

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 16
Issue 2 *June*

Article 4

June 1980

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 16, no.2, June 1980, p.91-105

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*"Language Strange":
"La Belle Dame Sans Merci"
and the Language of Nature*

by JUDITH WEISSMAN

THERE IS nothing in English Romantic poetry quite like Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"—so bare, so haunting, so close to the world of magic and fairy tales, so apparently free from the intellectual concerns of the poet. Even the simplest of the Lyrical Ballads, the ones most similar to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in form, contain some evidence of the poet's intellectual conversation with an implied adversary; they contain assertions—that children have wisdom which adults lose, or that passive joy is better than active thought. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is a more attractive poem than "We Are Seven" or "The Tables Turned" to readers who have been taught that didacticism is the mark of bad poetry; but I believe that in spite of its haunting beauty and apparent mystery, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is nevertheless also a part of a Romantic intellectual dialogue, a dialogue about whether nature has a language.

Sufficient critical attention has not been given to the key lines in the poem:

And sure in language strange she said
"I love thee true." (lines 27-28)¹

The knight is ensnared by the lady because he believes that he understands her language; but if the language is strange to him, he cannot know whether or not he actually understands it. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is Keats' defiance of his Romantic predecessors—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley—who all, at least at some point in their poetic careers, claimed to believe that they could understand the mysterious language of nature. Beneath the ballad is an argument, a statement that we only deceive ourselves by imagining that nature speaks a language which we can understand. The one major Romantic poet who anticipated Keats in repudiating the idea that nature can communicate spiritual truths is, of course, Blake; as he says in his annotations to Wordsworth, "Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me Wordsworth must know that what he Writes Valuable is Not to be found in Nature."² Blake was, however,

1. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," original version, in John Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959). All subsequent quotations from Keats are from this edition.

2. *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 655.

virtually unknown to Keats and so cannot be seen as a source for Keats' idea of nature, in spite of the parallels between them.

The mysterious language of Keats' fairy-woman is not a feature of the tales which are possible sources for his poem; and the many critics who have discussed the backgrounds of the poem have virtually ignored this striking fact, even though the obvious place to begin an interpretation of any new version of a traditional story is with the artist's additions or changes. The body of criticism on the poem is nevertheless immense and illuminating. Certainly our understanding of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is enriched by the work of scholars like Douglas Bush, Earl Wasserman, Harold Bloom, Mario D'Avanzo, and Stuart Sperry, who have discussed the relationship of Keats' poem to its many sources and analogues in both folk literature (Medieval ballads, Celtic fairy tales, Arthurian legend) and the work of writers like Dante, some of whose damned lovers resemble the knight, and Spenser, some of whose temptresses resemble the lady.³ And the poem can support most of the interpretations that have been offered. It can be read psychologically, in terms like those of Hyatt Williams, who sees the fairy-woman as a "Bad Breast Mother," or of Charles Patterson, who sees her as a Jungian anima figure.⁴ And it has, of course, also invited many Romantically traditional interpretations: To give a few examples, Mario D'Avanzo sees the woman as an emblem of the imagination itself; Stuart Sperry, of the bliss that cannot last on earth; Earl Wasserman, of the ideal which no mortal can absolutely attain; and Harold Bloom (whom I shall discuss in detail later), of the deceptive power of the natural world.⁵ Nevertheless, I believe that by neglecting the importance of the fairy-woman's language, critics have missed a clue that would clarify the meaning of the poem. Wasserman does notice that Keats adds the detail of the mysterious language, but does not incorporate this fact into his interpretation; Walter Jackson Bate does say that "even as far as the reciprocation of his love is concerned it was he himself who interpreted her as responding, though in a language far from definite," but he leaves the poem as a vaguely elegiac ballad about the impossibility of

3. Among the most important discussions of the sources of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" are those of Douglas Bush, in *John Keats, His Life and Writing* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 124-125; Earl Wasserman, in *The Finer Tone, Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 65-73; Harold Bloom, in *The Visionary Company* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 403; Mario D'Avanzo, in *Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 192-194; Stuart Sperry, in *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 233-238; Grant Webster claims to have located Keats' precise source in Thomas Sackville's Induction to *The Mirror for Magistrates*, quoted in Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* ("Keats's 'La Belle Dame': A New Source" in *ELN*, III, 42-47).

