

Fatality of Erotic Obsession in Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

In his brief ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci," John Keats paints the portrait of a knight-at-arms who has been sidetracked by a romantic encounter with a woman who is described as "full beautiful" (14) and "wild" (16), but who ultimately abandons the knight in his sleep. The poem's title, which translates to "The Beautiful Woman without Mercy," is borrowed from Alain Chartier's fifteenth-century poem on the subject of courtly love. Keats, however, uses this title for a ballad that pokes holes in rather than celebrates the courtly love tradition, suggesting that erotic obsession has the potential to be not only distracting, but fatal. Indeed, after his encounter with this woman, the knight dreams of kings, princes, and warriors who have all been left "death-pale" (38) as a result of "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The knight, in his refusal to fully embrace the real world upon waking from his fantastical dream, subsequently joins the ranks of these great men who have allowed erotic desire to undo them. Keats's ballad therefore functions as an anti-romance, warning its reader about the dangers of falling too deeply into the fantasy world offered by the genre of romance.

Keats creates an atmosphere of disenchantment and disengagement in this poem by emphasizing the knight's inability to take any kind of action after his brush with all-consuming desire. This entire story is one of stasis. An unidentified narrator happens upon the knight, and the knight recounts his story, but no real action takes place outside of the tale the knight tells. In fact, the knight's fantastical encounter strips him of all agency and leaves him utterly incapable of acting on the world around him. Beginning with stanza IV, the verbs in the first lines of each stanza trace the knight's gradual decline from activity to inactivity. The verbs that begin stanzas IV, V, and VI — the stanzas in which the knight actively pursues and courts the lady — are "I

met" (13), "I made" (17), and "I set" (21). Almost immediately, though, agency passes to the lady; she is the one performing all of the actions in stanzas VII, VIII, and IX: the knight says, "She found me" (25), "She took me" (29), and "she lulléd me" (33). In each of these lines, the knight is relegated to a direct object rather than the subject. The object of the knight's desire has escaped his control, and has begun to control him. By the time the knight awakes from his dreamlike romance in the last three stanzas of the poem, he has become an entirely static character, capable only of observing, not acting upon, his surroundings: "I saw" (37), "I saw" (41), and, finally, "I sojourn" (45). The stark contrasts between the verbs used to introduce each of these stanza groupings are evidence of the knight's passivity and inability to free himself from the stasis that is characteristic of the romance genre that Keats is criticizing. No forward progression exists in this poem, and Keats emphasizes this stasis by opening and closing his ballad with the image of his knight-at-arms "alone and palely loitering" (2; 46). In fact, the first and last stanzas of the poem are almost identical:

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
 Alone and palely loitering?
 The sedge has withered from the lake,
 And no birds sing. (1-4)

And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
 Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
 And no birds sing. (45-48)

Thus, the poem begins and ends with "loitering," symptomatic of the knight's stasis. Moreover, these bleak descriptions of "the cold hill side" (36) on which the sedge has withered and the birds do not sing underscore just how desolate reality appears to the knight after his dreamlike encounter with the woman has come to an end. Keats's placement of these two stanzas at the

beginning and end of the poem is significant, as it ensures that all of the stanzas which contain elements of the romantic and fantastical — including the “faery’s child” (14), the “honey wild, and manna-dew” (26), and the “Elfin grot” (29) — are enclosed within the stanzas that underline the mundane nature of reality. In other words, the knight’s otherworldly experience is ultimately bounded by reality, and he must either accept this fact and re-engage with the real world, or stay forever on the “cold hill side,” mourning the loss of his ephemeral fantasy.

Keats also exploits the form and meter of the ballad itself to caution against the entrapments of the knight’s idealized, unrealistic romance. The ballad consists of twelve quatrains written in iambic tetrameter, but Keats purposefully breaks with the predictable rise and fall of this rhythm in the fourth line of each stanza. Most of these short fourth lines, which are not subject to the same pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that governs the other lines and which are therefore naturally disruptive, contain subject matter that is decidedly unromantic: “And no birds sing” (4; 48), “And the harvest’s done” (8), and “On the cold hill side” (36; 44). In one stanza, Keats paints the knight as a typical Petrarchan lover in the first three lines only to undermine the fantasy of never-ending love with a stark reminder of mortality in the fourth line:

I see a lily on thy brow,
 With anguish moist and fever-dew,
 And on thy cheeks a fading rose
 Fast withereth too. (9-12)

The line “Fast withereth too” calls the reader back into a harsh reality. Although it is tempting to buy into the romantic promise that this knight will remain steadfast in his love and will perpetually enjoy the benefits of youth and handsomeness, such rapture cannot endure forever.

The knight and his passion will, like actual roses, wither and die at some point. Keats's aim in the construction of each of the final lines is to disrupt not only the poem's rhythm, but also the false entrapments of the romance mode as a whole. These lines abruptly call the reader out of the lilting cadence of the narrative and back into the less dreamlike melody of reality, even if only for a brief moment between stanzas. Just as the knight must separate reality from fantasy if he is to avoid the destructive power of romance, so, too, must the reader.

In this poem, Keats gives us a reflection on a romantic encounter that already belongs to the past and yet impinges on the present such that no real action or progress may take place. The fantastical nature of the knight's encounter with the lady is eclipsed by the sobering reality of the "cold hill side" (36), and obsessive erotic desire is presented as a destructive force, as it prevents the knight from engaging with reality in any meaningful way once his dream has ended. Romance effectively implies stasis, and it quite literally disarms Keats's knight-at-arms. For these reasons, Keats's ballad is unmistakably a criticism of the inherent flaws within the romance genre, the very flaws which make romance simultaneously alluring and destructive.

Works Cited

Keats, John. "La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad."