

## ŐÖVALYENİN BAKIŐININ ÖTESİNDE: "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI" NİN ÖZGÜRLEŐMİŐ CİNSELLİĐİNİ ÇÖZÜMLEMEK BEYOND THE KNIGHT'S GAZE: DECODING THE LIBERATED SEXUALITY OF "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI"

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### Öz

Bu makale, John Keats'in Őiiri "La Belle Dame sans Merci"yi derinlemesine incelemeyi ve Őiire adını veren gizemli kadına iliŐkin geleneksel algılara karŐıt bir yorum sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu karakterle ilgili yapılan yorumlamalar genellikle patriyarkal bir çerçevenin dıŐına çıkmamakla birlikte karaktere ölümcül bir doğaüstülik atfetmektedir. Bu makale ise bu karakterin mistik bir varlık deĐil, yalnızca cinselliĐini benimsemiŐ ve özgürleŐmiŐ bir kadın olduĐunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Őövalyenin Őüpheli anlatsına iliŐki yaŐadıĐı kadının etkin cinselliĐi karŐısında duyduĐu derin rahatsızlık ve iĐdiŐ edilme korkusunun sebep olduĐu ve anlatsının kadını kontrol etmeye, onu susturmaya ve ŐeytanlaŐtırmaya yönelik bir giriŐim olduĐu savunulmaktadır. Őiirin dilinin, imģelerinin ve tematik unsurlarının analizi yoluyla, gizemli kadının karakterini oluŐturan nüanslar ve Őövalyeyle yaŐadıĐı karmaŐık iliŐki gözler önüne serilecektir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalıŐma ile kadın cinselliĐi hakkındaki derin toplumsal kaygıları ve Őürde rol oynayan karmaŐık güç dinamiklerini ortaya çıkarmak ve 19. yüzyıl edebiyatındaki cinsiyet rolleri ve kimlikleri ile ilgili çalıŐmalara katkıda bulunmak amaçlanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *John Keats, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Romantizm, Cinsiyet rolleri*

### Abstract

This paper delves into John Keats' enduring poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," offering a reinterpretation that challenges the traditional perceptions of the mysterious lady that gives the poem its title. Contrary to prevailing supernatural interpretations, which generally cannot escape a patriarchal lens, the paper aims to show that La Belle is not a mystical being but rather a liberated woman who embraces her sexuality. In turn, the knight's dubious narration is argued to be an intricate attempt to control, silence, and demonize her, motivated by his deep-seated discomfort and emasculation in the face of her empowered sexuality. Through an analysis of the poem's language, imagery, and thematic elements, the nuances that make up the titular character, namely her agency and sexual autonomy in her courtship with the knight, are illuminated. In doing so, the paper aims to display the deeper social anxieties surrounding female sexuality and the complex power dynamics at play in the poem and contribute to the broader discourse on gender roles and identities in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature.

**Key Words:** *John Keats, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Romanticism, Gender roles, Emasculation*

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Since its publication, John Keats' poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" has invited many different interpretations and readings as it has a cloak of mystery around it that countless critics have tried to lift throughout the years. This mystery is largely due to "*the combination of an overabundance of information on the level of suggestion and a lack of information on the level of narrative*" (Bennet 73). Consequently, the figure that gives the poem its title, La Belle, has been seen as the key to unraveling its mystery. Therefore, this mysterious figure has taken on many different shapes and forms since 1819. She has been dubbed the quintessential *femme fatale*, an object of male desire, a damsel in distress, a muse, a vampire, a succubus, a sorceress "*without gratitude, without goodness, without pity and without remorse*" or, as of late, a victim" (Williams 63). La Belle, however, is not any of these things. Much like Alain Chartier's "La Belle Dame sans Mercy", from which Keats borrowed his own poem's title and maybe even the very core of the mysterious titular character, the lady is an atypical "beloved". She is simply a mortal woman who does not fit into the conservative construction of asexual femininity that was ascribed to women at that time and who, therefore, is demonized and made into La Belle Dame sans Merci by the knight and his male chorus of dead kings, princes and warriors, and even critics who might feel emasculated by her sexual freedom.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the image of the passionless, chaste, pure, domesticated female became a defense mechanism employed by England as a way of protecting the established order and patriarchy in the wake of revolutionary sentiments across Europe. As Rachel Schulkins states, at the turn of the century, "*countless female conduct books, ladies' magazines, and instruction manuals posited a feminine ideal that rested on the notion of the religious, pious, moral and asexual woman,*" and women who displayed and embraced their sexuality freely were considered to be morally and physically corrupt threats to society and were consequently ostracised (19). These writings emphasized and upheld the importance of feminine purity in maintaining social and political stability. Because female nature was considered to be unpredictable and lacking in rationality, the figure of the asexual woman became a method of controlling and subduing women and, consequently, safeguarding the traditional order and public from evil as it was thought that "*female modesty [was] among the best and last barriers of civilized society*" (Lloyd 117). On the other hand, philandering men were not given the same treatment. Any kind of sexual liberty was exclusively seen as a male privilege; while it could destroy women's reputations, as in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft, it could lead men into fame, as it was in the case of Lord Byron, and these are precisely the gendered double standards that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" addresses. The lady in question rejects the conservative concept of the chaste, restrained, asexual woman. Instead, she takes on the role of the philandering male and has