4. Williams, Hyatt A., "Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci': The Bad Breast Mother," in *American Imago*, XXIII, 63-81; Patterson, Charles L., *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 122-124.

5. These interpretations are well summarized by Patterson, pp. 125-137. As far as I know, no radically new readings have been offered since the publication of this book. Bloom's reading, with which I am particularly concerned, is in *The Visionary Company*, pp. 403-406.

communication between the human knight and the half-human fairy-woman.⁶

The poem demands a clearer focus than it has been given. The fairy-woman offers a particular kind of transient bliss, a particular kind of imaginative experience—the joyful experience of communication with nature so desired by the English Romantic poets. I would like to suggest a new meaning for the poem, more intellectual and conscious than mythic and psychological; this meaning depends on a subtle allusiveness to the works of other Romantic poets that critics other than Harold Bloom have largely ignored. The poem begins with the anonymous speaker's vision of the suffering knight, wandering disconsolately in a late autumn landscape.

O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the Lake
And no birds sing!

O what can ail thee, Knight at arms,
So haggard, and so woebegone?
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 cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too. (lines 1–12)

The speaker, unlike the knight, sees the landscape in a double way; it is now barren, but it is also potentially rich, capable of supporting both natural and agricultural life. He assumes, both from the knight's manner of wandering and from his feverish complexion, that the knight feels lost and bewildered in the landscape and can neither accept nor leave it.

The rest of the poem is the knight's story of what ails him, his encounter with the mysterious temptress who led him through nature into her cave. All we have is his version of the story; I believe that we must try to go beyond the narrative in interpreting the poem, and try to find a meaning for the experience in terms of the larger concerns of Keats' poetry and of Romantic poetry in general. Although the knight says that the woman is a fairy's child—a figure apparently unique in English Romantic poetry—she is, despite her possible supernatural origin, remarkably similar to a very familiar figure in English Romantic poetry, the child-woman who serves as an intermediary between the poet and nature. Both the sketchy description of her—

Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild—(lines 14–16)

6. Bate, Walter Jackson, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 480–486.

and her first activity, introducing the knight to nature—

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew—(lines 25–26)

are more reminiscent of female figures in other Romantic poems than of medieval temptresses. Bloom points out the echo of Coleridge in Keats' "honey wild and manna dew," and the fact that the line "her eyes were wild" is a virtual copy of the title of Wordsworth's poem "Her Eyes Are Wild."⁷ These wild eyes are also like those of Wordsworth's sister as she is presented in "Tintern Abbey," where she connects the poet with his own earlier relationship to nature—

[I] read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. (lines 116–118)⁸

Wild is also a key word in the description of Lucy Gray, a child who has become part of nature. Although Wordsworth provides the clearest and most important female figures from whom Keats may have derived his image of the wild-eyed woman who leads the knight into nature, this female or child figure appears in some form in the poems of Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley as well. In "Frost at Midnight" Coleridge prays that his child will be a link between himself, deprived of a childhood in nature, and the rural world of his present life; Byron, like Wordsworth, connects his sister with nature, most notably in "Epistle to Augusta." And in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* Asia is an intermediary between Prometheus and nature. Even though the words of the poem point to an origin for this figure in Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose guides are good, Bloom suggests that Keats' fairy-woman is analogous to a very different female guide into nature, Blake's Vala, who leads men into an inherently sterile natural world in which they are trapped. Although this suggestion is intriguing, it leaves us with two problems—the meaning of the echoes of Wordsworth and Coleridge and the uniqueness of this female figure in Keats' poetry.⁹ There is no other evidence that Keats shares Blake's belief in the collusion between the eternal Female and nature in the entrapment of men.

7. Bloom, pp. 404–405.

8. All quotations from Wordsworth are from William Wordsworth, *Selected Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1950).

9. I am not discussing the archetypal and mythical connections between nature and a female figure because I am addressing a narrowly defined topic—Keats and the Romantic tradition that nature has a language. The women whom Keats imagines as his own companions in nature distract his attention from the natural world instead of enhancing, reflecting, or interpreting that world. For example, in "To George Felton Mathew," he asks Mathew to find a lovely natural setting for his meeting with the muse; but nature will not be the subject of their poetic discourse.

