



The Irony of the Ballad Form in Keats's “La Belle Dame sans Merci”

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Abstract

Although critics commenting on Keats's “La Belle Dame sans Merci” are divided on whether or not the poem is autobiographical, the genre of the poem as a “ballad” tends to be given short shrift in their critical interpretations, and its role in determining the meaning of the poem is largely left unexplored. Taking into account the fact that a traditional ballad is an impersonal detached mode of poem, and that a lyric is a rather subjective composition displaying the poet's thoughts and sentiments, one would expect that Keats's utilization of the formal features of the traditional ballad genre, including a detached, impersonal mode of writing, would rule out lyrical or autobiographical interpretations. However, reading the poem against the grain (of its ballad form), this article argues that Keats's deployment of the ballad genre conventions does not actually preclude autobiographical interpretations, but, on the contrary, it endorses them. For Keats's poem is lyrical and personal in nature and his use of the conventions of the traditional ballad form is to deflect the critical attention away from the poem's autobiographical content. To make this point, this article investigates three illuminating contexts in which to place “La Belle Dame.” To begin with, “La Belle Dame” is a literary ballad that has much in common with Keats's other poems and letters, whether at the level of poetic themes and personal concerns or at the level of language. However, the most important context to consider the ironic relationship of Keats's lyrical content to his traditional ballad form is his revision of the poem for its first publication in the *Indicator*. If Keats's intention was to reinforce the ballad conventions of the poem, downplay its lyrical implications, and strike a self-conscious pose critical of what he thought was the poem's excessive sentimentality and easy surrender to wish-fulfilling romance, this very gesture is a confirmation that the poem, at least in its first version, is largely subjective and lyrical. As such, Keats's seemingly objective ballad mode, later further revised and strengthened, can be regarded as a trick to disguise his true conflicted feelings about his own enthrallment by Fanny Brawn – a trick that ironically reveals as much as it attempts to conceal.

Keywords: John Keats, Fanny Brawne, “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” genre, ballad, lyric, irony

“La Belle Dame sans Merci” is one of Keats's most superb and memorable poems. The original version appeared in a letter Keats wrote to his brother in America, dated Wednesday 21 April 1819. A later, slightly modified, version of the poem was published in the *Indicator* on 10 May 1820. The poem appears in a traditional ballad form. Though the label “ballad” was not added to the title of the *Indicator* version, in the transcripts of the poem made by Richard Woodhouse and Charles Brown, and in later editions based on them, from Milne Houghton's (1848) to Stillinger's (1978), the label would become formally the subtitle of the poem. Keats's poem is usually seen as “maddeningly simple” and yet “so enigmatic,” and perhaps enigmatic precisely because of its simplicity (Evert 244; Newman). While the poem does not assert or negate any assumption about the love encounter between the knight at arms and the fairy lady, it consistently uses an elliptical style and understatement, which further intensifies its magic and enigma. Questions about the identity of the knight and the questioner, as well as about the beautiful lady without kindness remain unanswered, and the nature of the love encounter itself nebulous. Is it an evil seduction of the unsuspecting knight by a merciless woman or is it rather a love encounter marked by mutual seduction? Other crucial questions also remain unresolved: is the whole thing merely a dream and the hellish dream of the knight merely a dream within the dream? Why does the knight ignore the warning of the past victims of la belle dame and continue to loiter hopelessly in a barren land?

Although the issue is actually more complicated than this, perhaps an initial attempt to resolve at least some of these queries would be to take into account the ballad form of the poem and its implications and read it as an impersonal statement about love and fixation. This reading would thus eliminate other autobiographical or lyrical interpretations which would otherwise construe the poem as Keats's own erotic fantasy betraying in a disguised form his fears and conflicted feelings about love and women in general and Fanny Brawne in particular. However, while critics and commentators have been divided on whether or not the poem is autobiographical, Keats's use of the conventions of the traditional ballad genre and its implications for the meaning of the poem have been largely ignored. Generally speaking, those who reject an autobiographical approach do so without invoking the ballad conventions of the poem, and those who consider the poem as essentially autobiographical do so despite the poem's ballad form. As an example of the first

tendency, Amy Lowell argues that the composition of “La Belle Dame” and other 1819 poems (“Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “To Psyche,” “On Melancholy,” and “On Indolence”) may be accounted for by “Keats’s reciprocated love for Fanny Brawne,” and “the excitement of his growing intimacy with Fanny Brawne” (149; 201). She nevertheless rejects the view that the poem is autobiographical: “It is, indeed, nothing more, nor less, than that I believe, after carefully examining all the data, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* not to be an autobiographical poem, and not connected, except in the most general way, with Keats himself and Fanny Brawne.” Lowell argues that the meaning of the poem can instead be understood by reference to the sources Keats was reading at the time. From these sources, Lowell singles out the prose romance *Palmerin of England* as the most potent one behind the poem. Similarly, Charles Patterson argues that neither the knight nor the questioner at the beginning of the poem “can be equated with John Keats or can be designated [as] Keats’s spokesman” (129). Nevertheless, Patterson goes on to add, the two characters represent two major tendencies in “Keats’s poetic mind.” The knight is motivated by a Keatsian desire to “burst our mortal bars” (“I stood tip-toe,” line 190) to reach the utmost levels of joy and happiness, while the questioner, who represents Keats’s “keen ability to feel the ordinary joys of existence on the plane of the actual,” is apparently happy with his human lot and he implicitly reproves the knight for his apparently hopeless quest (130). Interestingly enough, although such critics as Lowell and Patterson reject an autobiographical approach, they still see some sort of connection between the poem and Keats’s private life or poetic concerns.

On the opposite side, various autobiographical interpretations of the poem continue to proliferate without taking the genre of the poem seriously as a guiding principle. In most of these readings, the poem is commonly presumed to encapsulate Keats’s own feelings, conflicts and worries, rather than being a detached narrative about a love encounter. One would assume that the traditional ballad form of the poem and the label “Ballad” announcing it would at least forestall such autobiographical or lyrical interpretations, but ironically they do not. For example, Sidney Colvin argues that the poem is a “masterpiece of romantic and tragic symbolism on the wasting power of Love” (350). For Colvin, although Keats’s letter to his brother gives no hint of the personal nature of the poem, “the application of these verses to his own predicament” seems “manifest” (352). John Middleton Murry also believes that “La Belle Dame” represents Keats’s “anguish of an impossible love. La Belle Dame is Fanny Brawne; she is also the beauty of life itself which is claiming, through Fanny, Keats for its sacrifice and victim” (124). Similarly, Claude Lee Finney views the poem as expressing Keats’s own fears of the destructive effects of his passion for Fanny Brawne upon his personal freedom and his poetic career (590-3; see also Pettet 213-19, and Bostetter 160, for similar statements). As such, the poem represents a “rebellion against the trammels of love” in the objective form of ballad rather than in the personal mode of his second “Ode to Fanny”:

The second ode *To [Fanny]* is an exact and complete interpretation of *La belle dame sans merci*. The one expresses a rebellion against the trammels of love in direct, personal style; the other expresses the same sentiment in objective symbols. (Finney 593)

On this view, the poem is autobiographical in nature, and the use of the objective mode of ballad is merely a literary vehicle that does not diminish the lyrical implications of the poem. Finney’s claim is of a piece with an earlier significant assertion made in passing by Albert Elmer Hancock. Hancock writes that Keats’s ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci” sums up in a detached mood all the personal love experiences of the poet as expressed in later poems such as “Ode to Fanny,” “Lines to Fanny,” and a “Sonnet to Fanny.” The ballad “is thus seen to be an autobiographical revelation, concealed by art, of this victim of love. It is the epitome of Keats’ own enchantment” [sic] (197). As Hancock suggests, the knight is John Keats and La Belle Dame is Fanny Brawne, and the invocation of the ballad tradition is not merely a neutral stylistic choice, but rather a smokescreen to conceal the true identity of the protagonists of this drama of agonizing love and passion.

With regard to the above stated positions on the poem, Hancock’s remark, cryptic as it is, is still extremely useful in outlining the connection between the lyrical, personal content of the poem and the impersonal, distanced ballad narrative form. The further investigation of this connection is the objective of the present article. What one can glean from Hancock’s remark is a possible solution to the apparent contradiction, referred to above, between the impersonal mode of ballad and the lyrical personal content it expresses. There is here somehow an identity of form and content, rather than dissonance. As Hancock implies, the impersonal and detached mode, which the ballad form offers, might be a calculated ruse on the part of Keats to safeguard himself from the embarrassing consequences of his candid revelations. Extending Hancock’s insight, this article will investigate to what extent Keats’s poem is “lyrical” in nature and how the poet’s use of the impersonal mode of ballad may have been merely an ironic attempt to conceal the poem’s lyrical nature. Moreover, given the recent positive assessments made by Jerome McGann, Theresa M. Kelley, and Andrew Motion, of Keats’s revision of the poem for publication in the *Indicator*, which bolsters its ballad form to downplay its lyrical implications, the present article will show how the effect of such revision can ironically encourage speculations about the autobiographical content of the poem rather than diminish their validity. To argue these points, this article studies three contexts which may illuminate the nature of the poem. First, putting the “La Belle Dame” in the context of Keats’s other poems and personal letters will show how much it has in common with them, especially that it deals with typical Keatsian themes of love, thralldom, and fixation. A second important point to take into consideration is the fact that “La Belle Dame” is a *literary* rather than a *traditional* ballad. Being a composition by Keats and sharing common themes with other poems and letters by the poet suggest that “La Belle Dame” is largely an expression of Keats’s personal concerns and projections. Such a view has at least the virtue of highlighting the consistency in Keats’s works. Finally, perhaps the conclusive clue as to how one should interpret the poem can be found in the context of Keats’s revision of the poem for publication in the *Indicator* in 1820. As mentioned above, the recent critical tendency

assumes that Keats did this revision in order to reply to his critics and detractors by removing the excessive sentimentality of the poem and by distancing the personality of the poet from the persona of the knight at arms. However, the revision itself ironically gives the lie to the impersonal pretensions of the ballad form. Instead of deflecting the critical attention away from the (love) life of Keats, the changes made in the *Indicator* text can be shown to confirm the poem as based on his (love) life, on his conflicts, fantasies and fears of an enthralling passion for Fanny Brawne. The reference to the poem as “ballad” should thus be seen as ironic rather than illuminating and descriptive.

