POETICS AND THE POLITICS OF RECEPTION:
KEATS’S “LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI”

BY THERESA M. KELLEY

Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” illustrates the lesson Keats chose to learn from reviewers who criticized the patently factitious rhyme and figuration of his first published poems. For his early critics, these features betray a Cockney poet’s unjustified poetic ambition. For the mature Keats, they register the value of poetic craft and the status of the poet as maker. In “La Belle Dame sans Merci” Keats makes the strongest possible case for this view of his poetic task by presenting the belle dame as a figure whose otherness belongs to allegory, the most factitious of poetic figures. In doing so, he also acknowledges a line of poetic indebtedness and ambition that goes back to Spenser and allegorical romance.

In Keats’s poem the knight and male chorus of kings, princes, and warriors claim that the belle dame has them in “thrall,” even as her literary antecedents have enthralled their lovers. Although critics have rarely questioned this claim, it masks a prior entrapment.¹ As the object of their dread and fascination, she is a fetish, a figure whose alien status is the product of a collective decision to name her “la belle dame sans merci.” Her figurative capture suggests the reciprocal relation between capture and estrangement that exists in poetic figures whose otherness implies an allegorical rather than symbolic structure of meaning. By this I mean that as a figure she resists the instantaneous understanding Coleridge found in Romantic symbols, those figures whose tenor and vehicle are so closely bound (or so represented) that we understand their meaning immediately.² As a poem whose central figure is defined by her antithetical relation to the speakers of the poem and to a long tradition of belle dames, Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” explores the value of poetic figures whose meaning is not intuited but learned. As a figure the belle dame dramatizes what readers of traditional allegory assumed: an allegorical structure of meaning (whether or not the figure in question is part of a fully allegorical narrative) takes time to understand.³

The allegorical otherness of Keats’s belle dame indicates two
ways we might understand the historical consciousness of Romantic figures. First, because the poem that bears her name is evidently riddled with signs of its indebtedness to earlier poems, it presents a strong, perhaps deliberately exaggerated, case for the poetic value of figures that acknowledge their history. Second, because her otherness is a provocative if half-evasive reply to Keats’s early critics, the belle dame makes this reception history part of her meaning.

Read in these terms, Keats’s belle dame suggests how poetic composition may be bound up with the exigencies of publication and critical reception as well as personal circumstance. Clearly the extent to which this mutual binding exists depends on the poet, the occasion for writing, and other circumstances of time, ideology, and place. Until recently, critics have argued that these considerations are marginal, if relevant at all, for reading Keats. Instead, they have often assumed that Keats achieved poetic greatness in part because he transcended the negative criticism that greeted his first published poems. A version of this assessment remains influential among post-structuralist critics. Thus Richard Macksey proposes that as Keats matured he abandoned the “the chatty archaism” of his Cockney style to adopt a simpler, more serene style that renounced much, including the poetic indebtedness of earlier poems.

I suggest instead that as Keats composed then revised “La Belle Dame sans Merci” in 1819 and possibly 1820, he employed provocative elements of his early Cockneyism for specific poetic ends. If, as Jack Stillinger has argued, what distinguishes Keats’s mature poetry is not the emergence of new themes but its style, a curious strength of this style is its exploitation of the Cockney “faults” that characterize Keats’s early imitations of the language of Spenser and the seventeenth-century Spenserians: participial forms that verbalize nouns or nominalize verbs; metrical pauses and rhymes that loosen or demolish the closed neoclassical couplet; and a mannered blend of sensuous details and abstract figures. These intersections among Keats’s poem (both the early draft and the ill-favored Indicator version), its poetic tradition, and his early critical reception mark the terrain of Romantic allegory—that poetic space where history and the otherness of poetic figures meet.

In the first section of this essay, I consider the different figurative values assigned to the belle dame in each version of the poem; in the second and third, how both versions respond to a variety of

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”
sources and contextual pressures. These include its ambiguous generic identity as ballad and allegorical romance, attacks on Keats's Cockneyism, and other poems and letters that reiterate key figures in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The poetic inquiry that holds this matrix of sources and contexts together is Keats's fascination with the allegorical properties of Spenserian figures and emblematic tableaux.  

I. KEATS'S BELLE DAMES

Of the two versions of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" that Keats composed, the early draft of April 1819 and the version published in The Indicator a little more than a year later, readers have usually preferred the former or, more precisely, one of three later transcripts made of it by Charles Brown and Richard Woodhouse. Claiming that Hunt unduly influenced Keats as he revised the poem for Hunt's periodical, most critics and editors have dismissed the Indicator version as aesthetically inferior. In his recent and authoritative edition of Keats's poems, Stillinger prints Brown's 1848 transcript of the early draft and relegates Indicator variants to the critical apparatus. His rationale for doing so is textual: Brown's holographs are in general more reliable than early printed texts of poems Keats composed in 1819 and 1820. Jerome McGann argues to the contrary that since the Indicator version is the only one Keats chose to publish, it is, or should be, the authoritative text. This assessment assists McGann's larger polemic about the ideological bias that prompted the outcry against the Indicator version in the first place. He claims that the "aesthetic" decision in favor of the early draft masks an ideological preference for a Keats untainted by the bad poetic influence of the radical and Cockney Hunt. Though McGann argues persuasively that the Indicator version should no longer be suppressed, I am less persuaded that it is the only version Keats authorized and therefore the only one we ought to read. Instead I suggest that Keats composed the early draft as well as the Indicator version with two quite different audiences in mind—the private family audience of George and Georgiana Keats and the more problematic audience of Indicator readers. Considered as parallel texts, each offers a slightly different belle dame and anticipates a slightly different reception. Both register Keats's oblique reply to the controversy that dominated reviews of his early poetry.

In the Indicator version the "knight-at-arms" of the early draft

Theresa M. Kelley
became a “woeful wight,” an archaic and generic term for a human being or, in this case, a man. Along with other revisions, this one makes the poem more emphatically a ballad about a doomed relationship between a faery woman and a mortal lover. In this version the belle dame shows more human fears—or at least more sadness—and the “wight’s” response to her is more active, even slightly masterful as he “kisse[s her] to sleep.” Unlike the knight, who is lulled to sleep by his faery lover, the wight reports that they both “slumbered on the moss.”