—Oh Mathew lend thy aid
To find a place where I may greet the maid—
And we may soft humanity put on,
And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton. (lines 53–56)

And in "I Stood Tip-toe" a woman is the one thing that can make the poet forget nature. After describing a place of great natural beauty, the poet says,

Bloom does not provide a sufficient answer to the question of why Keats makes this female figure a deceiver rather than a benefactor, why the introduction to nature ends in seduction and betrayal. For the knight, the final vision of nature does not include the knowledge of potential fertility, the harvest, as it does for the speaker. It is purely desolate.

She took me to her elfin grot
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dreamed, Ah Woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.

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 starved lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gapéd wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering;
Though the sedge is withered from the Lake
And no birds sing. (lines 29-48)

Possible sources in Spenser or Dante or fairy tales are not enough to account for the fairy-woman's character, for in other poems, like "To Charles Cowden Clarke" and "Hyperion: A Fragment," Keats feels free to change the moral meaning of his source, in these cases Milton. The reason that Keats' female guide into nature is not like those of either Blake or the other Romantics is that his understanding of nature is unique. He does not share Blake's vision of nature as an inherently deceptive female principle, but neither does he share the belief of the others that nature has a language, which the female figure can help the poet to interpret.

This difference between Keats and the other English Romantics is so striking that it is surprising that it should have received little critical attention; it has, in fact, been denied by many critics. Even as intelligent a critic as Albert Gerard, for example, declares that the great English

Were I in such a place, I sure should pray
That naught less sweet might call my thoughts away
Than the soft rustle of a maiden's gown
Fanning away the dandelion's down. (lines 93-96)

Keats places relatively few women in nature and makes only the fairy-woman a guide into nature. Bloom's discussion of this woman as a Vala figure is in *The Visionary Company*, pp. 405-406.

Romantics—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats—have “the sudden realization that the universe is neither an unintelligible chaos, nor a well-regulated mechanism, but a living organism, imbued with an idea which endows it with its unity, its life, its harmony, its ultimate significance.” He continues, “There seems to be something Hegelian in the way the romantic mind functions. To the mature thought of the romantic poets, it will be remembered, living nature is the product of the infinite Mind working upon unorganized matter to give visible shape to His ideas. In this perspective nature’s ‘beauteous forms’ appear to be neither an obstacle to the mystical vision, nor the ultimate object of poetic vision. Their harmony and their vitality are immediately felt as the stamps of a higher force which remains transcendent.”¹⁰ These authoritative statements sound convincing, and it is easy to recall many familiar passages to support them—but only from the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley (and Byron, whom Gerard does not include).

Wordsworth makes one of the baldest statements of nature’s ability to communicate meaning in his early assertion that

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can. (“The Tables Turned,” lines 21–24)

And he suggests a similar idea more beautifully, more tentatively, and more persuasively in “Tintern Abbey,” where the poet finds

In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thought, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul,
Of all my moral being. (lines 108–111)

The music of nature is also that of humanity; sense is not merely sense, but is also language; the same spirit impels things and thought. Because nature *speaks* through the poet’s senses, she can be a moral instructor. The word *language* recurs in many of the most joyful and hopeful Romantic assertions of faith in nature. In “Frost at Midnight” Coleridge hopes that living in nature will enable his child to hear nature’s language:

So shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself. (lines 58–62)¹¹

Byron also occasionally speaks of nature’s language; for example Manfred remembers that in the starry shade of Night he learned the language

10. Gerard, Albert, *English Romantic Poetry, Ethos, Structure, and Symbol in Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), pp. 5, 8.

11. All quotations from Coleridge are from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965).

eleven of the *Prelude*, "Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples," Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*. The crucial difference between Keats and Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley is that the latter three all tell us clearly why the poet or the character sees nature as a wasteland. Wordsworth, in the "Intimations Ode," finally attributes his loss of imaginative power to the process of aging; Coleridge, in "Dejection, An Ode," is less resigned and blames his own loss of power to give love to nature for his loss of the ability to receive love from her; Coleridge's mariner is in a purgatorial wasteland because in killing the albatross he has violated the laws that bind him to nature and to God. Shelley's Prometheus is in a dead and icy world because he has allowed himself to be choked with hatred and a wish for vengeance. Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge try to account for the perception of nature as a wasteland without spirit, language, or love, by looking for some flaw in the perceiver rather than by doubting their original faith in the comprehensible goodness of nature.¹⁶

In "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" the cause of the knight's desolation has always been a problem for critics. The poem is much less clearly moral than "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or *Prometheus Unbound*; we do not know that the knight has lost the power to hear nature's loving voice, the voice of the fairy-woman saying "I love thee true," because he has changed or sinned. Bloom accounts for his misery by emphasizing the inherently deceptive nature of the physical world into which the fairy-woman has led the knight. "All is to the purpose, not of gratification, but of lulling the knight asleep, with the fated food within him, to dream of the truth and awaken to find himself in a withered natural world, forever cut off from it. The clearest of all Romantic analogues is Blake's *The Crystal Cabinet*, which follows the same pattern: the protagonist coming out of his momentary earthly paradise (Beulah) to find himself, not in the ordinary world of Generation from which he entered it, but in a solitary hell (Ulro) infinitely worse than his state of being at the poem's onset."¹⁷ This reading is perfectly coherent, and cannot be refuted with internal evidence from "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"; I simply believe that Bloom makes Keats more similar to Blake than he is. The narrator, after all, is in the same landscape as the knight, but does not see it as hell; nor in any other poem does Keats describe nature as hell. I know of no evidence that Keats believed, as Blake does, that nature is a deceptive world of Generation from which spiritual men must free themselves through Imagination. Entrapment in nature is one of Blake's great themes; we must go beyond Bloom and ask, if Keats and Blake are similar, why the knight is the only character in Keats'

16. There are, of course, some poems where faith in nature does seem simply to disappear, like "The Sensitive Plant" and "Resolution and Independence," but these poems seem to me to be thematically unrelated to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

17. Bloom, p. 406.

poetry who has a terrifying vision of nature as hell, and why the fairy-woman is the one enchantress who uses nature as a means of seduction.

Earl Wasserman, one of the most careful readers of the poem, blames neither nature nor the fairy-woman for the knight's misery; he tries to find fault with the knight for dreaming of a return to the human world, the world of knights and princes, as Lycius wishes to return, in "Lamia." "It is man's bond with mankind," he says, "that prevents him from lingering beyond the bourne of care. There is nothing in Keats' ballad even suggesting the frequent interpretation that the fairy's child is responsible for the knight's expulsion from the elfin grot; only his own inherent attribute of being mortal causes his magic withdrawal."¹⁸ Wasserman is right that we must look for some reason in the knight for his misery, but I believe that he has not correctly interpreted the knight's flaw. It is not just his general humanity, or his dream of men, that takes him out of his dream of love; it is his original delusion that he can understand the fairy-woman's language. He has met a creature like one of the women who serve as guides into nature in Romantic poetry and has chosen to believe that she has said, "I love thee true," even though he admits that her language is strange to him—that he cannot really understand it. He has entered the world of nature with false expectations, that it speaks to him and loves him; and so he is left desolate when he wakes up to find himself in an ordinary, dreary, autumn landscape.

The knight dreams of other men who have been captured by La Belle Dame Sans Merci because he is being trapped by a male tradition, an idea propagated by the earlier English Romantic poets. The knight is betrayed by the Romantic idea that nature expresses her love for human beings in a mysterious language, which male poets often understand with the help of young women or children, and that if the poet stops hearing that language, he is somehow at fault. Keats is denying this tradition in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." He is saying that of course nature will betray anyone who expects it to have a symbolic language and to say "I love thee true." The dream that nature speaks to us produces nightmares. As Keats says in a harsher way, with more obvious irony, in "Ode, Bards of Passion," heaven is a place

Where the nightingale doth sing
Not a senseless, tranced thing,
But divine melodious truth;
Philosophic numbers smooth;
Tales and golden histories
Of heaven and its mysteries. (lines 17-22)

It is a charming idea, he says, that birds can tell us things, that nature has a language and gives us wisdom; but here on earth nature can only sing.