Recently, in an attempt to adjudicate on the different readings of “La Belle Dame,” Jack Stillinger has argued that the poem is “symbolic,” though it never explains its own symbolism (70). As such, all interpretations, including the autobiographical ones, “remain hypothetical” (72). For Stillinger, the ambiguity of the poem could be clarified only by resort to genre:

This piece announces itself as belonging to a class of poems in which the standard materials are elemental, unexplained, and even supernatural occurrences. Naturally there will be a meeting with a mysterious lady. Naturally there will be singing, strange food, lovemaking, bad dreams, and a calamitous reversal. (71)

Many commentators have seen the poem as a dream with no apparent logic or sense of causality to connect the sequence of events or images that appear in the poem (see, for example, Van Ghent 126). According to Stillinger, however, “[t]he actions are made logical solely by the poem’s genre. They are just the sort of actions that happen in ballads” (71). Stillinger’s argument has the virtue of pointing out the formal features of a traditional ballad and Keats’s masterful use of the genre to present his powerful tale of doomed love and obsessive fixation. However, in such an argument genre is no more than a set of formal features that have little implication for the real meaning of the poem. As such, although Stillinger claims that reference to genre can resolve the ambiguity of the poem, his gloss does not encourage us to find any specific meaning for it. What this article is trying to argue is that genre can indeed resolve the ambiguity of the poem, not in Stillinger’s sense, but in the sense that it ironically encourages a certain autobiographical reading of the poem. *Pace* Stillinger, genre can indeed tell us what actions to expect in a ballad, but one can explain the symbolism and meaning of these actions only by locating the poem in the context of Keats’s other poems, his personal circumstances and his worries, desires, and conflicts. For example, the fact that the themes of the poem – love, thralldom, and death – are typical issues in Keats’s poems and letters may warrant an autobiographical approach that views the poem as an extension of Keats’s other narrative and lyrical poems and letters where he clearly registers his own fears and anxieties about love, thralldom, and death. For instance, most critics find Keats’s *Endymion* as the prototype of “La Belle Dame sans Merci.” Both *Endymion* and the knight follow recklessly a dream goddess to the verge of distraction. It is only that *Endymion* is at the end able to reconcile himself with reality and save himself from the tragic fate that would later befall the knight. The knight is totally enthralled, unable to observe the changing seasons and the passage of time, or take action to change his lot and end his suffering. He keeps waiting in such a cold barren land to relive his abruptly interrupted romance with a woman who would certainly not turn up again, not least because she might have been merely a figure in his dream vision, or a figment of his imagination. As Evert succinctly puts it, the knight “is, in fact, just what Peona said *Endymion* would become if he did not mend his imaginative ways, a heroic figure lost to valor, wasted by love, and so much in the grip of a malign fantasy and out of touch with the real world as to be hardly even sane” (254).

Moreover, in Keats’s lyrical poems and in his letters to Fanny, his family, and friends, love is always associated with death. Sometimes death is eroticised and explicitly wished for, or presented as an inevitable consequence of love. More often than not, it is regarded as a form of thralldom, irreconcilable with personal freedom and poetic ambitions. For example, in his sonnet “Bright Star,” Keats wishes to remain

Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

Unlike the knight of “La Belle Dame,” the lover of “Bright Star” is aware of the passage of time and seasonal change and, by the same token, of the possible change of human affection. For this very reason, however, he opts for death if everlasting passion is impossible or unassured. In a letter dated 27 July 1819 Keats writes to Fanny of his “swooning admiration” of her “beauty.” “You absorb me in spite of myself,” he confesses. In a passionate tone and a phraseology that recall the style and passions of the poem “Bright Star,” Keats goes on to tell Fanny that “I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I should have possession of them both in the same minute” (*Letters* 318). Here in Keats’s revelation, death is not conceived as an alternative to a failed romance, but as equivalent to, and attendant upon, romance. Keats’s projection of the erotic instinct and the death instinct upon women is already noticeable in his earlier brief relationship with Isabella Jones. In a long October 1818 letter addressed to Georgiana Keats, his sister-in-law, Keats talks enthusiastically about Isabella Jones, confessing how much she captivates him: “I forget myself entirely because I live in her. ... I should like her to ruin me, and I should like you to save me” (*Letters* 200).

The association of love with death is made even clearer in Keats’s last letters from Italy. From his deathbed, he writes to Brown that “the very thing which I want to live most for will be a great occasion of my death ... Were I in health it would make me ill.” A few pages later he reemphasizes his ironic situation: “If I had any chance of recovery, this

passion would kill me" (*Letters* 475, 480). Keats's earlier letter from Winchester dated 16 August 1819 betrays his failing struggle to liberate himself from his overwhelming passion for Fanny Brawne. He musters all his power to write a "flint-worded letter" to tell her in a strident tone that he can still enjoy his life and go about his intellectual pursuits away from her, but at the end his fortifications break down and he asks her to

Forgive me for this flint-worded Letter and believe and see that I cannot think of you without some sort of energy, though mal a propos. Even as I leave off, it seems to me that a few more moments thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me. I must not give way to it, but turn to my writing again. If I fail I shall die hard. O my love, your lips are growing sweet again to my fancy. I must forget them. (*Letters* 326)

A few days later, on 23 August 1819, he further shows his conflicted feelings about women and love, telling his friend and publisher John Taylor that love is incompatible with personal freedom and poetic ambition: "I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman – they are both a cloying treacle to the wings of independence" (*Letters* 327). There is indeed substantial evidence in Keats's private letters and his works to prove that he often associates love with death and suffering, or that he projects his erotic and death instincts upon women (see also Russell; Pettet 213-219).

From another perspective, Keats's "La Belle Dame" is a "literary ballad" *par excellence*. Being a literary ballad means, however, that it is not a traditional one inherited from folk culture, though of course elements of Keats's poem can also be considered traditional. Traditional ballads have unknown authorship and can be interpreted variously as the myths or stories of a certain cultural group, that is, as reflecting the group's desires and hopes, fears and anxieties. Since Keats's ballad is after all Keats's, this may justify the interpretive practices of many critics who do not read Keats's poem as an impersonal narrative. Keats created this poem and, as such, it must also in some ways reflect the poet's feelings, beliefs, and assumptions – a point which can in fact be easily substantiated with reference to Keats's other poems, letters, and notes, as we have seen above. Incidentally, it is on this account that all those who point out Keats's indebtedness to past and contemporary sources end up acknowledging the uniquely Keatsian character of the poem. The poem as a finished product is Keats's in all its aspects – whether in its vision or in its masterful technique and powerful suggestive nature. For example, Robert Gittings catalogues a list of the sources that contribute to the making of the poem, but he comes to the conclusion that none of them can "account for the intensity and underlying depth of a poem which brought Keats's darkest and most fundamental experiences to the surface" (303). While pointing out possible sources for Keats's poem, Stephen Coote concludes likewise that source hunting in the end "fails fully to account for the subtlety of its exploration of sex and death" (238). This is also the attitude of Ernest C. Pettet (37) and Francis L. Utley (105-6)). Since Keats's masterpiece cannot be in any way reduced to the sources from which it draws its inspiration, it may then be seen as occasioned by particular private events in Keats's life, by his "darkest and most fundamental experiences," as Gittings puts it. These latter may have roots in his interrupted and unhappy relationship with his mother, or in the suffering and death of his brother due to fake love (Motion 42; Ward 272-4). They may also be rooted in his fantasies and associations of love and death or in his fears and anxieties about his relationship with Fanny Brawne.

In his "Introduction to the Poetry of John Keats," Paul de Man makes an important remark about Keats's whole poetry, which is relevant to the point being made here. De Man says, given Keats's tragic short life and brief poetic career, Keats did not have a long rich past experience to draw on. His inspiration came primarily from reading past and contemporary poets:

In reading Keats, we are therefore reading the work of a man whose experience is mainly literary. The growing insight that underlies the remarkably swift development of his talent was gained primarily from the act of writing. In this case, we are on very safe ground when we derive our understanding primarily from the work itself. (181)

De Man stresses several points simultaneously in this statement. It is true that Keats is indebted to earlier poets and poems, but his work is after all his own creation. As such, it should not be explained by reference to the sources it derives inspiration from, but by reference to Keats himself and the work itself. For the nature of Keats's debt to other sources, de Man goes on to say, is largely technical, not thematic. His work therefore reflects his own intellectual and emotional concerns, rather than expounds the themes and concerns of earlier poets. Quoting de Man at length is important to show what is borrowed and what is Keats's:

Keats cannot draw strength from this past grandeur; his use of earlier models will always be more a sympathetic imitation than a dialogue between past and present, as between Milton and Wordsworth in *The Prelude*. Hence Keats's use of earlier poets is more technical than thematic: however Spenserian or Miltonic the diction of *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Hyperion* may be, Spenser and Milton are not present as such in the poems; Keats has to derive all his power from energy he finds in himself or in his immediate vicinity. (183)

De Man's point can usefully shed light on "La Belle Dame." The inspiration and creative energy behind Keats's poem are ultimately Keats's, and the meaning of the poem can be located in Keats's own vision and in his own circumstances both as a young poet and as a young person – in Keats's "himself or in his immediate vicinity," as de Man puts it. It is perhaps this very conclusion that Walter Jackson Bate would like to have us arrive at when he writes that "La Belle Dame" is "a lyrical distillation of diverse feelings, and at a troubled though richly thoughtful moment. It is ... a by-product that could not have existed without a large reservoir of concern and preoccupation" (478). As Bate maintains,

“La Belle Dame” is not only a “lyrical” poem encapsulating Keats’s different feelings and troubles at the time of its composition; the poem is also part of the larger context of Keats’s private as well as professional life, and understanding this context would enable us to better understand the poem.

As has been mentioned above, one major context in which to locate the poem is Keats’s difficult relationship to Fanny Brawne and his worries about the effects of his passion for her on his poetic career. Another equally, or even more, important context for considering the meaning of the poem and the irony of its form is connected with the poem’s revision for publication in the *Indicator* and the subsequent controversy among critics and admirers of Keats about the intentions, meanings, and merits or drawbacks of this revision. First, the noble “knight at arms” becomes an ironic “wretched wight” in the revised version. Another significant difference is observed in stanza 8 and beginning of stanza 9. The speaker says in the original version that la belle dame “wept, and sigh’d full sore,” and that he “shut her wild wild eyes / With kisses four.” In the revised version, the speaker says that “she gazed, and sighed deep” and that he soothingly “shut her wild sad eyes / So kiss’d to sleep.” While in the original version the seduction of the knight is complete when “she lulled [him] asleep,” the revised version implies a more emotional reciprocation in the encounter. After their love making, the speaker says, “we slumber’d on the moss.” As Jerome McGann points out, the original version, or the Brown/1848 text, paints a more sympathetic portrait of the protagonist as a noble unsuspecting knight ensnared by a “bewitching siren” (1003).

