

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.⁴

1819

1838

La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad¹

i

O what can ail thee, knight at arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge^o has wither'd from the lake, *rushes*
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

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

4

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

5

20 I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;²
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

25 She found me roots of relish^o sweet, *flavor*
And honey wild, and manna dew,

4. In the earlier version: "Half passionless, and so swoon on to death."

1. The title, though not the subject, was taken from a medieval poem by Alain Chartier and means "The Lovely Lady without Pity." The story of a mortal destroyed by his love for a supernatural femme fatale has been told repeatedly in myth, fairy tale, and ballad. The text printed here is

Keats's earlier version of the poem, as transcribed by Charles Brown. The version published in 1820 begins, "Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight."

Keats imitates a frequent procedure of folk ballads by casting the poem into the dialogue form. The first three stanzas are addressed to the knight, and the rest of the poem is his reply.

2. Belt (of flowers).

And sure in language strange she said—
I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot^o *cave*
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.³

9

And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!
The latest⁴ dream I ever dream'd *last*
On the cold hill's side.

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

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

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

Apr. 1819

1820

Sonnet to Sleep

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting with careful fingers and benign
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
5 O soothest⁵ Sleep! if so it please thee, close, *softest*
In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,
Or wait the Amen ere thy poppy⁶ throws
Around my bed its lulling charities.
Then save me or the passed day will shine
10 Upon my pillow, breeding many woes:
Save me from curious⁷ conscience, that still hoards *scrupulous*
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like the mole;

3. Keats commented in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, "Why four kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have 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."
1. Opium is made from the dried juice of the opium poppy.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI: A BALLAD

I

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

II

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.

III

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

IV

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

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

I

Perché soffri, o cavaliere in armi,
E pallido indugi e solo?
Sono avvizziti qui i giunchi in riva al lago,
E nessun uccello cantando prende il volo.

II

Perché soffri, o cavaliere in armi,
E disfatto sembri e desolato?
Colmo è il granaio dello scoiattolo,
E il raccolto è già ammucciato.

III

Scorgo un giglio sulla tua fronte,
Imperlata d'angoscia e dalla febbre inumidita;
E sulla tua guancia c'è come una rosa morente,
Anch'essa troppo in fretta sfiorita.

IV

Per i prati vagando una donna
Ho incontrato, bella oltre ogni linguaggio,
Figlia d'una fata: i capelli aveva lunghi,
Il passo leggero, l'occhio selvaggio.

V

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.

VI

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

VII

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

VIII

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.

IX

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.

V

Una ghirlanda le preparai per la fronte,
Poi dei braccialeffi, e profumato un cinto:
Lei mi guardò come se mi amasse,
E dolce emise un gemito indistinto.

VI

Sul mio destriero al passo la posi,
E altro non vidi per quella giornata,
Ché lei dondolandosi cantava
Una dolce canzone incantata.

VII

Mi trovò radici di dolce piacere,
E miele selvatico, e stille di manna;
Sicuramente nella sua lingua strana
Mi diceva, «Sii certo, il mio amore non t'inganna».

VIII

E mi portò alla sua grotta fatata,
Ove pianse tristemente sospirando;
Poi i selvaggi suoi occhi selvaggi le chiusi,
Entrambi doppiamente baciando.

IX

Poi fu lei che cullandomi
M'addormentò – e, me sciagurato,
Sognai l'ultimo sogno
Sul fianco del colle ghiacciato.

X

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!»

XI

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.

XII

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

X

Cerei re vidi, e principi e guerrieri,
Tutti eran pallidi di morte:
«La belle dame sans merci», mi dicevano,
«Ha ormai in pugno la tua sorte».

XI

Vidi le loro labbra consumite nella sera
Aprisi orribili in un grido disperato,
E freddo mi svegliai, ritrovandomi lì,
Sul fianco del colle ghiacciato.

XII

Ed ecco dunque perché qui dimoro,
E pallido indugio e solo,
Anche se sono avvizziti i giunchi in riva al lago,
E nessun uccello canta, prendendo il volo.

(Trad. S. Sabatini)

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