (Bennett, 1990, p. 74). Since the meaning of her utterance is unidentified, whatever she says weighs nothing to the knight; instead, it is sacrificed to satisfy his subjectivity of the romantic realm, as Schulkins states, “she ... lacks the weapons of language to resist the knight” (2014, p. 123). Yoked in his romantic tale of love, she is dragged into unexplained grief and agony: “And there she wept, and sigh’d full sore” (line 30). As discussed earlier, if in the knight’s point of view la belle dame is supposed to be seductive and devouring, then what does she weep for? This essay argues that the tears might be understood as her silent resistance against his control. She therefore turns from a deceptive temptress to a trapped victim. The tension between their relationship reaches its climax in the knight’s nightmare where la belle dame is severely accused by the male chorus of royalties as merciless and enthralling, “They cried—La Belle Dame sans Merci/Hath thee in thrall” (lines 37–38). The overemphasized sense of the male royalties’ horror is convincing until their “starv’d lips” (line 39) reveal disclosed hunger and greed for sexual experience, hence “pale” (line 35 & 36) turns to an indication of their jealousy at unattainable love. Therefore, their condemnation of la belle dame’s enthrallment and their warning the knight of his love’s wickedness denote male hypocrisy and artificiality—uncontrollable lust on one side; denial of female sexual nature on the other. In this sense, la belle dame’s ruthless image is constructed through the patriarchal order, while her true voice is deprived. Another detail worth noting is that the knight claims his nightmare as “the latest dream I ever dream’d” (line 34). It provokes further questions: what are other dreams? Is she merely a phantom created by his desire in self-constructed series of dreams? Is the whole story his imaginary experience? The mysteries remain unsolved in the ambiguities of the ending where the knight is abandoned, “And this is why I sojourn here / Alone and palely loitering” (lines 45–46). “Sojourn” and “loitering” confirm the notion that he is still indulged in self-justifying and self-pitying fantasies and unable to distinguish dream from soberness, as commented by Wolfson, “the ballad shimmers as a dialogue of the mind with itself” (2015, p. 85).

3.2 *Why Is She Silenced?*

More than one interpretation can account for Keats’s deprivation of la belle dame’s voice by giving authority over language to the knight. Scholars have suggested possible sources of the complex traits of la belle dame. Her encounter with the knight is believed to encapsulate Keats’s romantic relationship with Fanny Brawne, the woman to whom he was deeply attached while the poem was composed in March 1819. Brought up in a decent family where her father’s ancestors had been knights and lawyers, Miss Brawne knew how to carry off the social manners of a young lady (Ward, 1986, p. 240). Her romantic traits attracted Keats deeply, as he exclaimed, “I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but beauty” (“To Fanny Brawne, 8 July 1819”, p. 313). He also compared his desire for love to “honey” in the letter written on 8 July 1819, “I kiss’d your writing over in the hope you had indulg’d me by leaving a trace of honey” (ibid). Despite love’s sweet taste, Keats’s pain of being torn by uncontrollable passion and doubt about Fanny’s love overwhelmed temporary pleasure. In one of his affectionate letters to her, Keats confessed his inner struggle between the joy of love and fear of its yoke, “Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom” (“To Fanny Brawne, 1 July 1819”, 2002, p. 309). Fanny resembles his “la belle dame sans merci”, who has entrapped and imprisoned him. Keats’s poetic reflection of his fixed feelings is manifested through the ambiguity and perplexity of language concerning love and death in “La Belle”, of which one typical example is the metaphorical “fading rose”. As Thomson argues, “Keats’s complete infatuation with her inspired the great, bittersweet poems of 1819, in which eros and thanatos are never far apart” (2017, p. 44). In this sense, beyond the knight’s narration, the poet’s denunciation of female bewitchment and appealing to extrication from female sexual yoke can be perceived.

Another explanation of the knight’s accusation of la belle dame concerning the poet’s brother Tom Keats has

been proposed though not especially convincingly. It has been widely discussed that the knight's "anguish moist" (line 10) and "fever dew" (ibid) signify Tom's death of tuberculosis. On April 15, Keats went to the Bentley's to collect some of Tom's papers and accidentally found a pile of love letters, which were in "such a mixture of high-flown sentiment and downright vulgarity" (Ward, 1986, p. 272). Those letters turned out to be a hoax played by Tom's friend, Charles Jeremiah Wells, who disguised himself as a young lady Amena Bellefila and successfully enchanted Tom. The false image of Amena worsened Tom's illness and misery. Keats was raged at the thought that Well's hoax had killed his brother; thus, the vicious deception and the false image of Amena may contribute to his ruthless portrayal of la belle dame. Since Keats is worried at being imprisoned by Fanny's love and annoyed at female bewitchment like Tom's faked lover Amena, it makes sense he attempts to overcome the fears through the knight's deprivation of la belle dame's voice. In other words, Keats intends to imprison the feminine in the "marble of his art" (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 460). Further evidence can be found in his letter to Fanny on 25 July 1819, which says, "I can believe there ever was or ever could be any thing to admire in me especially as far as sight goes—I cannot be admired, I am not a thing to be admired. You (Fanny) are, I love you" (Keats, 2002, p. 318). "I am not a thing to be admired" apparently exemplifies that Keats believes admiration would turn him into a "thing" and thus rejects to be objectified; instead, he would rather make Fanny an objectified "thing", as shown in the determinate tone of "You are". At the end of the letter, he reiterates, "I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Hethen. Your's ever, fair Star..." (ibid). We can see he imagines Fanny as his eternal thing like a star or planet so that she can be observed. As Homans points out, "Keats constitutes himself as a male subject—as the I who admires—by limiting Fanny to being the object of his vision, by appropriating all the speaking parts, even hers, and leaving her nothing to say" (1990, p. 351). Alike in the poem, la belle dame is portrayed as an object of the knight and therefore her real feelings are concealed.