There is an almost complete consensus among critics and commentators on the comparative aesthetic and poetic superiority of the original version of the poem which appeared in Keats’s letter to his brother and was later standardized by Milne in the first edition of Keats’s works in 1848. For example, Colvin argues that the “slipshod and the commonplace” substitutions “enfeebled” the poem and “rob[bed] it of half of its magic” (469, 351). For “‘wretched wight’ is a vague and vapid substitute for the clear image of the ‘knight-at-arms’” (469). Finney similarly condemns the revision because it “destroy[s] much of the magical charm of the ballad” (599). On her part, Amy Lowell describes the changes as a sheer “blunder” for they ruin “a perfect work of art” (228). However, since the appearance of Jerome McGann’s path-breaking article “Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism” in 1979, there has been not only a surge in the critical interest in the *Indicator* version, but also a tendency to view the revised poem not disapprovingly as an inferior copy but as the result of Keats’s anticipation of the critical reception of his poem. McGann’s basic argument is that despite the critical objections to the modifications made in the *Indicator* version, the difference between the two texts should not be viewed neutrally as an aesthetic one, but as the difference between “‘a more and a less ‘romantic’ version of the ballad” (1006). In McGann’s view, the letter version of the poem – the Brown/1848 text – is more “romantic” in the sense that it does not distance itself from itself; it is “more self-absorbed and self-absorbing” than the rather detached, “more self-conscious and critical” *Indicator* text (1031). For in the latter text, Keats not only adopts a self-conscious, detached tone with regard to the romantic experience of the wight, but he also urges his audience “to recognize, and respond to, the poem’s self-conscious and slightly critical treatment of its romance subject” (1006). McGann points out that in the late 18th and early 19th century at the time when Keats composed his poem, the archaic Spenserian “wight” had already carried “a distinctly ironic overtone.” By using the ironic “wretched wight” Keats strikes a self-conscious pose as an artist by inviting his readers to see “that he, as a poet, stands at a slightly critical distance from his subject” (1002). In other words, Keats urges his readers not only to avoid confusing him with the wretched wight, but also to understand that he is mildly critical of the romantic self-absorption of the unself-conscious wight. Moreover, given the hostility of the prevailing literary climate to him and to his works, when Keats signs the poem “Caviare,” he intends once again to emphasize his self-conscious posture as a poet and to share with his *Indicator* readers, “who are presumed to represent an undebased literary sensibility,” “a mildly insolent attitude toward the literary establishment” (1002).

McGann’s influential essay has had the positive effect of encouraging critics and commentators to consider the *Indicator* text of “La Belle Dame” in more favourable light as Keats’s “last deliberate choice,” and to regard the event of writing and, later, of revision as determined by the intersection of many factors pertaining to publication, critical reception as well as the poet’s private life and public image. For example, following McGann, Theresa M. Kelley reiterates that “Keats’s belle dame suggests how poetic composition may be bound up with the exigencies of publication and critical reception as well as personal circumstance.” To these exigencies Kelley ascribes the differences between the two versions of the poem. The early draft was written for the private family audience of George and Georgiana Keats, but later Keats had to modify his poem for “the more problematic audience of *Indicator* readers (68).” As such, each version of the poem “offers a slightly different belle dame and anticipates a slightly different reception. Both register Keats’s oblique reply to the controversy that dominated reviews of his early poetry” (69; see also Jones).

R. S. White maintains likewise that Keats’s ballad is ironic in the sense that the impersonal ballad form allows Keats not only to distance himself from Fanny Brawne and the pains of the man in love, but also to voice his critical and even harsh view of the man in love (145). If many other critics believe that the differences between the two versions of the poem “reflect differences in poetic intent” (McFarland 52), White argues that the changes in the *Indicator* version drastically modify the tone of the original poem, making it seem rather ironic about the lovesickness of the knight/wight. For example, the noble “knight at arms” is replaced by “a more critical and judgmental” wretched wight. Further, “the reference to the poem as ‘A Ballad’ (albeit a fragmentary one) shifts the poetic mode away from the subjectivity of lyric.” This shift is augmented by Hamlet’s phrase which “encourages us not to read the poem as subjective or personal” (145). Bate has argued in a related context that Hunt and possibly Woodhouse might have thought, “with myopic good-will, that the magic, dreamlike quality of the [original] poem would be considered ‘sentimental,’” that is, among other things, too personal and subjective, involving the worries and embarrassments of

Keats himself (479). However, as White argues, “Bate’s argument ... can easily be upturned to suggest that Keats himself intended to eliminate any ‘sentimental’ reading that critics or readers ‘with myopic good-will’ might construct – that he meant it to be an ironic and even harsh view of the man in love” (145). White believes that the corrections are so substantial that they produce an altogether different poem (146; cf. Barnard 93). As such, Keats has in effect produced two poems, “differing from each other at a tonal level,” and thus encouraging two different readings. The “sentimentalist” reading, variations of which have been considered above, constructs “a sincere poet thinly disguised as narrator, forsaken in love by a merciless *femme fatale*.” However, “so little needs to be changed to make a virtually opposite reading:”