Keats suggests the naturalized, human emphasis of this version by using the English spelling of “mercy” in the title and the text. Whereas the early draft and its later transcripts preserve the French spelling, in the Indicator text the belle dame is half-Englished, as she is in the translation of Alain Chartier’s medieval poem of the same title, which Hunt’s Indicator preface identifies, somewhat misleadingly, as Keats’s source. Keats’s substitution of “mercy” also replaces one ambiguity with another. The French merci may mean pity, compassion or thanks. In the chivalric context of Chartier’s ballad, the “beautiful lady without pity” is she who refuses a lover—in effect, she shows no chivalric politesse, or says “no thanks.” The English “mercy” of the Indicator text abandons the implied chivalric pun. Moreover, its presentation of a belle dame who seems less in control of the love relation encourages us to read her name and the title of the poem as a comment on her woeful predicament as well. Like the wight, she stands in need of the “mercy” neither can expect from a society threatened by her supernatural nature.

McGann contends that the archaism of “wight,” already archaic when Spenser used it in The Faerie Queene, makes the narrator of Keats’s poem more objective by creating a distance between him and the “wight.” Yet this apparent objectivity may be little more than a mask for Keats’s proximity to the wight as well as the narrator. In July 1819, three months after he drafted the first version, Keats was woeful enough as he wrote poems and letters to Fanny Brawne from the Isle of Wight. As his letters make clear, kisses and honey, what the wight of the poem gets from the belle dame, are what John Keats longed to get from Fanny Brawne (L, 2:123, 127). Much as the scene of the poem is an external sign of the wight’s inner desolation, so is the Isle of Wight the scene of letters that emphasize Keats’s isolation from Fanny Brawne. Even if Keats did not compose the “wight” version at this time, the pun-
ning association between the Isle of Wight and the Indicator "wight" was certainly available to him after the summer of 1819. Moreover, in both versions the anaphora that links the narrator's "I" at the beginning of stanza three to the knight/wight's "I" in the next stanza undermines the purported narrative distance between the two speakers.¹⁴

By reversing the order of two stanzas in this version, Keats makes the mutuality of the love relationship take precedence over the wight's eventual enthrallment. In the early draft the knight explains that first he saw the belle dame and made her bands of flowers. Then she "looked at me as she did love, / And made sweet moan." After this he put her on his "pacing steed" and saw nothing else; finally she gave him her wild food. In the early draft the "pacing steed," which waits none too patiently for his owner to cease dallying, signifies the knight's chivalric identity. Thus by putting the belle dame on the horse after she loves him, he implies that her enthrallment has led him to abandon chivalric responsibilities. In the Indicator version the wight puts her on his horse before their exchange of love and gifts. This new sequence presents a different view of the protagonist's role in his own enthrallment. Rather than simply succumbing to the belle dame, he now seems to invite her to enthrall him. Keats's reversal of these stanzas also changes the figurative significance of the steed. Now the sexual implications of a horse and female rider overtake the chivalric emphasis of the earlier version.

Yet the different sexual politics of the two versions does not simply make the Indicator text a less misogynous narrative about men and women in love. As a poetic figure, the belle dame pays a price for her more sympathetic portrait in the published version: in the figurative economy of Keats's revisions, when she becomes a more sympathetic figure she also becomes a less alien one and for this reason less powerful. In the earlier draft her alien, supernatural identity more clearly sets her apart in the eyes of the narrator, the knight, and the chorus of kings, princes, and warriors who warn that she is fatal to human life and society. Figured in these terms, she is their fetish: an object of worship whose supernatural power over them (which they in fact have assigned to her) inspires dread and fascination.¹⁵ As such, she knows that poetic figures become fetishistic if they are presented as powers that hold our attention precisely because they are extra-human. If the fetishistic power presented in the Indicator version illustrates the latent fe-

Theresa M. Kelley 337
tishism in human love relationships which Freud describes, the early draft of the poem gives the same power a wider reference.\textsuperscript{16} There it shows how some figures belong to an allegorical structure of meaning, in part because they call attention to their separate, alien identity as figures.

The first writer to suggest that fetishism is allied to poetic figuration was Charles de Brosses, whose mid-eighteenth-century treatise on fetish gods in Egyptian and African cults prompted later writers to look for fetishism in modern Western cultures as well. Noting that fetishism reflects a universal human tendency to personify things, de Brosses insisted that “this use of metaphor” ("\textit{cet usage des métaphores}") is as natural for “civilized peoples” as it is for “savage nations.”\textsuperscript{17} Although the figurative value of the belle dame in Keats’s early draft is not as overtly declared as, for example, that of Spenser’s Una or Holiness, it is more apparent there than in the \textit{Indicator} version, which David Simpson prefers because he finds in it an indeterminate play of signs and meaning that is absent in the earlier draft. Simpson’s reading ignores the instructive possibility that the figurative status of the belle dame in the early draft dramatizes a necessary, if haunting, risk—the transformation of life and the world into well-wrought urns or, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s phrase, the “fetishization” of the art work.\textsuperscript{18}

In his study of fetishism and imagination in nineteenth-century literature, Simpson argues that Romantic poets avoided fetishism by engaging in “healthy figurative activity,” a continuous process of re-creation by which figures refuse the fixity and alienation that characterize Keats’s belle dame.\textsuperscript{19} As a poet who repeatedly warns himself and readers about the dangers of figures that are lifeless, Wordsworth is Simpson’s exemplary Romantic instance of this refusal. Certainly what Simpson describes is what Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, sought to do. Yet even Wordsworth (or especially Wordsworth) created figures that are fixed as objects of his or a speaker’s poetic attention—a leech-gatherer, a thorn, a blind beggar. It may be more accurate to say that a healthy recognition of the fetishistic tendency inherent in poetic figures is what helps Romantic poets understand their inclination to confuse natural objects, human beings, and poetic figures. In other words, not all Romantic figures are organic symbols, that is, figures in which the literal and the figurative articulate an organic, indivisible whole. Instead, some Romantic figures are so evidently factitious that their otherness as figures has to be recognized.
In Keats’s poem this otherness is a property both of its figures and of their relation to the sources that readers have identified for the poem. For example, in Thomas the Rhymer’s medieval ballad about a faery lady who seduces him then tells him prophecies before abandoning him, Thomas spies an “arbours” of fruits which the lady warns him not to eat if he wishes to save his soul. In most versions of Thomas the Rhymer’s poem that were published in the eighteenth century, including one reprinted in Sir Walter Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, the fruits are pears, apples, dates, figs, wineberry, filberts, and damson (a Mediterranean variety of plum)—all cultivated fruits grown in Europe and the Mediterranean. Scott also discusses an ancient manuscript version in which the lady offers Thomas a loaf of bread and wine after she warns him against this rather Blakean “garden of fruits.” Keats’s version of this story presents a different kind of food. Unlike the cultivated if forbidden fruit of Thomas the Rhymer’s poem or the bread and wine offered in the manuscript Scott describes, roots, wild honey, and manna dew are what Keats’s lady provides. As foods that are wild and heaven sent, they are manifestly “other,” in contrast to the “harvest” mentioned by the narrator as the poem begins.