18. Wasserman, pp. 74-75.

In the poems where Keats celebrates what nature has to give us, her gifts do not include words or thoughts. Over and over Keats says that nature gives us beauty, joy, ease, comfort—in “Imitation of Spenser,” “To Solitude,” “Sleep and Poetry,” “Endymion.” It can inspire the poetic impulse in “I Stood Tip-toe”; and in “Sleep and Poetry” the poet through his art can create a gloriously sensuous and attractive natural world for his reader’s imagination. In the first line of “The Grasshopper and the Cricket” he comes close to saying that nature speaks—“The poetry of earth is never dead”; but as the poem develops, that poetry, the voices of the two insects, turns out to be music rather than words.

Keats’ refusal to share a Romantic vision of nature is perhaps clearest in “Written Upon the Top of Ben Nevis”:

Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud
 Upon the top of Nevis, blind in mist!
 I look into the chasms, and a shroud
 Vaporous doth hide them—just so much I wist
 Mankind can tell of heaven; mist is spread
 Before the earth, beneath me,—even such,
 Even so vague is man’s sight of himself!
 Here are the craggy stones beneath my feet,—
 Thus much I know that, a poor witless elf,
 I tread on them,—that all my eye doth meet
 Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
 But in the world of thought and mental might!

Mountain tops are the traditional places for the visions of poets and prophets; and among the Romantics, Coleridge and Shelley both address poems of revelation to Mont Blanc, Wordsworth has a climactic moment of illumination at the top of Mount Snowdon, and Byron finds spiritual companionship in the mountains and the ocean. Keats, however, gets no response when he asks the muse to speak to him in this most sacred of natural places. The mountain is only a mountain; the mist is only mist; he learns nothing there of the human or supernatural worlds.

For Keats nature is only nature; but no poet has ever made it more beautiful than he does. We can love nature, even if it does not speak to us and does not love us. The other Romantics approach nature through Christianity, more or less secularized, and find in it a spirit that is another version of God. Keats associates nature instead with the characters of Greek mythology, the kind of characters that Wordsworth shunned as old-fashioned, artificial poetic ornament. Keats’ characters—gods, demigods, dryads, nymphs, personified seasons—are also very different from Shelley’s Greek characters in *Prometheus Unbound*, another Romantic adaptation of classical mythology, because they do not become metaphors for parts of the mind. They remain creatures of whom the poetry creates a primarily visual apparition, although they do

speak. The essential difference between the speaking characters with whom Keats peoples nature and the speaking spirit that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley claim to hear is that the latter four want to tease the reader into belief—or at least into the willing suspension of disbelief—whereas Keats clearly does not expect his readers to believe in pagan gods. As poetic characters, they enhance the sensuality of nature, not its spirituality; they do not provide revelation and do not invite us to a new religion.¹⁹

Unlike the many recent critics—Wasserman, Sperry, Goldberg, Evert, among others—who have insisted upon the great intellectual and philosophical content of Keats' poetry, I would like to take him at his own famous words—"Oh, for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts." His supreme gift, suggested in the hymn to Pan in "Endymion" and the fragment of an "Ode to Maia" and fully realized in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "To Autumn" is celebration, celebration of love and of the natural world as we apprehend them through our senses. And it is significant, with respect to my reading of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," that for Keats, unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley, love and nature are not interdependent poetic subjects. They are parallel, for we must experience both love and nature with full knowledge of the threat of time if we are to experience them truly; but love and nature are not connected by spiritual bonds. The ironic meaning of their apparent connection in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," where betrayal by love leads to a vision of nature as barren, is clarified when "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is read in the context of Keats' great poems celebrating both love and nature.

"The Eve of St. Agnes" is Keats' joyful repudiation of the idea that sexual satiety or debilitation is the inevitable result of sexual experience, and that therefore it is better merely to imagine or desire love than to experience it. The fear of sexual experience, expressed in some of Keats' own early poems, like "Fancy," is inherited at least partly from the tradition of courtly love, which praises illicit desire over continuing experience. The medieval ballads from which Keats' own "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is derived belong to this tradition; and Keats makes the connection between "The Eve of St. Agnes" and these ballads explicit when he says that Porphyro sings to the sleeping Madeline "an ancient ditty, long since mute / In Provence called, 'La belle dame sans mercy'" (lines 291-292). Bloom emphasizes this connection when he suggests that Madeline, in waking, is responding to the ballad: "In that