a dalliance with a knight, turning him into one of her “conquests”, which leads to the knight’s efforts to reconstruct his masculinity and “the natural order of things” through his narrative. By turning the lady into a malevolent supernatural being in his narration, the knight emphasizes the dangers unrestrained female sexuality poses against the established constructs of masculinity.

The poem opens with the encounter of an unidentified speaker and a “*woe-begone*” knight in a lifeless and barren setting in the late fall, which directly reflects the knight’s current state of mind (Keats line 6). He recounts his tale of seeing a beautiful, wild woman in a meadow. He showers her with flowers, and they ride on his steed together while she sings an enigmatic song. She then feeds him and tells him she loves him in a “*language strange*” that he cannot comprehend (line 27). After she lulls him to sleep, the knight dreams of a multitude of kings, princes, and warriors who are all deathly pale and shriek a horrible warning that “*La Belle Dame sans Merci / Thee bath in thrall*” (lines 37-8). When the knight wakes up, he is on a cold hillside, and the lady is gone.

The first three stanzas, which are not a part of the knight’s narration of his encounter with the lady but the observations of the unidentified traveler, paint him out to be a somewhat effeminate figure. Despite his description as a “*knight-at-arms*”, he does not behave as a regular knight would. He does not seem to be brave or valiant; on the contrary, he is passive, inactive, and distracted, aimlessly wandering around, and drifting away from the social world (line 1). Furthermore, he is described as having “*a lily on [his] brow*” and “*a fading rose*” on his cheeks (lines 9-11). Aside from linking him with illness and death, this association with flowers also connects him to the traditional notions of femininity, as the female figure would typically be described using flower imagery in the poetry of romances. His encounter with the mysterious lady and her abandonment of him appears to have emasculated the knight, and his seemingly imminent “death”, therefore, is not a literal one but a metaphorical death of his masculinity, which he so desperately tries to reinstate through his narration. When he becomes the narrative voice, the knight describes himself as the assertive figure and takes on the traditionally masculine roles in his romance with the lady. He gives her gifts, shuts her eyes with kisses, and sets her on his steed, which very well may be a euphemism for sexual intercourse where the knight appears to take on the dominant role. As he becomes more and more aggressive, the lady, in turn, becomes more passive and silent in his narration.

In the fourth stanza, the knight takes control of the narrative and describes his encounter with the mysterious lady. His narration, however, only works to cast doubt on his point of view as it is fragmented, incoherent, and lacks connection within itself. Jane Cohen remarks that “*as observer*

*and lover, the knight inspires little confidence. One cannot determine if the Lady he meets is or is like a 'faery's child'; if her 'wild' eyes suggest wickedness or sweetness . . . if she looked at the knight lovingly or 'as' she did love; and if 'in language strange' she indeed said 'I love thee true'"* (11-2). Indeed, rather than acting as proof of her being an otherworldly creature, the knight's overtly sentimental and superficial description of the lady seems to be born out of his need to turn their story into a traditional example of chivalric romance through which he can compensate for his emasculation by taking on the role of the masculine, valiant knight. However, the lady is not a supernatural enchantress but simply *"another mortal woman, whose beauty is elevated into that of a goddess by her admirer"*, as in typical romance tales (Schulkins 118). As if she is a near-forgotten dream, the knight only offers fragmented images of her, which certainly seems strange if he is madly in love with her. Described in four short lines and referred to only as *"a lady"* and *"faery's child"*, she is made into an object to which the knight can give shape as he sees fit (Keats lines 13-4). His description of her is limited to her most sensual and feminine features: her lengthy hair, light foot, her voice, and wild eyes. Aside from this brief, unelaborate portrayal, there is no other account of her. This deliberate objectification and fragmentation of La Belle is due to the knight's desire to gain back his authority and masculinity and to exert some degree of control over the woman who has reduced him to such a state. The lady, as Schulkins argues, *"is dependent upon his narrative and words to give her back her physicality. By scattering her image, the knight prevents La Belle's voice from being heard"* and gains the power to shape the perception of her and their brief relationship (118). Indeed, the initial picture he portrays of her is only a dim silhouette of an idealized woman, which, combined with her enforced silence in his narration, robs her of her individuality and turns her into a shadowy representative of the dangers of liberated female sexuality in the end.