The belle dame’s food is “other” for another reason: in the discourse of the poem, it signifies her alienation from society, represented by the knight, the narrator, and the male chorus. That is to say, her food remains wild, undomesticated, because these speakers insist on this point, not because wild food cannot be domesticated—by ritual or mythic as well as agricultural means—if a society chooses to do so. In *From Honey to Ashes*, the second in the series on structural anthropology that begins with *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss explains that some South American tribes domesticate honey by converting it into a food that is gathered and distributed according to specific rituals. Among these tribes, several myths tell of a woman who tries to grab honey for herself by defying rituals for gathering and distributing it. (This woman is not authorized to gather honey for the tribe; that job is the woodpecker’s, whom she often marries to get honey.)

These myths and the rituals they authorize pit woman’s greed for honey against a well-orchestrated social network for food production and consumption. By presenting honey as a sign of the belle dame’s alien as well as sexual power, the speakers of Keats’s

*Theresa M. Kelley* 339
poem specify what such myths imply. Yet this difference masks an intriguing parallel. In both cases, social and linguistic processes define the meaning of honey and woman. In Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist analysis such processes domesticate honey and women by assigning them tasks and limits that neutralize or eradicate their “natural” wildness or greediness (or both). In Keats’s poem this process places the belle dame and her food outside the society of speakers represented by the narrator, the knight, and the male chorus of kings, princes, and warriors whose warning the knight receives in a dream. Paradoxically, like all fetishes her alien status is a social, linguistic invention.

In Keats’s early draft and its later transcripts, then, the belle dame is fixed, even impaled by the narrator, the knight, and the chorus as someone who opposes the social plenty of harvest and granary. She is the reason their lips are “starv’d” of everything except incantatory warnings that the knight will repeat their history. The balladic repetition of the opening and closing stanzas emphasizes the collective understanding the figure of the belle dame reflects. In the first stanza the narrator asks the knight why he is “alone and palely loitering” when “The sedge is withered from the lake, / And no birds sing”; in the last one the knight explains that “this”—meaning his union with the belle dame—is why he is “alone and palely loitering.” The fact that both narrator and knight use the same phrases to specify the knight’s situation suggests that each gives the same interpretation to the story he tells. Although the Indicator version has virtually the same opening and closing stanzas, the “this” to which the knight refers in the last stanza is not the same because Keats has altered his story. As a figure with a fixed if different currency in each version, the belle dame makes these mirror exchanges between the narrator and the speaker possible. By presenting the belle dame as a figure whose otherness separates her from the knight despite her evident sympathy for him, Keats makes her figurative enthrallment more apparent and thus more chilling.

II. “LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI” AND POETIC TRADITION

This enthrallment is all the more compelling because it does not end at the border of Keats’s text (or texts). Indeed, insofar as reading “La Belle Dame sans Merci” requires reading its relation to its sources, among them Chartier’s medieval poem of the same title, Thomas the Rhymer’s ballad, and Spenser’s Faerie Queene,
Keats’s poem dramatizes the otherness that prompts its poetic speech.\textsuperscript{24} Keats’s most obvious acknowledgment that extratextual pressures are part of the meaning of his poem is generic. The poem is at once a ballad and an allegorical romance.

Subtitled “A Ballad” in the Brown and Woodhouse transcripts (but not in Keats’s early draft or the \textit{Indicator} version), its ballad meter, rhyme, and stanza make its formal commitment to this genre clear.\textsuperscript{25} This commitment appears to serve two purposes. First, as a genre with a less than exalted position in the neoclassical hierarchy of literary genres, the ballad would be an appropriately humble literary vehicle for a Cockney poet. More immediately, the early Romantic rehabilitation of the ballad, accomplished largely by Scott, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, had made the ballad respectable poetic fare for the next generation of young poets. By writing “La Belle Dame sans Merci” as a ballad, then, Keats may play a double game with his audience. For if writing ballads is on the surface less ambitious than writing in the more aristocratic genres of epic, tragedy, or allegorical romance, writing ballads after Scott and Wordsworth is also a bid for a contemporary poetic fame and audience. The Wordsworthian echo of “her eyes were wild” may assist this double appeal for poetic authority and successorship. This appeal may mask an intriguing, perhaps deliberate tension between Keats’s political sympathy for the liberal values implied in the early Romantic ballads, particularly the \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, and his rejection of the Tory politics adopted by the older Wordsworth. Although he was by 1819 a political ally of those who had criticized Keats’s poetic ambition and his politics, here Wordsworth’s early poetic practice legitimates Keats’s present poetic ambition. Second, whatever the narrative gaps or lack of narrative progress in traditional as well as lyrical ballads, the ballad meter and rhyme of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” keep the poem going or, more to the point, they keep its readers reading. By choosing the ballad form, then, Keats restrains his youthful fondness for the lingering metrical pauses and syntactic inversions that irritated reviewers of \textit{Endymion}.\textsuperscript{26}

The ballad features of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” mask its more problematic relation to Spenser and allegorical romance. As many readers have noted, the union between Keats’s belle dame and knight echoes those between Spenser’s errant knights and evil enchantresses disguised as virtuous women. Specifically, the garland, bracelets, and “fragrant zone” Keats’s knight makes for the

\textit{Theresa M. Kelley} 341
belle dame recall the bands two of Spenser’s knights make for the False Fidessa and False Florimel, as well as the magic girdle the true (if hapless) Florimel loses as she flees would-be despoilers. Although Keats’s belle dame is not, like Spenser’s deceitful simulacra, False Fidessa and False Florimel, antitruth, she is a figure for the “erring” of meaning that allegorical truth requires in The Faerie Queene.27

Not content to make the lady just one band of flowers, Keats’s knight makes her three, a garland, bracelet, and fragrant “zone.” Considered together, they are a redundant visual sign of Keats’s indebtedness to Spenser, an emblematic portrait something like the pictorial tableaux Spenser uses to reveal and conceal allegorical meaning. Keats’s knight presents the belle dame as though he were listing details in an emblem or a Spenserian tableau, among them her long hair, light foot, and wild eyes, as well as the gifts she receives and the food she gives. Along with her tears and sighs, these are the signs of who or what she is. Neither the reader nor the knight is privy to her inner thoughts. As a figure known exclusively by her attributes, then, the belle dame is alien to her human observers, and alien in a thoroughly Spenserian manner. For if she is clearly not a full-fledged allegorical figure like Spenser’s Fidessas and Florimels, she shares their emblematic separateness.