Actually, Keats felt threatened not only by Fanny's female sexual power but also by her reading intelligence and insight, which intensifies his desire to forge masculine artistic identity by repressing female dominance in his poem. Fanny was not only a "fickle temptress" or muse to Keats but also a cultivated women reader. He directed her reading, guided her to dislike Byron, and wrote letters to her mentioning various books including a Spencer with the most beautiful passages marked (Homans, 1990, p. 349). He told her what to say in the love letters, "Write me ever so few lines and tell me you will never forever be less kissed to me than yesterday" ("To Fanny Brawne, 11 October 1819", 2002, p. 389). In another letter written in 1820, he offered advice for correcting her writing, "For some reason or other your last night's note was not so treasurable as former ones. I would fain that you call me Love still" (2002, p. 421). It can be inferred that Keats tried to "appropriate her voice" (Homans, 1990, p. 351) in defense of his poetic masculine identity, for he felt threatened by her power of creativity as a woman reader. As revealed in the letter to Charles Brown in August 1820, Keats's first three books suffered from unexpected failure, "the sale of my book is very slow, though it has been very highly rated" (Keats, 2002, p. 465). He owes the unpopularity to "the offence the ladies take at me" (ibid). Therefore, his apprehension of women readers' power to determine his success in the marketplace motivates him to strive for Fanny's faithfulness as a reader and prototype of a general female readership. He even equates poetic capability with female sexual power, and thus the deprivation of la belle dame's voice demonstrates the poet's effort to confirm the stability of his masculine identity. As White concludes, "throughout his adult life Keats was concerned to prove his 'masculinity' ... while simultaneously reaching out to female company and women readers" (2010, p. 154).

Meanwhile, Keats was suffering the anxiety of influence from Byron's literary and masculine success. Byron showed a vehement dislike of the latter because of his Cockney style and depreciation of Pope. He accused Keats's poems of "a lack of decorum (Cockney vulgarity) and a lack of restraint (outstretched imagination)" (Cheatham, 1983, p. 24). Byron's attacks originated from his fear of the force of romantic poetic theory over classical aesthetics. He foresaw "the new system was destined for abuse in the unskilled hands of its inheritors" (ibid) and was worried Keats was "fulfilling his prophecy" (ibid). Keats responded to Byron's comment indirectly at the beginning of his long letter to George and Georgiana from February to May, 1819, "the literary world I know nothing about. There is a Poem from Rogers dead born and another satire is expected from Byron call'd Don Giovanni" (p. 254). The ironic tone exclaims his feeling of impotence and resentment at Byron's power. Keats's anxiety over his literary inadequacy and the hope of matching Byron's wide female readership are weaved artistically in his poems, in which he equates the need to attract a female readership with the need to attract women sexually. Therefore in "La Belle" we can find Keats endeavors to voice his masculine poetic identity over women readers through the knight's attempt to repress la belle dame's sexual enthrallment. Although the knight is endowed with vulnerable and effeminate traits, I would like to argue Keats's vacillation and uncertainties of gender norms serve as an intentional subversion of Byron's confidence in stereotypical female characters to arouse the interest of the female audience. It is also a covered poetic device under which

Keats is trying to win support from male readers over his rival. In this way, Keats accomplishes the aesthetic principle of “negative capability”, as he put it, the ability of “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (“To George and John Keats, 21, 27 December 1817”, 2002, p. 60). Perhaps it is the ambivalence and ambiguities that make the poem an insoluble riddle that deserves unremitting exploration.

4. Conclusion

This essay has examined the unreliability of the knight’s narrative in which “la belle” is endowed with dual traits—fair lady of romance versus serpentine enchantress. It points out the lady’s voice is actually deprived, which is backed up by a number of significant details, including objectified scattered images, symbols of imprisonment, the paradox of “sweet moan”, dysfunctional “strange language”, doubtful action of weeping and sighing, and the male royalties’ “starved lips”. Then, it explores the poet’s motivations of depicting such deprivation in light of his letters and contemporary researches. It might result from Keats’s fear of female beauty and love caused by his relationship with Fanny Brawne and his brother’s tragic love experience. Most importantly, just like the knight trying to resist la belle dame’s sexual temptation in the poem, Keats struggles to emphasize his masculine poetic identity in front of women readers. His portrayal of the knight’s feminine qualities and la belle’s subverted traits serves as a refutation against Byron’s confident portrayal of stereotypical heroines. Consequently, Keats successfully creates a poetic tension in the male-female relationship in the poem, which achieves the aesthetic effect of “negative capability”.

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Notes

Note 1. “La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad” is referred to as “La Belle” hereafter.

Note 2. All the quotations of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” in this paper come from Keats’s early version. Keats composed two versions — the early draft of April 1819 and the version published in *The Indicator*. In the *Indicator* version “knight-at-arms” became “woeful wight,” and the “wight”’s response to la belle dame is more active even masterful while she is more human and naturalized. But the readers have usually preferred the former version. See Kelley’s “Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’” in *Blooms Modern Critical Views: John Keats*, ed. Harold Bloom, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007. pp. 69–70.

Note 3. Here “as” means “as if”.

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