19. Ian Jack discusses Keats' use of visual art in *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); M. A. Goldberg has done an extensive study of Keats' classicism in *The Poetics of Romanticism: Toward a Reading of John Keats* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Antioch Press, 1969), but he does not pursue the implications of Keats' choice of classical supernatural figures, the difference that those figures create between his view of nature and the view of the other Romantics. Walter Evert discusses the reaction of the other Romantics to Keats' classicism but he does not discuss Keats' classicism as a reaction to the other Romantics.

poem, the knight at arms awakens to disenchantment on the cold hill's side. To forestall such a fate for Porphyro, Madeline awakens out of a dream centered upon her lover."²⁰ Madeline *chooses*, then, to be something other than a cold enchantress. She chooses love over dream. Both "The Eve of St. Agnes" and Keats' own "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" are mock-medieval poems in which the medieval ballad of "La Belle Dame Sans Mercy" is a point of reference against which Keats can declare his own thoughts. In "The Eve of St. Agnes" he transforms the medieval controversy of courtly love, the question of whether romantic love is compatible with marriage and sexual experience, into his own statement that love experienced is more valuable than love imagined. And although he uses a form and story like those of an old ballad in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," he transforms the ballad from a love story to an emblem of a contemporary Romantic theme by adding the element of incomprehensible language and emphasizing the fairy-woman's connection to nature.

In spite of the explicit link between "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "The Eve of St. Agnes," and the similarity in story between "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Lamia"—the seduction of a young man by a beautiful, non-human woman and the eventual destruction of the love spell—nevertheless thematically "Lamia" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" are more closely related than either is to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." In different ways, each questions the idea that sexual love is a disappointing delusion (and neither is about nature or language).²¹ Although "Lamia" is, literally, a poem of disillusionment, nevertheless Keats' reversal of expected sympathies makes it difficult to read the poem as a new version of the old theme, that love is a deceitful snare woven by women for imaginative young men, which eventually leaves men wretched. Our sympathies are with Lamia, the innocent and loving enchantress, rather than with Lycius or Apollonius. The poem suggests, indirectly, that the enchanted love created by Lamia could have remained real if Lycius had chosen to believe in it, instead of choosing to create a disjunction between illusion and reality.²²

And "The Eve of St. Agnes" asserts positively, in the mode of celebration, rather than negatively, in the mode of irony, that imagination and reality can become one through the experience of sexual love. Keats acknowledges, by framing the idyllic moment of Porphyro and Madeline with the feud, the storm, and the aged characters of the bedesman and Angela, that love must face a harsh external world and the inevi-

20. Bloom, p. 401.

21. Miriam Allott discusses the connections between "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Lamia" in "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and "Lamia," in *John Keats: A Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 40-63. E. C. Pettet deals with both "Lamia" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" in connection with "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," pp. 213-250.

22. Good discussions of the ironies of "Lamia" are those of Bate, pp. 547-561 and Morris Dickstein, in *Keats and His Poetry, A Study in Development* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 236.

table passage of time; he acknowledges, when Madeline awakes to the disappointing sight of Porphyro's pale face, inferior to his face in her dream, that it takes emotional effort to replace imagination with experience. And yet he declares, through the energy, joy, and sensuous beauty of his poetry, that the experience of love can reconcile dream and reality. The lovers go into the storm, but they go bravely and hopefully, willing to take their chances in the world of experience, without fearing that the inevitability of change in time will invalidate the experience of ecstasy and leave them in despair. Although it is not impossible to read Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" as a sincere return to the vision of love that "The Eve of St. Agnes" repudiates, I believe both that the power of "The Eve of St. Agnes" makes such a reading suspect, and also that such a reading does not account for the connections among the fairy-woman's delusive love, her strange language, and the barren natural world.

Nature is a separate subject for Keats, the subject of his odes, which can be read as a record of his effort to accept and love the purely sensuous world of nature, even though it is subject to time, as he accepts sexual love in "The Eve of St. Agnes."²³ He moves from a celebration of imagination and imagined nature in "Ode to Psyche," to a struggle against imagination in "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," to statements that he accepts a mixed world of experience in "Ode on Melancholy" and "Ode on Indolence," to a pure presentation of nature as it changes in time, without intrusion by the poetic self, in "To Autumn."