As a poetic figure borrowed from a long tradition and defined within the discourse of Keats’s poem, the belle dame of the early draft directs our attention to the alienation of other figures in the poem, including the landscape, the knight, and the chorus. Of these, the human characters are the most suggestive, since the figures Keats invents to depict them are themselves alienated from their referent—death or its approach. This “language strange,” thoroughly Keatsian by way of Spenser, illustrates how figurative meaning tends to “err,” half-mistaking itself as it wanders from its referent in ways that dramatize the allegorical potential of figures as factitious and referential signs.

Two deletions in the early draft make it clear that the lily and fading rose the narrator “sees” on the knight’s countenance are Petrarchan figures of death. Keats first wrote but then crossed out “death’s” in the phrases “death’s lily” and “death’s fading rose.” Scholars have suggested several sources for these figures, including Tom Keats’s death of tuberculosis in the winter of 1818. In his copy of Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, Keats underlined
Drayton's use of the same Petrarchan figures in one of his Heri-
call Epistles. In Drayton's poem an abandoned female lover uses
the terms "Rosie-blush" and "lily-vale" to indicate that she grows
"pale" and is about to die. The visual source for the "death's lily"
or "lily" in Keats's poem is probably William Hilton's early nine-
teenth-century painting The Mermaid. On exhibit in Sir John Lei-
cester's gallery when Keats visited it in early April, 1819, the
painting depicts a knight lying dead in a mermaid's lap with a
water-lily on his brow.28

Keats's poem alters the way readers construe the visual aspects
of its figures. We are not likely to think of them as visual or visu-
alizable in the same way that the water-lily of Hilton's painting is.
Instead we are more likely to assume that the lily and rose on the
knight's face are poetic figures because their obvious Petrar-
chanism invites us to make this assumption. By forcing us to notice
what these figures do as figures, Keats emphasizes their man-
nered, Spenserian relation to their referents. Both the figures that
describe the knight's face and the "starv'd lips" of the "death-pale"
chorus are death-masks; they have the look a face assumes just
before death or in a death-like state of exhaustion.29 The difference
is of course that the chorus is dead and the knight isn't dead yet.
Even so, each of these figures emphasizes what is left—remnants
of life that is going or gone. As fixed, residual, even disembodied
images, they signify death or its approach much as the cheshire
cat's smile is a lingering, residual sign of the cheshire cat. None of
these is a fetish, yet all are detached, and as such patently objects
of poetic attention. The material separateness that is part of the
aura of the primitive fetish—whether it is a stone, a carved stick,
or something else—is oddly yet appropriately reborn in these
figures.

III. "HONEY WILD AND MANNA DEW"

Two revisions in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" register the cli-
mate of reception embedded in the figurative project of the poem.
The first revision appears in the stanza where the knight presents
the belle dame's gifts of food and "language strange" as syntacti-
cally parallel. The second reveals Keats's half-playful, half-serious
recognition of earlier critical objections to his rhymes. Considered
together, these revisions help to define the intersection between
Keats's early reception and his mature poetics.

In both versions of the poem, the knight declares:

Theresa M. Kelley
She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna dew,  
And sure in language strange she said—  
I love three true.

(25–28; my emphasis)

The perplexities of language and truth implied by the knight’s conviction that he understands what she tells him recall the Spenserian dilemma of mistaking the false Florimel for the true one and vice versa. A stronger perplexity in Keats’s poem concerns the status of its key figures, whose sensuous details contend with their abstract or semi-abstract meaning in ways that make the language of the poem alien poetic food.

Nineteenth-century readers who objected to Keats’s poetry often attacked his frequent use of food and eating imagery to represent poetic or sexual longing. Byron repeatedly charged that Keats indulged in “onanism” or “mental masturbation,” while Carlyle somewhat less harshly chastized Keats for his insatiable and infantile desire for “treacle.” In his more sympathetic account of Keatsian treacle, Christopher Ricks suggests that the risk of this diction is the unsettled middle ground it occupies between primitive sensuality and self-conscious poetic refinement. Ricks astutely observes that nineteenth-century criticism of Keats’s frequent use of “honey” as a poetic figure shows just how provocative this poetic strategy was.30

Even before he wrote the notorious phrase “honey-feel of bliss” in Endymion (1.903), “honey” was for Keats a figure for poetic language. For example, he began an 1817 verse in praise of “The Flour and the Leafe,” a poem then attributed to Chaucer, with this simile:

This pleasant tale is like a copse:
The honied lines do freshly interlace
To keep the reader in so sweet a place

(1–3)

Ricks notes a more personal use of “honied” in an acrostic verse on his name which Keats composed for his sister-in-law Georgiana Keats in 1818 (L, 2:123). A year later “honey” reappears in two letters he wrote to Fanny Brawne from the Isle of Wight. On July 1, 1819, he asks her to kiss the “softest words” she writes in her next letter. A week later, replying to her reply, he writes: “I kiss’d your writing over in the hope you had indulg’d me by leaving a

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”
trace of honey” (L, 2:127). In his last letter to Fanny Brawne, Keats recalls his earlier use of “honey” as a figure for desire by figuring the barriers to that desire as bitter in taste. He tells her he cannot be happy without her because “everything else tastes like chaff in my Mouth.” Rebelling against plans then being made for his departure for Italy, he declares: “the fact is I cannot leave you, and shall never taste one minute’s content until it pleases chance to let me live with you for good.” Echoing lines from the abandoned Hyperion, he complains, “the last two years taste like brass upon my Palate (L, 2:311–12).31

In “The Eve of St. Agnes” “honey” assists the provocative sensuality that is the crux of the modern critical debate about the poem. For some readers the poem is a quasi-allegorical narrative whose sensuous diction serves a non-sensuous end. For others it is a thoroughly sensual and rakish poem about the deception and seduction of a maid who doesn’t quite know what is happening until it has happened. Earl Wasserman defends the first view, arguing that Porphyro’s gifts of food and sex are ultimately transmuted into “a finer tone,” whereas Jack Stillinger contends that the “solution sweet” of Porphyro and Madeline is preeminently a sexual act that concludes the “hoodwinking of Madeline” which began with her enthrallment by “enchantments cold” (299—318). The last to assist in this hoodwinking is Porphyro, whose seduction of Madeline begins with the exotic foods and spices he heaps beside her bed and ends when he joins her there.32