If we accept that the poem is a distanced ballad rather than a lyric, that the man is an ‘everyman’ in love, a generalised ‘wretched wight’, rather than a noble knight at arms, and that, moreover, it is not the poet at all but one whom the poet in mood of superiority and irony (‘Caviare’) is not pitying but scorning, then the whole adds up to a condemnation of male fantasy. The woman’s own view is not directly given, but rather it is constructed through the man’s consciousness, and his responses are guided more by his own dream and lovesick state than by anything we definitely know the woman has done. She is the woman in courtly poetry, aloof and not seductive. Does the poem reveal Keats’s masculinist and misogynistic distaste for powerful women who seduce and then betray innocent men? Or is it a wry and harsh judgment passed on the tendency of men to create such self-justifying and self-pitying fantasies that the actions and feelings of real women become irrelevant? (146)

White’s argument in fact clarifies McGann’s critical position and exactly captures his differentiation between the more romantic, more-absorbed letter version and the less romantic, but more self-conscious *Indicator* version. Further, it shows us that focus on the changes Keats made in the published version opens new possibilities of interpreting the meaning of the poem or justifies some of the ones already made – archetypal and mythical approaches, for instance, or psychoanalytical readings that focus on male fantasies and projections, including the projection of sex and death instincts. In fact, in one of the latest studies on Keats, Rachel Schulkins picks up this very line of argument to advance her thesis that in “La Belle Dame” Keats rejects the idealizations of romance by exonerating La Belle Dame from the cruelty ascribed to her and by representing the knight as “the victim of his own romantic notion,” which the poem “frame[s] ... as inappropriate and self-reproved” (113). In his critical view of romance, Keats “sees men as the victims of their own romantic, infantile behaviour, while women are the mere passive objects of false adoration” (114). From yet another perspective, such an argument as White’s can also possibly reconcile the differing autobiographical and non-autobiographical interpretations of the poem. This then would allow an approach that reads Keats’s literary influences as well as biographical circumstances as “raw material” which Keats puts in the service of a vision that begins with the personal but ends with a poetic, memorable treatment of sex, fixation, and death.

White’s suggestion, which recalls Kelley’s argument, that Keats himself might have deemed these modifications necessary for the publication of “La Belle Dame” to distance himself from the sentimental implications of the poem are plausible, too, especially if we take into account Keats’s worries about the reception of his earlier love poems. For example, Keats balked at publishing *Isabella*, a long narrative poem composed in early 1818, because he thought it was still sentimental and “mawkish,” showing “too much inexperience of life,” and thus inviting more of the kind of criticism he had already received from his critics and detractors in the conservative reviews (*Letters* 351; for these unsympathetic reviews, see Matthews, especially pp. 94-111). As Jeffery N. Cox comments in this regard, Keats’s misgivings about *Isabella* show his awareness that “romance, a mode of enchantment linked to wish-fulfilment, was prone to being seen as a weak indulgence, incapable of sterner stuff – in Keats’s summary term, ‘too smokeable’” (54; see also Keats, *Letters* 351). The adjective “too smokeable” meant “easily exposed in its faults,” or more precisely “too easily made fun of” – as Keats himself was in the conservative reviews. Keats feared that *Isabella* might seem as the work of an adolescent naively embracing the idealizations of romance, thus making its author “the object rather than the master of humor” (Cox 54). Moreover, Keats worried not only about the conservative critical assessment of his work, but also about the negative response of the general public. As Cox puts it, “Keats may well have worried that his romances would court a defensive ridicule from readers intent to deny their susceptibility to the wish-fulfilling enchantments of the genre” (54). Moreover, since the “La Belle Dame” also belongs to the genre of romance, Keats’s opting for the detached ballad form is seen as reflecting his own desire not to appear too sentimental and susceptible to the charms of romance’s wish-fulfilling fantasies in the eyes of the public.

However, for all those who have followed McGann’s suggestions, including Kelley, the difference between the two versions of the poem cannot be explained solely as Keats’s reply to his detractors. They believe that it is also driven by Keats’s own, eventually doomed, struggle to liberate himself from the increasingly sapping emotional involvement with Fanny Brawne. If one accepts McGann’s distinction between the more romantic original version and the less romantic *Indicator* text, the latter more self-conscious and critical text can be considered as Keats’s effort to distance himself from Fanny Brawne. For example, Andrew Motion agrees that Keats’s pseudonym “Caviare” suggests a mildly disparaging attitude to the readership of the magazine by making an allusion to Hamlet’s “Caviare to the general” (515; Shakespeare, *Ham.*, 2.2.300-305). Ironically, however, “its uncharacteristic haughtiness also registers a grave self-doubt” (Motion 515). Talking to the visiting players, Hamlet explains the failure of a play they have earlier performed to attract the attention of the public as the result of being too sophisticated for the plebeian taste: “’twas caviare to the general.” As Motion intimates, Keats had grave self-doubts not only in regard to his poetic worth in the eyes of the public in the light of the sustained criticism he received from the conservative journals and reviews, but also, crucially, in regard to his own relationship to Fanny Brawne – a relationship that he found to be increasingly sapping both his

poetic power and his sense of freedom (376). McGann's description of the original poem as "more romantic" can be rephrased as "more sentimental" in the critical language of Keats's day. Following McGann, Motion sees Keats's revision of the poem, possibly acting on the advice of Hunt and Woodhouse, as "more rewarding," removing as it does the danger of seeming too "sentimental." For at the outset, the noble "knight-at-arms" is replaced by a distinctly Spenserian "wretched wight," reiterates Motion (515). Moreover,