In the fifth stanza, the association between La Belle's sexuality and the natural world is emphasized, which, combined with the fact that the liaison with the knight ensues amid nature, is essential in showing that the sexual appetite of women is a natural occurrence. The stark contrast between the barrenness of the world at the start of the poem and the lushness of nature in the knight's narration highlights the naturalness, richness, and beauty found in the sexual freedom of the female, and despite the knight's efforts to suppress it, it rears its head through his subconscious. He tries to control and contain this freedom through the offerings of garlands and bracelets he has made, which he presents to her as a part of his duty as the "lover" of courtly romances. He emphasizes his adherence to the codes of masculinity and *"tries to embellish his trophy, the lady, by his own artwork in order to claim her as his own. From this perspective, the symbols of love and adoration turn into symbols of captivity"* (Schulkins 118). The feminizing flower imagery that was associated with him

at the beginning of the poem is now turned around; he quite literally decorates the lady with flowers, which is a part of his effort to reverse the emasculation that his encounter with La Belle has caused. He is trying to restore his wounded masculinity and reduce her power by forcing her into the role of the silent and passive beloved. This struggle repeats itself in his later act of setting the lady on his steed, which is often seen as an extension of a knight's virility. He attempts to exercise a controlling, masculine authority over the lady by stabilizing her and imprisoning her on his steed and in his gaze.

In stanzas five through seven, the lady and the knight consummate their relationship, however, the knight continues to enforce his own subjective and controlling narrative on her. He claims that La Belle "*looked at [him] as she did love*" (Keats line 19). He believes that she loves him simply because the alternative, that she may have only wanted a sexual relationship with him to satiate her own needs as a man might, is inconceivable. His interpretation casts doubts on his narration as he appears to project his own desires onto her. The same thing happens again when he states: "*in language strange she said / I love thee true*" (lines 27-8). Even while trying to control the narrative, the knight does not deny that her language was strange to him, and since her language is strange, his interpretation of it cannot be relied on. Because he uses the language of romance, he assumes she does the same as well, which she does, simply not in the way he interprets it. The lady *does* flirt with the knight. She sings him a song, rides his steed, and reciprocates, or even encourages his advances, not because she loves him true, but simply because she wants to. Just as the knight plays the part of the lover in his idea of chivalric romance, the lady also plays the part of the beloved to achieve what she desires, which is her own sexual gratification.

In stanza seven, there is a curious detail that has been associated with the idea of La Belle being a supernatural creature. According to the knight, she feeds him "*honey wild, and manna-dew*" (line 26). However, since manna-dew is a miraculous food that God provided for Israelites during their wanderings, it is probable that the knight is once again using the overtly embellished and artificial language of romance tales to strengthen his narrative; and if this is the case, it is significant that the nourishment he associates with La Belle is strange, wild, and untamed, just like the lady and the lush natural world she inhabits are, as opposed to the knight's barren one.

Stanza eight begins with another peculiar detail; the knight claims that La Belle took him to her "*Elfin grot*" (line 29). The Elfin grot is a continuation of his earlier association of the lady with the supernatural, however, since his embellished and artificial language and his account of the lady are unreliable, it is not possible to discern what exactly he means; the seemingly magical Elfin

grot could very well be a simple cottage. Indeed, the entire episode in the lady's Elfin grot is strange because, according to the knight, La Belle weeps and sighs for reasons he does not disclose. It is possible that he is trying to undermine her by ascribing her a "feminine weakness" as a part of his continued effort to re-establish his masculinity and compensate for her ultimate rejection and abandonment of him. This effort, however, is fruitless because it is *she* who lulls the knight to sleep. In that sleep, he has a nightmare in which his emasculation anxiety finds voice through a male chorus of "*death-pale*" kings, princes, and warriors who claim to be the former victims of the demonic La Belle Dame sans Merci (line 38). Their starved lips display their hunger and greed for the sexual satisfaction that La Belle is able to bring; however, her sexuality is only desirable and acceptable for the chorus of men when it is *taken*, not willingly given, as it disrupts the carefully constructed notions of gender identities. These now-impotent figures of masculine power are undone, not by La Belle per se, but by what she represents: the liberated female sexuality. When he wakes up from his Freudian dream, the knight is all alone. La Belle seems to have quietly made her exit from his life and the text, which undermines the title assigned to her by the male chorus, as the knight is able to leave the mysterious Elfin grot unscathed.

The critics who think the lady to be a *femme fatale*, a dangerous and supernatural entity who entrammels and devours men, seem to take the knight's narration at face value, even though there is no indication in the poem that confirms her being something more than human. This ambiguity regarding the nature of the lady serves to challenge not only "*the knight's narrative but rather the entire manly conceptions that guide romance and romantic love*" (Schulkins 113). Since there are not any certainties regarding her supernatural nature, the important question here, as Anne K. Mellor suggests, becomes what "*the knight and the warriors of his dream have to gain by defining the belle dame as cold, cruel, lacking in compassion*" (184). The answer to this can be found in the motivations of the lady herself, who is simply a woman who does not hide or deny her sexuality; on the contrary, she rather enjoys and embraces it. She flirts with the knight, engages in courtship, and satisfies her sexual appetite as a philandering man would without any kind of repercussions, then simply leaves because she does not want anything more from the knight. Because this notion of the philandering female is directly in opposition to the asexual female, her existence is inconceivable in the patriarchal discourse, which is why the knight and the figures in his dream turn her into the figure of La Belle Dame sans Merci. They restructure her through the male discourse and appropriate her existence and actions through their own constructions of femininity. She is undeniably a threat to masculinity; she mesmerizes kings, princes, and warriors, the ultimate figures of masculine power, and brings an end to their preconceived ideas about both themselves and women. She, therefore, becomes a

figure that needs to be appropriated, silenced, and demonized, which is what the emasculated knight tries to achieve through his narrative.

The poem's circular structure, repetitive pattern, and the knight's narration itself are also very interesting as they act very much like a trauma response, which compels the victim to relive and retell a traumatic incident in order to reclaim the experience and gain control over the situation or, in this case, over the woman who forsakes the knight. Very much like a victim of trauma who *"cannot resume the normal course of life, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts,"* the knight is stuck in an oppressive, barren world (Herman 26). To be able to recover from the trauma and reclaim his masculinity, the knight creates his narrative and shares it with the world as a storyteller might. However, the encounter with the lady has made him a passive and apathetic figure, and even robbing the lady of her voice and demonizing her through his narrative is not enough to re-establish his masculine identity. In the end, he is exactly where he started, isolated in a lifeless environment without any hope for the future. He simply repeats the words of the unidentified speaker when he finishes his narration, unable to offer something new from himself, as he is left with nothing. He is forever trapped in his own narrative; *"it is as if time stops at the moment of trauma"*, at the moment when he loses something essential for himself (26).

Throughout the years, the figure of the La Belle Dame sans Merci has been interpreted through the lens of patriarchal constructions of femininity. Although some critics like Mario L. D'Avanzo and Earl R. Wasserman have read her in a positive light, the dominant assumption is that she is a more-than-human entity who deceives, victimizes, and eventually kills men. However, *"as the object of the sexual and the flesh, La Belle stands for the symbol of life and not of death"* (Schulkins 125). As opposed to the lifeless landscape of the knight, her world offers lushness, songs, and nourishment. In the midst of nature, the lady is far away from the constraints of society and free to do whatever she desires, which is not something deadly or treacherous but only the satisfaction of her very natural urges. Rather than her liberated sexuality, as the knight and the male chorus suggest, it is the narration of the knight and, therefore, the patriarchal forces that Keats criticizes. Emasculated and rendered powerless by his encounter with a liberated, passionate woman, the knight's narration is aimed at silencing and demonizing La Belle and, consequently, the sexual freedom of women at large. Nevertheless, he is unable to achieve his goal as the lady's silence only serves to undermine the legitimacy of his narration and his interpretation of reality. Through the figure of the La Belle and the knight's response to her, Keats is able to *"discard the polarities of sexual experience, which tend to depict women as either virtually innocent or dangerously sensual"* and acknowledge sexuality as a complex and essential part of female identity (Schulkins 15). La Belle is neither good

nor bad; neither the asexual female nor the malicious, supernatural entity who devours men, but simply a woman who denies the pre-destined notions of a structured femininity and enjoys her humanity.

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