Although the sensuous imagery of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” is less overtly provocative, its echoes of “The Eve of St. Agnes” also explore the unsettled middle ground of Keatsian figuration. Much as Porphyro plays the melody of “La belle dame sans mercy” (292) to assist his seduction of Madeline, so does Keats’s version of this “ancient ditty long since mute” seek to persuade readers to accept a mature version of the figurative project that his early critics had dismissed as vulgar Cockneyism. It is not surprising that other textual resonances linking the two poems concern the figure of “honey.” According to “The Eve of St. Agnes,” legend has it that maidens will receive “soft adorings” their future lovers “upon the honey’d middle of the night” (49). In his astute analysis of this revision of a line from Measure for Measure (“the heavy middle of the night”), Ricks emphasizes the “delighted physicality” of Keats’s figure.33 The noun “honey” figures in a series of revisions that extend from this poem to “La Belle Dame sans

Theresa M. Kelley 345
Merci,” where Keats’s successive revisions of the line “And honey wild and manna dew” echo his revisions of a line in “The Eve of St. Agnes.” In the final text of the latter poem the line in question reads, “Manna and dates, in argosy transferr’d / From Fez” (268–69). Remarking that this is “the most worked over line in all of Keats’s MSS,” Stillinger proposes that the sequence of revisions probably began with two different attempts to include “Manna wild” among the foods Porphyro heaps beside Madeline. A few months after he drafted this poem, Keats rehearsed the same textual debate as he composed “La Belle Dame sans Merci.” In the phrase that became “honey wild and manna dew” in the final text of the draft version, Keats replaced “honey dew” with “manna dew” and restored the “wild” dropped from the manuscript of “The Eve of St. Agnes.”

The textual and figurative implications of these revisions go back to Keats’s early critical reception. Among the charges levied against Endymion in the 1818 reviews were several pointed criticisms of his frequent use of “honey” as a figure (and an adjective). For example, the anonymous reviewer for the British Critic complained that by using phrases like “honey-dew,” and “the honey-feel of bliss” the poet of Endymion repeated the stylistic excesses of Leigh Hunt’s poetry. Reviewing Endymion for the Quarterly Review, John Croker cited the second phrase to show how Keats “spawns” new nouns to replace those he has transformed into verbs. The implied premise of this objection is syntactic decorum: using the noun “honey” as an adjective or as the adjective portion of an invented compound word violates the legislated boundaries of syntax. The poetic implications of Keats’s lawlessness (and Croker’s critique), however, extend beyond matters of syntax. By verbalizing nouns, Keats layers his poetic texture much as Spenser’s allegorical tableaux layer descriptive and sensuous details. Keats acknowledges this literary debt in his early poem “In Imitation of Spenser,” where the noun “oar” is verbalized: the king-fisher “oar’d himself along with majesty” (15). Forty years later, in an otherwise favorable assessment of Keats’s poetry, the Victorian editor and critic David Masson cited the by then infamous phrase “honey-feel of bliss” to demonstrate Keats’s occasional poetic vulgarity. For Keats’s contemporaries and his later critics, syntactic irregularity signals a broader debate about the self-absorbed blend of sensuous details and abstract, or semi-abstract, poetic figures to which such irregularities call attention.
When Keats revised the early draft of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," then, he tacitly acknowledged the objection raised by the reviewers for the British Critic and the Quarterly by substituting "manna" for the second "honey" in the line that originally read: "And honey wild, and honey dew." Yet if this revision removed an obvious invitation for criticism, the final version of the line retains a strong poetic reminder of Keats’s desire to participate in the great tradition of English poets—the Miltonic inversion of "honey wild." Moreover, his syntactic error remains even after the removal of the second "honey." For whatever else "manna" is, it too is a noun that here serves as an adjective; moreover, its figurative task is at least as provocatively Keatsian as that of "honey dew." Because "manna" signifies supernatural rather than human food, its appearance in the list of foods the belle dame gives the knight emphatically reiterates the uneasy blend of sensuous and semi-allegorical details that troubled Keats’s early critics.

The rhetorical figure suggested by this and similar Keatsian figures is catachresis, a "harsh" or "unnatural" figure whose misuse or misapplication of one category for another forces us to acknowledge it as a figure. To borrow Joseph Priestley’s example, when trees are called the "hair of mountains, or the walls of cities their cheeks," the figure is a catachresis. Although Keats’s early critics do not specifically charge him with this "figure of abuse," their critique of his poetic language emphasizes the unnaturalness of its figures, particularly those that appear in an allegorical or quasi-allegorical context. Keats’s repeated use of "honey" as a figure thus signals a larger, more troubling, figurative deformation that his early critics called "vulgar Cockneyism," either because that is what they believed it was or because they wanted to dismiss his poetic radicalism by presenting it as the uneducated, pretentious ravings of a lower class versifier. In different ways, both versions of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" anticipate possible critical objections to its figurative argument. The Indicator version minimizes the allegorizing tendencies of the early draft, making it less easy to abuse this version for its unnatural figuration. At the same time, this published version flaunts its Cockney sensuousness. The unpublished early draft is more daring insofar as it emphasizes the tension between its sensuous and semi-allegorical referents. When Keats revised this draft in his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, he removed the most obvious markers of its radical poetic argument.

Theresa M. Kelley 347
By making the love relationship between the wight and the belle dame the focus of the *Indicator* text, Keats draws attention away from the allegorizing tendency of details like the belle dame’s food. For this reason, the association between honey and language receives less notice than the more natural or more sensuous association between honey and desire. Yet Keats also makes this sensuousness more provocative by signing the poem with the pseudonym “Caviare.” Taken from a speech in which Hamlet explains that a play did not succeed because it was “caviare to the general,” that is, food too rich or elevated for plebian tastes, the pseudonym ironically presents the poet and the poem as just this kind of poetic food. Keats thus makes it clear that he is still the Cockney poet who dares to offer the public a poetic fare that is supposed to be beyond his and their capabilities—a reminder that is all the more pungent for its appearance in one of Hunt’s periodicals. Critics who have supposed that Hunt dictated the *Indicator* revisions usually claim that the pseudonym was also his idea.\(^{38}\)

This claim is suspect for two reasons. The first concerns the authorship of the *Indicator* revisions. Keats may have written them himself either before Hunt decided to print the poem in *The Indicator* or for the occasion of its publication. As Stillinger and Hyder Rollins note, after Georgiana Keats’s death her second husband John Jeffrey sent a list of Keats’s verse manuscripts in his possession that included a poem whose first line is “Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight.”\(^{39}\) If Jeffrey’s description is accurate, Keats must have sent the *Indicator* version as well as the early draft to his brother and sister-in-law between the spring of 1819 and the publication of the later version. Even if Keats composed the *Indicator* version just before its publication, he would hardly have sent it to George and Georgiana Keats if he thought it inferior to the early draft. Instead, it seems likely that he sent it along so that his best familial audience could compare it to the draft. Second, the turns and countturns in Keats’s friendship with Hunt after the *Endymion* reviews strongly suggest that by 1820 Keats could no longer be unduly influenced by his early mentor. Keats’s sharp-eyed criticisms of Hunt’s character and talent in 1817 and 1818 show that the younger poet had become a good deal less suggestible than he had been earlier in their friendship. Perhaps because Hunt’s poetic influence had cost Keats much, he had reason enough to learn what he did and did not value in Hunt. Even in the spring and summer of 1820, when an ill Keats was grateful to