Of all the odes, "Ode to a Nightingale" is most easily compared with "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The speaker is drawn into the world of nature by the singing bird, an analogue of the singing woman; he falls into a state of dream; and then he abruptly finds himself forlorn, detached from the world of beauty that he has experienced and unsure of its reality. The elements of the two poems are similar, but a close examination reveals that the issues addressed are very different. The poet, the speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale," willfully transports himself, with the power of his imagination, into a dark, sensuous world of nature, guided by the song of the bird; he is not seduced, led away, as the knight is. And he tells us clearly what attraction the imagined world of nature has for him—it is an escape from the world of human time, where men sicken and die. The world of real nature, apprehended visually, would reveal evidence of temporal process and so would not offer the freedom from time that the world of imagined nature, where each sweet is only *guessed*, does.

23. The amount of criticism on the odes and their development is too immense to summarize—virtually every book cited in these notes discusses the odes in detail. A reading of the odes as a group that is close to mine is Kenneth Muir's "The Meaning of the Odes," in *John Keats: A Reassessment*, pp. 64–74.

The words of the poem create a vision of nature that is explicitly the product of imagination and so can be dispelled by the process that creates it, by the speaker's uttering the word "forlorn." Although the speaker of "Ode to a Nightingale" and the knight of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" are both forlorn, the knight is bewildered, helpless, a victim of his experience, and the poet is creating experience through language and imagination. His mood at the end of the poem, when he wakes from his vision, is less desolation than defiance. He is disillusioned not with love or nature, but with his own imagination. He rejects the singing bird which he had imaginatively transformed into a dryad, and which he now transforms into an elf, a mischievous creature, which would cheat him of the real world if he allowed it to. We must realize, at the end of the poem, that the speaker has not seen actual nature at all; he is not in the position of the knight, who wakes from his dream to find the natural world that he sees with his eyes, barren. "Ode to a Nightingale" points toward a fresh sight of nature that will be preferable to an escape into imagined nature; it points toward "To Autumn."

"To Autumn" is Keats' purest vision of nature as it exists in time. The season, subtly personified, becomes a figure in the landscape, the subject of all the active verbs of filling and swelling and blessing with which Keats makes the passive processes of nature active and so creates in the reader a kind of primitive thankfulness for harvest that we do not feel when we consider nature to be governed purely by physical and biological laws. We see three different autumn landscapes, which change as the season passes, and in the last stanza we hear the songs of gnats and lambs and crickets and birds; but we do not see a symbol or hear a word. The autumn landscapes of this poem are closer in meaning to the wordless joy and fulfillment of a landscape by Rembrandt or Van Gogh (who loved Keats) than to the spiritually symbolic landscapes of "Tintern Abbey" or "Mont Blanc." Like the landscapes of Wallace Stevens' great poems "Sunday Morning" and "Esthétique du Mal," the landscape of "To Autumn" is beautiful because it changes, because it has not been removed from time by art or imagination.²⁴

Keats writes a human version of "To Autumn" in "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream," another poem that is partially similar to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in story and very different in meaning. The similarity is in the poet's process of passage from an attractive natural world to a state of sleep, to a new and harsh reality, Moneta in her ancient temple. Here the female figure is neither a sexual enchantress nor a guide into nature but a new muse, the muse of a poetry of sorrow. The simplest and most obvious meaning of the poetic vision of the fallen

24. Meyer Abrams oddly insists on a similarity between Stevens and Wordsworth rather than Stevens and Keats in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 69-70.

Titans to which she brings the poet is the universal tragedy of human old age, of being replaced by a younger generation, a subject virtually neglected in English poetry. The Titans cannot hope for the renewal that takes place in nature, and because they are immortal, they cannot even hope for the escape of death. To celebrate the sad dignity of these ever-aging gods is to embrace, absolutely, the passage of time for human beings. The waking poets of "Ode to a Nightingale" and "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream," like Madeline waking in "The Eve of St. Agnes," are in the process of giving up imagination for experience and are finding the beauty of the world that changes in time. The knight of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," who has awakened from a dream of terror, is different from these figures because he feels only betrayal and desolation in the autumn landscape. He has not learned the great truth of Keats' poetry; he does not know that life as it exists on earth and in time is beautiful. He has expected magic, spirit, and language in nature and so is disconsolate when he cannot find them. Blake would say that he never should have looked to nature for happiness in the first place, but should have lived in the Poetic Imagination; Keats believes that he went wrong in looking for more than earthly life can give.

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