

Ambiguity in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*
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In “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*,” by John Keats a nameless narrator asks a knight why he is “Alone and palely loitering.” (2) The knight describes how he fell in love with a fey young woman, who eventually abandons him, leaving him in his current sorry state. But who is capturing who? We interpret the scene through the knight’s eyes, and receive only a gloss of the maiden’s speech, consistently prefaced by the knight’s perception of her as an exotic, fey creature. The foundational quality of “*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*” is the impossibility of constructing a true narrative of the knight’s relationship with the lady. The stanzas concerning the active parts of their relationship are rife with contraries, gestures that carry two or more contradictory meanings simultaneously. The lady introduces an ambiguity of narrative that begins with her appearance, and ends with her passing

In the first stanza detailing the knight’s time with the lady, he says, “I made a garland for her head,/And bracelets too.” (21-22) A garland is not an image of control. Its provenance can be traced back to classical times, when a laurel wreath could symbolize victory at a sporting event, success in a war, or the possession of supreme political power. Closer to home, on May Day, a throwback to pagan fertility celebrations, a young woman was often chosen to be the May Queen and crowned with a garland of flowers. The garland can be a symbol of authority, or victory. The bracelets are more ambiguous. In ancient Ireland, bracelets of woven metal worn around the upper arms or wrists were one of the primary forms of jewelry. But bracelets have often been used as instruments of control, as in the case of the manacles of slaves. The bracelets the knight makes are made of flowers, insubstantial, and the knight would likely have had to weave them around the lady’s wrists. (Either that, or he would have had to make them large enough to slip over her hands, in which case they would have fallen off the first time she stood up) This seems to imply some degree of consent. Yet the next two lines in the stanza reproduce the ambiguity of the knight’s gestures in the lady’s response.

The knight says, “She looked at me as she did love,/and made sweet moan.” (23-24) On an initial reading, the line seems relatively unambiguous. The lady is looking at the knight with loving eyes. But the construction of the clause is peculiar. We know that the lady looks at the knight, but why “as she did love?” (23) The word “as” (23) seems to invite the insertion of an ‘if’ immediately after, ‘as if she did love.’ The knight may believe that what he saw was only a simulation of love. But this is further complicated by the retrospective nature of his narrative, which recasts the lady’s gestures and actions within the frame of his abandonment. The last line of the stanza recapitulates the earlier imagery of bondage and submission seen in the bracelets. The lady “Made sweet moan.” A moan is most often either a sign of distress, or of sexual pleasure. This duality of meaning mirrors the duality in the woven bracelets, which simultaneously suggest unwilling bondage and a loving gesture.

The knight “set her on my pacing steed,/and nothing else saw all day

long.”(25-26) The use of “set”(25) seems to suggest a lack of agency on the lady’s part, though no explicit violence. His inability to see beyond the lady could suggest either devotion or obsession. We cannot know without some hint of the lady’s response to his continual observation, which is unavailable to us. All we know is that while she is on his horse “Sidelong would she bend,/ and sing a faery’s song.” (27-28) Her bending sideways could suggest either relaxation, or an attempt to escape. The faery’s song does not appear to be intelligible to the knight, or if it is, he conceals its content from the listener. The primary effect of her song is of distance. It is foreign, not of the knight’s world, and perhaps not interpretable within the cultural codes the knight is familiar with.

The lady “found me roots of relish sweet, and honey wild, and manna dew.”(29-30) The lady supplies him with foods that emphasize her connection to nature. To acquire wild honey she would somehow have to penetrate a bee’s nest, which, considering the poem makes no mention of bee-keeping equipment, implies some supernatural agency on her part. The manna dew is sap from the manna ash, but it also bears Christian connotations, as in the manna that the israelites found in the desert. Her nature in this moment when she first shows agency in their relationship, is both saintly and pagan. The lady is both an exemplary part of the knight’s own Christian world, and a pagan force from without. The knight next says, “And sure in language strange she said—/I love thee true.”(31-32) The lady speaks in a strange language, further emphasizing her distance from the knight’s world, but at the same time the knight finds her words to be an intelligible and conventional statement of affection. However, the knight qualifies his statement in the same way he does when he first mentions the lady’s love for him by adding the word ‘sure.’ This statement of certainty undercuts his claim, and implies that he is reassuring himself of something of which he is not certain.

The last stanza which the knight spends fully with the maiden begins with another act of agency on her part. The knight says, “She took me to her elfin grot/And there she wept and sigh’d full sore.” (33-34) Though she takes him to her home, an otherworldly cave, she expresses grief. Whether this grief is at their impending parting, or at some mistreatment that the knight hides from us is unclear. Here, the knight has come to occupy her otherworldly realm. Where previously he experiences her otherness as a performative act on her part, now he inhabits it, and shows himself to be comfortable within her world. Once in the grotto, he “shut her wild wild eyes/with kisses four.” (35-36) Similarly to his actions with the bracelets, the knight’s actions here can be construed as both binding and comforting. He could be smoothing away her grief, or shutting her accusing eyes with unwanted touches.

In the next stanza, the knight’s delicate play of ambiguities collapses. He falls asleep, and dreams that ghostly representations of his male social superiors come to him. They collapse his relationship with the lady into a simple narrative. She is the beautiful woman without mercy, and she has seduced him. He awakes on “The cold hill’s side.” (40) It is possible that by interacting with his Christian superiors he has exiled himself from the lady’s pagan world, and that his acceptance of their narrative is what damns him to join their numbers. It is equally possible that his obsession with her has been entirely one-sided, and that

the lady was only waiting for his sleep to escape from his unwanted attentions. Or it may be that the Christian patriarchs are correct and the lady truly is la belle dame sans merci, a terrible seductress. All that can be firmly resolved is the knight's certainty of his own terrible unhappiness after the lady leaves.

bibliography

Keats, John. *La belle dame sans merci*. Eragny Press, 1906.