348

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”
Hunt for his kindness, their personal relationship was not smooth. Keats angrily left the Hunt household when one of his letters was opened by a servant. Afterward he said he had been a “prisoner” while staying with the Hunts.40

I review these matters to suggest another view of the Keats-Hunt collaboration for the two poems Keats published in the Indicator. Even if the “Caviare” pseudonym was Hunt’s idea, its allusion to Hamlet is one Keats himself might have chosen to defend his poetic Cockneyism. Instead of being led by Hunt, he probably recognized that publishing one of his poems in a Hunt periodical would inevitably create an ideologically charged context for its reception. For this reason, Keats may have shaped the poem and its pseudonym to fit the goals and intended audience of this periodical in ways that would invite a more sympathetic reception than his early published poetry had received.41

Attached to a poem where honey is a figure for forbidden, probably fatal food, Keats’s pseudonym exploits the resonances of the title Hunt chose for The Indicator. Commenting on the first of two mottoes that appear at the beginning of the first eight issues, Hunt explains that, like the Indicator (also known as the Bee Cuckoo or Honey Bird), an African bird that instinctively guides bees to honey, his “business is with the honey of the old woods”—stories from antique literature and mythology gathered to entertain readers.42 The second motto, which Hunt retained throughout the run of The Indicator, is taken from Spenser’s The Fate of the Butterfly, or Muiopotmos, which had earlier supplied Keats with the epigraph for Sleep and Poetry:

There he arriving round about doth flie,  
And takes survey with busie curious eye;  
Now this, now that, he tasteth tenderly.43

Although the “he” in these lines refers to the butterfly whose fate Spenser’s poem describes, the analogy suggested by these lines works equally well for the bee of Hunt’s title.

In the first issue of The Indicator, Hunt refers obliquely to the political turmoil in which he had long been embroiled as editor of The Examiner to insist that his new periodical will be apolitical: “the Editor has enough to agitate his spirits during the present eventful times, in another periodical work.” Yet if The Indicator was not intended to be and never became identified with a specific political program, Hunt’s assessment of its intended audience in-

Theresa M. Kelley 349
vokes the old squabble about Keats and Hunt as charter members of the “Cockney School of Poetry”:

To the unvulgar he [Hunt as Editor] exclusively addresses himself; but he begs it to be particularly understood, that in his description of persons are to be included all those, who without having had a classical education, would have turned it to right account; just as all those are to be excluded, who in spite of that “discipline of humanity,” think ill of the nature which they degrade, and vulgarly confound the vulgar with the uneducated.44

This appeal to an audience not necessarily trained in the classics offers a new perspective on that debate. Instead of preparing to defend contributors to his new periodical against similar charges, Hunt chooses to imagine and invite an audience less likely to object to him or his contributors. Mindful of the class bias evident in Lockhart’s charge that in Endymion Keats used classical materials without benefit of a classical education, Hunt proposes a new distinction between the vulgar and the unvulgar: the vulgar are those who consider people who are uneducated in the classics vulgar. Hunt’s intended audience is “the unvulgar,” a group that includes, among others, those who lack a classical education but who, had they had one, would have “turned it to right account.” By this Hunt presumably means that they would not have used it to bludgeon the reputations of poets who lacked training in classical languages and literature.

Seen from the perspective of the Indicator mottoes and Hunt’s description of its intended audience, the Indicator version of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” plays an intriguing double game with its probable reception. By emphasizing the erotic, sensuous appeal of its story for a plebeian (that is, middle class) palate eager to be offered the rich poetic food that better educated critics would deny them, Keats both allies himself with the audience for which The Indicator was intended and taunts his early critics. Yet because the Indicator version mutes the figurative argument of the early draft, where the alliance between sensuous details and the fetishistic powers of its key figures is more prominently displayed, this taunt operates on safe ground. In the preface to the Indicator version, Hunt assists this strategy by suggesting that, like its medieval source, Keats’s poem is a love story. Precisely because the published context and text of the Indicator “La Belle Dame sans Merci” emphasize the love relation between a wight and a faery

350

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”
lady, the differences between this version and the early draft make the figurative risks of the draft more apparent.

Another revision in the draft version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" marks a second intersection between the critical reception of *Endymion* and Keats's mature poetics. To defuse possible objections to rhymes richer in sound than earlier critics wanted them to be, Keats replaced these lines in the early draft,

> And there she wept and sigh’d full sore  
> And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
> With kisses four,

with the lines printed in the *Indicator* text:

> And there she gazed and sighed deep.  
> And there I shut her wild sad eyes—  
> So kissed to sleep.

In the journal-letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats's adroit defense of the original "sore"/"four" rhyme suggests why the rhyme he later chose for the *Indicator* version would be even less likely to invite the kind of criticism leveled at the end-rhymes of *Endymion*:

> Why 4 kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fain 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: and to speak truly I think two a piece quite sufficient—Suppose I had said seven; there would have been three and a half a piece—a very awkward affair—and well got out of on my side.

L, 2:97

John Crowe Ransom's examples of single, duple and triple perfect rhyme or *rime riche* make its potential for excess apparent: "Keats-beets"; "Shelley-jelly"; "Tennyson-venison."45 By substituting the less suggestive rhyme "deep"/"sleep" in the *Indicator* version, Keats retained the perfect rhyme but avoided the patently archaic sensuousness of the original rhyme ("sighed full sore"/"kisses four"). Much as this revisionary strategy declares

*Theresa M. Kelley*
Keats's apprehensiveness about the reception of the poem, so does the *Indicator* revision suggest that he gave up the sensuousness of the early draft as one too many provocations in a version that makes amorousness its theme.

The apparent defensiveness of Keats's revision may mask a more aggressive stance toward neoclassical (and Tory) values implied and declared in negative reviews of *Endymion*. As William Keach and others have observed, reviewers attacked the Cockney couplets of *Endymion* because they undermined the poetic and political values identified with the neoclassical couplet. Croker in particular singled out Keats's rhymes for special blame, arguing that Keats played the game of *bouts rimes* badly by writing rhymes that were still nonsense at the end of the poem. The point of this complaint is not that Keats should have played the game better, but that he should not have played it at all. The implied neoclassical touchstone for Croker's criticism is an issue of the *Spectator* devoted to a discussion of false wit. Using the game of *bouts rimes* as one example, Joseph Addison chastized the French for inventing the game and then playing it relentlessly. According to Croker, then, Keats's rhymes display both his poetic shortcomings and a penchant for foreign affectation. A year later, in his 1819 letter to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats chose to defend a rhyme in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" by playing *bouts rimes* to show how much more mannered and self-conscious he could have been. Had he written "kisses score," the resulting "sore"/"score" rhyme would have been, if anything, a Keatsian version of *rime très riche*. Moreover, so many kisses would have been a Keatsian excess of another kind.

In this witty and rebellious reply to his early critics, Keats presents himself as someone whose rhymes exemplify poetic restraint, not Cockney license. Yet his playful inventory of possible rhymes also suggests that he could let rhymes dictate to sense if he chose, as Francis Jeffrey later accused Keats of doing in his 1820 review *Endymion*. This notice of the potential lawlessness of rhyme belongs to Keats's larger poetic recognition of the factitious, at times arbitrary, character of poetic figures as well. In his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats implies this alliance between rhyme and figure when he explains his choice of rhyme as though it were a compromise among the half-personified, abstract forces of "Imagination," "Critics," and "Judgment"—all key elements in reviews of *Endymion*. The plural "Critics" pointedly
shows how badly Keats and his defenders were outnumbered in that battle. If Keats appears to grant the merit of some of this criticism when he chooses (or says he chooses) to temper his imagination with judgment, the language he uses to make this point shows him as willing as before to create poetic figures that are factitious and semi-abstract and, in doing so, to transform real critics into abstract ones.

The tentative allegory implied by this half-playful, half-serious defense of the rhyme Keats eliminated altogether in the Indicator version echoes an allusion to Spenserian allegory in the journal entry that precedes this one in his long letter of February 14 to May 3, 1819. Explaining that he had agreed to review Reynolds’s parody of Wordsworth’s Peter Bell, which had not yet been published, Keats quotes the first section of his review to show how “politic” it is:

This false florimel has hurried from the press and obtruded herself into public notice while for ought we know the real one may be still wandering about the woods and mountains. Let us hope she may soon appear and make good her right to the magic girdle—The Pamphleteering Archimage we can perceive has rather a splenetic love than a downright hatred to real florimels.

(L, 2:93)

By using a Spenserian conceit to make the truth or falseness of an allegorical character a figure for the difference between a real poem and its parody, Keats can be in good “conscience” about reviewing the parody before the real thing. The conceit also suggests a Spenserian antecedent for the syntactic parallel between “language strange” and “honey” in “La Belle Dame sans Merci.” Two echoes, or putative echoes, link Keats’s poem to this review: Florimel’s “girdle” reappears in Keats’s poem as one of the knight’s gifts and florimel is “language strange” for “flower honey” (the same “language strange” used in Chartier’s poem). Although Keats does not mention this etymology in his letter, Spenser’s blend of allegorical abstraction and sensuous detail in his portraits of Florimel and other ladies, both false and true, suggests why Keats admired “honey’d lines,” including his own.

Much as Spenser’s allegorical romance makes erring—in the double sense of making mistakes and wandering—the condition of knowing or discerning allegorical truth, so do Keats’s sensuous and

Theresa M. Kelley
semi-abstract figures elicit readings that err between sensuous detail and abstract meaning. Wandering and making mistakes about which category is which are what readers do to find out how Keatsian figures work. Thus, for example, the interpretive mistake of thinking the belle dame a deceiving enchantress (like Spenser's false ladies) makes it easier to see that she is neither false nor true, but simply alien. By this I do not mean that Keats's figurative truth is relative or, conversely, that Spenser's is fixed. My point is rather that Keats's poetic figures, like Spenser's allegory, persistently work the terrain between referential truth and its representation, borrowing obliquely from one to characterize the other. Specifically, the materiality of Keats's figures—those "honey-feels" that disgusted his early critics because they consorted with archaic, semi-abstract figures like Spenser's—belong to his signifying practice, much as the realia of Spenser's emblematic portraits belong to their referents.

When Keats's early critics attacked the lusciousness of his diction and rhyme, they blundered on the network of poetic concerns and figures that Keats later clarified in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Both versions of the poem, but especially the early draft, retain the essence of Keats's Cockney style—its odd blend of sensuous and archaic or semi-abstract figures—to represent the belle dame. In the early draft, she dramatizes the consequences, for art and for life, of turning natural objects and human beings into poetic figures or poetic abstractions. As Keats's version of a traditional personification, the enchantress who enthralls human lovers, her sympathetic qualities are subordinated to her fixed, supernatural value in the poem as a semi-abstract figure. So regarded, she is an object animated by the supernatural powers Keats and the speakers of the poem attribute to her. Like a fetish, whose material fixity is one sign of its special status, her identity isolates her. By presenting the belle dame in this way, Keats examines how and why some poetic figures are patently alien objects of a speaker's attention. Like Keats's nightingale and grecian urn, she shows how such figures are alien poetic powers that hold our attention precisely because they are extra-human.

Unlike Romantic symbols, whose figurative meaning is presented as an organic, simultaneous extension of their literal meaning, Romantic figures that tend toward allegory emphasize the fact that their meaning is not organic, not simultaneously understood. Such figures encourage historical awareness among

"La Belle Dame sans Merci"
readers. Unlike symbols, whose meaning is supposed to be understood at first glance, allegories require a process of reading and reflection. So understood, Keats’s belle dame presents one model for the presence of history and allegory in Romantic figures.

University of Texas at San Antonio

NOTES

I began work on this essay while a fellow of The Society for the Humanities, Cornell University. I am grateful to its director, Jonathan Culler, and staff for their support of the larger study of allegory from which this essay is taken, to audiences at University of Rochester and the 1985 Convention of the Modern Language Association who commented on earlier versions, and to Peter Manning and Susan Wolfson for their responses to the final version.