[i]n purely literary terms, [the changes made] "toughen and discipline the poem, making it resonate with a creative kind of self-consciousness. Biographically speaking, they help to explain his [Keats's] state of mind during his last months as a poet. By existing more obviously and ironically within the ballad tradition, they create a degree of detachment. This possibly reflects a fresh effort by Keats to distance himself from Fanny. (516)

Like McGann, Motion also believes that the *Indicator* version is more self-conscious because it introduces an ironic note absent in the original version. However, the real irony, which Motion makes us aware of, is that the original poem has a rather personal lyrical content and that the ballad detached mode together with the modifications introduced in the published version are meant to negate this lyrical content. Thus, "existing more obviously and ironically with the ballad tradition" does not merely suggest Keats's ironic stance towards the wretched wight. It can also suggest that Keats's style of writing ironically reveals more of what it tries to hide, and the grander the effect of detachment seems (recall the relish of the self-conscious "Caviare" ... to the general) the deeper is Keats's involvement and the greater is the revelation. Keats's use of the ballad tradition in this manner recalls Hancock's earlier charge that Keats's poem "is thus seen to be an autobiographical revelation, concealed by art, of this victim of love. It is the epitome of Keats' own enchantment" (197). In this sense, the reference to the poem as "a ballad" in the title of the poem appears to be an ironic excess – "surplus to requirements: an unnecessary supplement," as John Whale argues in a related context (63).

As we have seen above, McGann argues that the archaic "wight," already archaic in Spenser's day, creates a distance between the narrator or poet and the "wight," and thus gives the narrator of the poem a measure of objectivity. "Yet," as Kelley maintains, "this apparent objectivity may be little more than a mask for Keats's proximity to the wight as well as the narrator." At any rate, as Kelley goes on to add, the anaphoric incidence of "I" at the beginning of stanza three, which is supposedly the narrator's, and at the beginning of stanzas four and five, which is supposedly the wight's, links in effect the narrator and wight, and thus "undermines the purported narrative distance between the two speakers" (70; see also Whale 64-5)

Interestingly, but ironically enough, Thomas McFarland claims in his book *The Masks of Keats* that replacing the "knight at arms" with a "wretched wight" in the new version is "inconsequential," since both versions of the poem are "testimony to the dark side of the erotic force" (52). It is true that the "wretched wight" is "less identificatory" than the "knight at arms," nevertheless both personae are merely masks for "Mister John Keats five feet high" [sic] (52; Keats, *Letters* 169). If the intention behind the modifications of the poem in its *Indicator* version is to mask the identity of Keats as the knight at arms, McFarland contends that such an effort is a failure. For contrary to the supposed intentions, "knight at arms" better masks Keats and better serves the decorum of the poem than the poetically "less effective" "wretched wight" (53). In comparison to the "completely masked," "more medieval knight," the "wretched wight ... is without such protective masking." Recalling Keats's earlier revelation that he does not have a "fair man's form" and that "No cuirass glistens on my bosom's swell" (Keats, "Had I a man's fair form"), McFarland contends that Keats's proximity to the wight is more obvious and revealing. The wight "is more vulnerable, more nearly in the actual situation of the poem's author, with the word 'wretched' conveying the personal agony of Mister John Keats." Moreover, whether it is a knight at arms or a wretched wight, in the end both versions of the poem "insist on the debilitating effects of love" (53). Thus, Keats's seemingly objective poetic mode and the *Indicator* revisions, including the replacement of the "knight at arms" by a "wretched wight," can be seen as no more than a trick to disguise his enthrallment by Fanny Brawne – ironically, a trick that does not work in the end.

From a different angle, if, according to Motion, the revision of the poem shows Keats's renewed efforts to distance himself from Fanny, this confirms the status of the original poem as a personal lyrical expression of tortured love and doomed efforts. For, as Motion himself notes, "In the past, separation had often made him challenge her rather than seek reassurance; now it only proved his dependence," as is clear in the recrimination and tortured tenderness of his letter to Fanny from Wesleyan Place, written some time in late May 1819 (516). As McFarland argues, though these revelations of Keats date later than the composition and publication of "La Belle Dame" "the relationship with Fanny simply focused the positive and negative aspects of loving that had been intensely present in Keats's psyche for a long time" (56; cf Van Ghent 131).

As McFarland notes, the fact that the knight is "Alone and palely loitering" in a bleak environment where "the sedge is wither'd from the Lake / And no birds sing" reveals "a fine psychological understanding." A lover would remain in a love relationship even if it brings pain and harm, because walking away from the relationship causes a similar amount of pain, if not much more (55). In the 8 July 1819 letter to Fanny Brawne, Keats admits that he is "miserable" without her, and that his life away from her is "that dull sort of patience that cannot be called Life" (*Letters* 312). Writing on 13 September, Keats tells her

If I were to see you today it would destroy the half comfortable sullenness I enjoy at present into downright perplexities. I love you too much to venture to Hampstead. I feel it is not paying a visit, but venturing into a fire. Que ferai-je? as the french novel writers say in fun, and I in earnest. Really, what can I do? Knowing well that my life must be passed in fatigue and trouble, I have been endeavouring

to wean myself from you, for to myself alone what can be much of a misery? As far as they regard myself I can despise all events, but I cannot cease to love you. (*Letters* 339)

As McFarland points out, it is this overwhelming passion for Fanny Brawne that Keats “sublimated into [his] great medieval imagining” (57; cf Van Ghent 130).

The connection between Keats and the knight/wight is thus too apparent to be disguised by changing the mode of the poem. Kelley argues that Keats uses “honey” in “La Belle Dame” as a figure for desire (77). However, “honey,” the food which the La Belle Dame offers the knight/wight, is also what Keats longs to get from Fanny. In a letter he writes to her from the Isle of Wight on 1 July 1819, Keats requests Fanny to kiss the “softest words” she writes to him in her next letter, and upon receiving that expected letter a week later, Keats tells Fanny, “I kiss’d your writing over in the hope you had indulg’d me by leaving a trace of honey” (*Letters* 309, 313) According to Kelley, what confirms Keats’s use of “honey” as a figure of desire is his “figuring the barriers to that desire as bitter in taste” (77). For example, in his last letter to Fanny Brawne, he tells her he is not happy without her because “everything else tastes like chaff in my Mouth” (*Letters* 457). Moreover, Kelley believes that just as the bleak natural environment in the poem signifies the wight’s inner desolation, so does the Isle of Wight appear in Keats’s letters to Fanny of July 1819 as a desolate scene that “emphasized Keats’s isolation from Fanny Brawne.” Kelley speculates that the irony in the punning association between the Isle of Wight and the *Indicator* “wight” might then have become poignantly apparent to Keats (70).

As Motion, Bate, White, and Cox have argued, Keats’s revision of the poem might have been driven by his fears that “La Belle Dame” would seem too sentimental and “smokeable” and thus face the same critical fate of his earlier poems at the hands of the conservative critics. The corollary of this argument, however, is that if Keats or his closest friends and editors made these changes in order to negate the “sentimentality” of the poem, this would be all the more reason to believe that the poem is originally lyrical and personal. Keats’s choice of ballad as his mode of poetic composition is thus no more than a smokescreen to disguise his true feelings, fears and fantasies.

Despite the compelling case McGann, Motion and White make for Keats’s detached ballad mode and ironic stance towards the wight in love, ironically Keats himself may be accused of being defensive in his ridicule of the man in love, just as his readers’ ridicule of his “sentimentality” might betray their absorption in romantic wish-fulfilling fantasies. As Whites points out, Keats often swings between “extremes of self-absorption and ironic self-awareness of the man in love” (147). For example, in one of his letters, Keats claims that

Nothing strikes me so forcibly with a sense of the ridiculous [sic] as love – A Man in love I do think cuts the sorryest figure in the world – Even when I know a poor fool to be really in pain about it, I could burst out laughing in his face – His pathetic visage becomes irresistable [sic]. (*Letters* 361)

But it is Keats himself who also candidly avers that “the man who ridicules [sic] romance is the most romantic of Men” (*Letters* 261). In the revealing letter of 1 July 1819 to Fanny Brawne, Keats describes his changing moods between day and night: in the evening “when the lonely day has closed, ... the lonely, silent, unmusical Chamber is waiting to receive me as into a Sepulchre.” But in the morning he finds himself in a “reasonable” mood and recognises that his distress is one “which I have often laughed at in another.” (*Letters* 309, 308). In the light of Keats’s candid revelation, his laughing at the man in love can be seen as nothing more than the projection of his own embarrassment unto other men in love, since his distress is that “which I have often laughed at in another.” In other words, Keats is himself one of the men in love he often ridicules. If we take the argument of McGann, Motion and White into account, this swinging between two extremes is indeed comparable to the observed tonal shift from the original “sentimentalist” poem to its ironic, detached “ballad” version, that is, the shift from the perspective of the poet as a man immersed in love to the perspective of a poet making an ironic statement about the man in love. From this perspective, one can agree with White’s argument that there is an “indeterminacy of point of view” in the poem, which shows “Keats’s ambiguous attitudes to women and sexual love in general” (147, 143).

To conclude, a traditional ballad is by definition an impersonal, objective, and detached narrative, while a lyric poem tends generally to express the poet’s subjective feelings, attitudes and thoughts. In what may at first approximation seem a contradiction in terms, Keats’s poem could be designated as a “lyrical ballad.” For Keats is ironically expressing a lyrical content in a traditional ballad form, apparently to forestall possible lyrical interpretations of the poem and deflect the critical attention away from his private love life. Several clues which can be traced in Keats’s life and works help confirm such a conclusion. The fact that the poem is a “literary” ballad which reflects issues and concerns common with other poems and letters by Keats suggests that “La Belle Dame” is less an impersonal, distanced narrative poem about a doomed love encounter than a personal account of Keats’s own attraction to, and fears of, a love that would, he believed, amount to “a cloying treacle to the wings of independence,” if not a metaphorical and even literal death for him and for his poetic career. This idea can be made even clearer when one considers the context of Keats’s revision of the poem before its publication in the *Indicator* in 1820. The intentions behind Keats’s revision of the poem may have been to remove its excessive sentimentality and adopt an ironic detached tone towards the man in love in an attempt to distance himself from the suggestion that he is himself the desperate man in love, giving in to the seduction of romance’s wish-fulfilling fantasies. However, the very attempt to conceal such a personal dimension of the poem is ironically an indirect confirmation of the extent to which the ballad “La Belle Dame” is, at least in its initial moment of composition, a lyrical, subjective poem, registering Keats’s own fears, conflicts, and desires.

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