1 Those who read the poem as a narrative about the knight’s enthrallment include: Dorothy Van Ghent, Keats: The Myth of the Hero, ed. Jeffrey C. Robinson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 63–64, 128; Robert Graves, who identifies the belle dame with various literary enchantresses and concludes that she represents “Love, Death by Consumption . . . and Poetry” (The White Goddess, 3rd. ed., enlarged [1971; reprinted, London: Faber and Faber, 1972], 429–32); Charles I. Patterson, Jr., who, although he argues that Keats’s belle dame is not evil but a neutral daemonic force, also assumes that the knight in the only one who is enthralled in the poem (The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970], 128–29); and Richard Macksey, who presents the belle dame as someone who (like Keats’s Lamia) “imprison[s]” the knight and “exile[s] him from the human” (“’To Autumn’ and the Music of Mortality: ‘Pure Rhetoric of a Language without Words’,” in Romanticism and Language, ed. Arden Reed [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985], 270n. But in La Belle Dame sans Merci and the Aesthetics of Romanticism (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1974), Barbara Fass notes that the belle dame is not always presented as a deceitful enchantress (18); and in Keats the Poet (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), Stuart Sperry observes that the tradition from which Keats derives his belle dame includes several Januslike figures who are both benevolent and malevolent (237). In a paper delivered at the 1985 Convention of the Modern Language Association, Karen Swann presents a strong feminist reading of the belle dame’s enthrallment by the narrator and speakers of the poem.


4 For example, Lionel Trilling argued in “The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters” that one source of Keats’s genius is his geniality, which allowed him to discern the larger poetic or philosophical implications of his and others’ private concerns. This claim assumes that Keats’s poetic achievement derives in part from his ability to tran-
scend personal crises like the hostile reception of his early poetry. See Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 11–19. Working against Trilling’s biographical emphasis, de Man argued that Keats’s poems are “the work of a man whose experience is mainly literary” principally because he kept “his capacity for personal happiness in reserve” for a better future he did not live to see. Like Keats, de Man turns this biographical pathos into metaphors for poetry and a program for reading. See de Man, ed., *John Keats: Selected Poetry* (New York: Signet NAL, 1966), Introduction, xi. Once again, this critical perspective presents Keats’s poetry as an achievement wrought outside the fray of personal circumstance and public opinion. In an astute essay on the ideology of genre in “To Autumn,” Geoffrey Hartman proposed that the ode surpasses the sublime ode of his predecessors by offering figures of death whose impersonal tranquility rejects the hysteria of earlier odes as well as Keats’s mortal fears after the death of his brother Tom. See Hartman, “Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats’s “To Autumn,”” in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 146. For all these strong readers of Keats, one mark of his poetic greatness is his superiority to circumstances of career and biography. Jerome McGann invited renewed attention to the relation between Keats’s politics and his poetics in “Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism,” *Modern Language Notes* 94 (December 1979): 988–1032. See too the valuable discussion of this topic in a print forum on “Keats and Politics” in *Studies in Romanticism* 25 (Summer 1986): 171–229. Contributors include Susan Wolfson, Morris Dickstein, William Keach, David Bromwich, Paul H. Fry, and Alan J. Bewell.

5 Macksey (note 1), 264.


7 Robert Gittings offers a tactful discussion of Spenser and the allied contexts indexed in the long journal-letter in which the early draft of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” appears in *John Keats: The Living Year* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1954), 113–23.


10 McGann, 1000–1005.


12 *The Indicator*, No. 31 (May 10, 1820), 246–47. Keats probably took little more than his title from Chartier’s poem, a chivalric love *debat* between the narrator (the hopeful but finally disappointed suitor) and the unwilling lady who, he complains, lacks compassion. Robert Graves rightly emphasizes Keats’s stronger debt to Thomas the Rhymer’s medieval ballad about an encounter with a faery woman. See Graves, 430.

13 McGann, 1002.

“La Belle Dame sans Merci”
10 Simpson, Fetishism and Imagination, 14.
22 Kenneth Gross points out that whereas manna is an exilic, Old Testament food for prophets and their peoples, honey is mentioned in post-exilic and New Testament narratives as a food for prophets. By using both in his version of "an ancient ditty," Keats elaborates the range of prophecy granted Thomas the Rhymer by his lady.
24 Allott (note 11) lists these sources in her edition, 500–506. See also Sperry’s (note 1) analysis of the significance of Keats’s allusion to Spenser, 236–39.
28 Allott (note 11) points out Keats’s echoes of Burton’s Melancholy and mentions his visit to Sir John Leicester’s gallery, 501.
29 For a discussion of the allegorical properties of facies hippocratia, a death mask or death’s head, see Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 53.
31 In his edition of the letters Rollins cites H. Buxton Forman’s notice of the Hyperion echo: “Instead of sweets, his ample palate took / Savour of poisonous brass and metal sick” (1:188–89).

Theresa M. Kelley

357
“La Belle Dame sans Merci”
APPENDIX

La belle dame sans merci—
O what can ail thee knight at a[r]ms
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the Lake
And no birds sing!
O what can ail thee knight at a[r]ms
So haggard and so woe begone?
The squirrel’s granary is full
And the harvest’s done.

I see (death’s) lilly on thy brow
With anguish moist and fewer dew,

And on thy cheeks (death’s) fading rose
Fast Withereth too—
I met a Lady in the (Wills) Meads
Full beautiful, a faery’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(s)
She look’d at me as she’d 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 faerys song—
She found me roots of relish sweet
manna
And honey wild and (honey) dew
And sure in language strange she said
I love thee true—
She took me to her elfin grot
and sigh’d full sore
(And there she sighed full sore)
And there she wept
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.
And there she lulled me asleep
And there I drean’d Ah Woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side

Theresa M. Kelley
I saw pale kings and Princes too
   Pale warriors death pale were they all
They cried La belle dame sans merci
   Thee hath in thrall.

I saw their starv’d lips in the gloam
   (All tremble) gaped
   With horrid warning wide (agape)
And I awoke and found me here
   On the cold hill’s side

And this is way I (wither) sojourn here
   Alone and palely loitering;
Though the sedge is wither’d from the Lak[e]
   And no birds sing— —          —

Letter to G. G. Keats, April 21 or 28, 1819

La Belle Dame sans Merci:
   A Ballad

1
O what can ail thee, knight at arms,
   Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither’d from the lake,
   And no birds sing.

2
5
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.

3
I see a lily on thy brow
10
   With anguish moist and fewer dew,
   And on thy cheeks a fading rose
   Fast withereth too.

4
I met a lady in the meads,
15
   Full beautiful, a fairy’s child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
   And her eyes were wild.

5
I made a garland for her head,
20
   And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look’d at me as she did love,
   And made sweet moan.
6
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.

7
She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
I love three true.

8
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.

9
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.

10
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!"

11
I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

12
And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Brown transcript, ed. Stillinger (1978)

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCY.
Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Theresa M. Kelley
Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
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 cheek a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

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

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.

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 gaz’d and sighed deep,
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—
So kiss’d to sleep.

And there we slumber’d on the moss,
And there I dream’d, ah woe betide,
The latest dream I ever dream’d
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cried, “La belle Dame sans mercy
Hath thee in thrall!”

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

CAVIARE.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci"