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John Keats and Mythopoetics: A Reading of "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

Abstract: While the title of Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" points to Alain Chartier's medieval poem as major source, there is an even earlier subtext suggesting itself in both the ballad's narrative and structure. As demonstrated in this paper, Keats's depiction of the relationship between the knight and the fairy-figure, between poetic ward and mysterious muse, refers to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as it is presented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Exceeding what can be regarded a fine example of creative reception, the recurrence to the classical tale of poetic inspiration and, as it were, despair adds a metapoetic level to "La Belle Dame." Playing on in a world that is depicted as having fallen silent, the ballad becomes a means for reviving orphic singing and enacts an encounter with antiquity, in which the poet's anxiety of belatedness is eventually overcome. Thereby Keats emerges as another Ovid or even a new Orpheus, writing himself into a greater tradition of mythopoetry.

Heard memories are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter (John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," II,1-2)

1. Keats's Sources

Few poems announce their source as explicitly and as confidently as "La Belle Dame sans Merci." And yet the allusion to Alain Chartier's medieval ballad of the same title¹ marks not the end but rather the outset of an adventurous quest for Keats's literary model. It does not preclude but rather encourage further investigation into the poem's legendary and fictional heritage. In this respect, it contributes to a greater poetic strategy that serves to stimulate the reader's imagination in that it evokes a sense of literary polyphony behind a seemingly simplistic surface. What, at a first glance, appears "a piece of light occasional verse" (Gittings 1968, 306) evolves into a multi-faceted and self-reflective poem. To quote Shakespeare's Porter, Keats's ballad "provokes and unprovokes" (*Macbeth*, II.iii.27), or rather: It unprovokes in order to provoke. Neither on the level of language nor on that of content does "La Belle Dame sans Merci" follow the track it proposes to tread. Instead of pursuing the path carved by Chartier, Keats leaves his poem loitering on

¹ Leigh Hunt was the first to suggest a link to Chartier's "La Belle Dame sans Mercy" (1424), or, more precisely, its English translation, attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer, in a note to Keats's ballad on its publication in *The Indicator*, May 10, 1820. The English version of the French court poem was included in the 1782 edition of Chaucer's *Complete Works* that was part of Keats's library. Cf. Owings 1978, 18-9.

the verge of its acknowledged model, scrutinizing it from a distance while numerous other potential sources are passing by. Amidst the Scottish True Thomas and Thomas Rymer ballads, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the *Fairie Queen* by the "Elfin-Poet"² Edmund Spenser, and, most recently established, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (Finlayson 2000) – to name but a few of the associated narratives that share the *topoi* of the *femme fatale* and the medieval *plainte d'amour* (Fass 1974) – a mythological pattern suggests itself, whose connection to, and interaction with, Keats's ballad has yet to be acknowledged.

In the following, I will argue that it is particularly in "La Belle Dame" that the two 'masks,' 'the Mask of Hellas' and 'the Mask of Camelot' – paradigms that, according to Thomas McFarland, characterize the fabric of Keats's poetry –, correlate and interact. Viewed on its own, the medieval source cannot solve the riddle posed by the ballad, which Spencer Hill locates "beyond the reach of criticism," being "hauntingly suggestive but elusive in meaning" (Hill 1989, 19). Likewise, the classical subtext does not suffice to grasp the full scope of the poem. What lies at the core of "La Belle Dame" is the interaction of the two and, beyond the level of reception, the metapoetics of writing. As will be argued, the ballad can be read as a blueprint for a poet who faces the challenge of feeding on and, more importantly, of digesting the literary heritage his work is grounded on.

2. Tales of Ovid

It is the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which this essay proposes as a possible source for Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The story, as it is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is as follows: Orpheus, a renowned singer and son of Apollo, descends into the nether world in order to retrieve his wife Eurydice, who, on the day of their marriage, was killed by a snake. With his sweet singing, which – as Ovid writes – makes the shadows weep, Ixions wheel stand still, and Tantalos forget his quenchless thirst, Orpheus succeeds in charming Pluto and is given permission to take Eurydice back to life with him on one condition: He is not allowed to look at her until they have reached the upper world. If he does, Eurydice will have to stay with the dead. However, on their journey, Orpheus, too eager to see his beloved again, turns to look at her whereupon he loses Eurydice, who is henceforth confined to the nether world. Grieving, Orpheus withdraws to the wilderness where he continues to attract birds and beasts by his singing. Eventually, he is killed by the Bacchae, who tear his body to pieces, accusing him of hatred against the female sex (cf. Ovidius Naso 2004, x-xi). Although the myth is not called upon explicitly, it is nonetheless closely intertwined with the *histoire* of the poem and proves a fruitful subtext even if, initially, the protagonists of myth and ballad do not quite seem to match. The affectionate woman mourned for in Vergil's *Georgica* as *misera Eurydice* (IV, 526), as a deplorable lady that has been

² John Keats, "Spencer, a jealous honoror of thine," 5. (Keats 1979, 233. All passages from Keats's poems are cited from this edition). Cf. also Gittings 1968, 302-4.

confined to the nether world before her time, seems incompatible with Keats's mysterious fairy-creature, whom "pale warriors" (38) fatefully label "la belle dame sans merci" (39), and is even antagonistic to Chartier's utterly pitiless, proud, and vindictive "la dame." The same gist of incompatibility surrounds the "knight at arms" (2): While he bears at least some resemblance to Chartier's "l'amant," who, having been rejected by his adored, dies of unrequited love, Keats's protagonist seems to lack 'orphyic' qualities. However, this first impression turns out to be as misleading as the French title. Like the latter, the discrepancy between the Ovidian and Keatsian figures belongs to a greater antithetic strategy, which dominates the ballad's structure and content. The dual setting supports this notion in introducing two (poetic) spheres, which, at least at a first glance, strongly oppose each other. Again, it is the reader's task to take the challenge and connect the narrative strings presented to him. As an outsider, who can approach the ballad from a critical distance, the recipient holds a privileged position, which allows him or her to scrutinize the complex discourse which the poem embarks on and thus to detect the classical myth under the cloak of a Chartier-revival.

Before embarking on a comparative reading of the ballad and its mythological pattern, let us briefly turn to Keats's relation to ancient literature in general and to his acquaintance with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in particular.

Keats's fascination with the ancients reaches back to his schooldays. Whilst unable to read Greek, he showed a firm grasp of Latin and began to translate Virgil's *Aeneid* (cf. Roe 1997, 62). Hence, it is more than likely that the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was familiar to him from either Virgil's *Georgica* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,³ both of which he could have read in the original. Of the latter he also owned an English translation (most probably George Sandys's), which was given to him as a present by his headmaster on the day he left school. Along with John Lemprière's *Bibliotheca Classica; or A Classical Dictionary*, which, as Cowden Clarke claims, Keats "appeared to learn" (Clarke / Clarke 1969, 124) and Andrew Tooke's *Pantheon*, an anthology of deities and mythological figures, which contains a synopsis of the Orpheus-saga, the *Metamorphoses* has been identified as Keats's major source of mythmaking.⁴ Beside the fact that Ovid's version is far more exhaustive than Tooke's, there is one aspect in which both accounts deviate and which is worth taking into account when relating them to Keats's adaptation of the myth. While Ovid's Orpheus continues to sing once he has returned to the living and thus introduces the Pygmalion-story into

³ Among the numerous versions of the myth that exist within classical literature, the most popular – and, at the same time, most relevant in terms of reception – is Ovid's account in the *Metamorphoses*. Both Virgil and Ovid seem to follow the same version even if Ovid's adaptation is more elaborate. There is, however, one notable difference between the two. Whereas in the *Metamorphoses* the lovers are reconciled in the nether world, Virgil lets the story end miserably with the head of Orpheus floating down the Strymon, lamenting the loss of Eurydice (Vergilius 1995, IV, 454-527).

⁴ Cf. Owings 1978, 48-9. See also Pomey 1698, 373-4. Cowden Clarke, for instance, claims that Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, Joseph Spence's *Polymetis*, and Tooke's *Pantheon* "were his constantly recurrent sources of attraction" (Clarke / Clarke 1969, 124).

the *Metamorphoses* – a story that appears like an inversion of the failed revitalization of the beloved – in Tooke's account, the lyre is not struck again. In Keats's ballad, the two versions are combined. Although the plot corresponds to Tooke's adaptation as far as it springs from, and concludes in, a scene of loss, grief, and silence, the piper does pipe on. In a sense, it seems that the music continues to resonate in the ballad's sweet sound and pacing rhythm. I will return to this observation in the second part of this paper where I will further discuss how far, by means of poetic *aemulatio*, Keats succeeds in surpassing both his medieval and classical sources. As I will argue in the following, Keats (re-)appears not only as a new Orpheus behind the masks of Camelot and Hellas: He also emerges as another Ovid insofar as, in the process of rewriting and recreating the classical myth, he crosses the border between poetic reception and imagination.

3. Orpheus and Eurydice and "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

Taking a closer look at "La Belle Dame sans Merci" with regard to narratological and structural aspects, the Orpheus-myth offers a strong, suggestive pretext: Life and death, joy and grief, ecstasy and despair, and, above all, 'descent' and return are patterns that resonate in the myth as well as in Keats's ballad. The dramatic turning point especially reinforces a connection between the two: the abrupt break-up of the love-relationship, which is the outcome of a journey to a non-human sphere, can be linked to Orpheus's *katabasis*, particularly to the moment of its failure. Although Keats's "La Belle Dame" can comfortably be read and made sense of without referring to Ovid – as critics up to the present day have done –, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice contributes to a deeper understanding of the poem's narrative. Furthermore, a reader familiar with the myth – and most of Keats's contemporaries must have had a firm knowledge of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*⁵ – will undoubtedly recognize its traces in the relationship between the knight and the fairy, which is launched on the verge of the supernatural before, via the "elfin grot," it is transferred to a gloomy, uncanny realm where it is threatened by pale figures and finally disrupted by the knight's sudden awakening. The potential analogies between the two narratives become even more apparent when considering Charles Segal's account of the myth's symbolic quality:

It offers the creative artist the power to feel his art as a magic that touches sympathetic chords in all of nature and puts him in touch with the thrill of pure life, pure Being. The myth of Orpheus is the myth of ultimate seriousness of art. It is the myth of art's total engagement with love, beauty, and the order and harmony of nature – all under the sign of death. It is the myth of the artist's magic, of his courage for the dark, desperate plunge into the depths of the heart and of the world, and of his hope and need to return to tell the rest of us his journey. (Segal 1989, 198)

⁵ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was part of the school curriculum and widely read. There were numerous translations, adaptations, and synopses available. Especially the story of Orpheus and Eurydice was very popular and found its way into mythological dictionaries and anthologies as well as into numerous literary works. As stated above, Keats's reading encompassed several versions of the myth.

The same might be claimed for Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," which, as Mario D'Avanzo has argued (cf. D'Avanzo 1967, 199-208), can be read as an allegory on poetry and poetic imagination while employing a very similar storyline.

In addition to his acquaintance with Ovid, there is strong evidence suggesting that the story of Orpheus and Eurydice was part of Keats's repertoire: It is explicitly referred to in "Lamia" – moreover in a scene which is strongly reminiscent of "La Belle Dame" as far as it depicts the moment Lycius falls in love with Lamia as both musical and magical: Transformed into a beautiful maid, the serpent-woman urges Lycius, whom she has been longing for, to turn and look at her, imploring him to be compassionate:

"Lycius, look back! and be some pity shown."
 He did; not with cold wonder fearingly,
 But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice;
 For so delicious were the words she sung
 It seem'd he had lov'd them a whole summer long. ("Lamia," I, 246-50)

Lamia's stunning beauty, the coalescence of supernatural bliss and demonic power (I, 55 f.), her "elfin blood" (I, 147), her manner ("fairily" [I, 200]), and not least her enchanting singing ("A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres" [I, 299]) make her a sister-figure to the anonymous "lady in the meads" ("La Belle Dame," 13). Moreover, like the latter, whom a collective voice stigmatizes as "la belle dame sans merci" (39), Lamia, who is associated with Circe ("her Circean head" [115]), is a highly seductive and yet sympathetic figure.

Regarding the literary triangle formed by the two poems and the myth, it is striking that, in Keats, it is the female who adopts the position of the singer while the male is confined to the passive role of the listener. Thus, the parts of Orpheus and Eurydice are reversed – or are they? Following Mario D'Avanzo's suggestion that the fairy figure represents imagination *sui generis*, it can be argued that Keats does not counteract the Orpheus-story but rather engages in its dynamic de- and reconstruction. When he makes the presence of the female a prerequisite for music to be played, he follows the pattern of the myth: As Ovid records, Orpheus, having lost Eurydice for a second time, kept lingering on the shores of the Styx for seven days, living on his grief:

[...] septem tamen ille diebus
 squalidus in ripa Cereris sine munere sedit;
 cura dolorque animi lacrimaeque alimenta fuere. (Ovidius Naso 2004, X, 73-5)

At the outset of Keats's ballad, we find the knight in a very similar desolate state. Like Orpheus he seems to have "totally separated himself from the society of mankind" (Lemprière 1984, 430). Committed to sorrow and decay, nature becomes his ally as well as his enemy. The autumnal setting strengthens the relation to Ovid since the mythical referent behind Keats's personification of autumn is Ceres.⁶

⁶ Cf. Roe 1997, 263-5. For the different functions attributed to Ceres see Pomey 1698, 201-10. Cf. John Keats, "To Autumn": "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store? / Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find / Thee sitting careless on a granary floor" (12-4).

Associated with the art of husbandry and, above all, fruitfulness, the goddess, or rather her absence, certainly plays an important role in "La Belle Dame" as it intensifies the knight's suffering: "The squirrel's granary is full / And the harvest's done" (7-8). The knight arrives too late. Ceres's goods have all been spent to fill the granaries of men and beasts. While nature and its inhabitants have retreated in order to prepare for oncoming winter, the knight, like Orpheus, is left in the cold, unsheltered and without nourishment.

The proximity of death and the nether world is not the only feature which Keats's knight and Ovid's Orpheus have in common: Bereft of happiness in a time of greatest bliss, they both suffer deeply from lost rather than unrequited love. As far as Keats's ballad is concerned, a sense of genuine love has often been disputed. However, there is only little evidence that would support a reading which places either the lady or the knight in the position of a victim other than of love. In view of the fact that the ballad conveys a highly gendered reading of women in that the speakers are all male, the lady's position is especially at stake here. Whether she deserves to be labelled "la belle dame sans merci" (39) or to be praised as a "fairy's child" (14) remains an open question since these *personae* are but male projections.⁷ Judging from her deeds, the fairylike woman appears truly benevolent towards her poetic ward, whom she provides with "roots of relish sweet / And honey wild, and manna dew" (25-6), which being the purest of their kind seem sprung from the very source of poetry. Furthermore, it is not until the knight has been separated from the "fairy's child" (14), who as the spouse but not the 'original,' as the offspring of a mystic being, as muse and mediator, links the human with the supernatural, that decay sets in. Only in retrospect does the knight doubt the genuineness of the lady's love, which he then recalls to have been confessed in "language strange" (27). While sympathy for the fairylike woman is not as strong as for Lamia since the focus is set on the lovelorn male, the ballad triggers some compassion. The lady's parting from the knight is tearful. Weeping and wailing, she is in need of comfort,⁸ expressing sincere sorrow.

Even though the ballad's title takes up the demonising judgement of the grotto's pale inhabitants and supports the lady's confinement to the role of the *femme fatale*, the knight's account presents a strong counterargument. However, as far as the connection with the Ovidian myth is concerned, the "horrid warning" (42) and the misogynistic view it expresses take up an aspect which Tooke explores in his *Pantheon*. There he writes that, having lost Eurydice for good, Orpheus resolved "to live a Widower, and with his example alienated the minds of many others from the Love of Women" (Pomey 1698, 374). By including those "many others" into the main plot, Keats's ballad yet again (as already mentioned in connection with the symbolic function of the lady) seems to set in an

⁷ Cf. Bode 1996, 162. Regarding an evaluation of the female character in Keats's ballad, I agree with Charles Patterson, who argues that the poem construes "a neutral daemonic realm instead of a distinctly evil one" (Pettersen 1970, 14).

⁸ At this point, another reference to "Lamia" could be made: "And for her eyes – what could such eyes do there / But weep, and weep that they were born so fair" (I, 61-2).

instant before Tooke's version of the myth. The fact that Keats brings forward these figures can be read as an attempt to counteract the belatedness which he saw himself faced with as a straggler behind the great Latin and Greek poets. Furthermore, the numerous figures bonding with the knight deny the uniqueness of his fate and make the story of the lovelorn man captured by a wicked enchantress an almost common tale. And yet, this notion, which supports a misogynistic reading, does not prevail over the Ovidian subtext, not least because the latter becomes evident in the stanza that precedes the warning.

4. Orpheus's *Katabasis* for Wild-Eyed Agriöpe

At the most intense moment of the relationship between the knight and the mysterious woman the allusion to the Ovidian myth becomes very apparent. Prolonged by the anaphoric "and there," the turning point from happiness to woe and solitude, from thriving nature past the elfin-grot to the gloomy dream-scenario, marks the core of the poem. This shift of place can be read like a prelude to the *katabasis* Orpheus undertook for his Eurydice. As far as the lady is the cause of his descent, she is the one to lull him asleep. And yet Eurydice – like the female in Keats's ballad – is the first to shut her eyes, dying of snakebite in the meads. However, what affirms a connection between Keats's and Ovid's tragic love stories is less the question of who sets whom to sleep (although the knight seems to take an active part in this scene, one could argue that his kisses are soothing and by no means lethal) than the stress on the adjective "wild." "And there I shut her wild, wild eyes / With kisses four" (31-2). For the strange number of kisses, Keats offers a playful explanation when he writes that they were needed "to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse." Thus, by semantically outnumbering the adjectives of excitement, he can adequately respond to the "wild, wild eyes." These are the lady's most significant feature. On first mentioning his mysterious encounter, the knight already emphasizes that "her eyes were wild" (16).

In the sense of "highly excited or agitated, passionately vehement or impetuous" (*OED*, 10), the adjective "wild" on the one hand supports an allegorical reading as far as it suggests an "untamed energy of imagination" (D'Avanzo 1967, 202). Furthermore, the impetuous and highly impulsive trait induces a Dionysian element into the Apollonian realm of poetry (cf. Nietzsche 1993, 19-24), which underscores the poetic tension working within Keats's ballad. On the other hand, the expression "wild" strengthens a mythological reading although, at first, it appears to relate not to Eurydice but rather to the Thracian women,

⁹ "Why four kisses – you will say – why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse – she would have fain said 'score' without hurting the rhyme – but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgement. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play: and to speak truly I think of two a piece quite sufficient – Suppose I had said seven; there would have been three and a half a piece – a very awkward affair – and well got out of on my side" (Keats 1958, 97).

who punish Orpheus for his misogynistic views by tearing his body apart. However, while it seems plausible to read "wild" as a reference to madness, it seems even more plausible to take it as a reference to poetic frenzy, in which mania and imagination coincide.¹⁰ In fact, the attribute "wild" is intimately connected with the figure of Eurydice. In the earliest version of the myth, the female protagonist was not called Eurydice but Agriope,¹¹ which could be translated with "the one with the wild look" or simply "wild-eyed." The story of Agriope reads like an inversion of the rape of Persephone, who was also a goddess of the underworld. When Orpheus descended with the intention of taking Agriope back with him to the realm of the living, he failed. Considering Keats's education, it is likely that he was aware of the myth's origin and established a connection to the Eurydice-figure by highlighting the impetuous and insubordinate expression of the fairy's eyes. After all, in "Endymion," Keats refers to "mad Eurydice" (II, 164). Insofar as the implicit reference to Agriope can be read as a desire to return to the very roots of poetry, it furthermore entails a renaissance of an orphic singer who as an heir to Orpheus, in a post-Ovidian, muted world, once again starts to strike his lyre.

The claim that the Orpheus-figure played an important role in Keats's self-fashioning and self-perception as a poet suggests a re-reading of "La Belle Dame" from a metapoetical perspective.

5. Pipe on, Orpheus! – Keats's Lyre

The alignment of art and love, which characterizes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, is reflected in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" not only by the ballad as genre but first and foremost by the enthralling, seductive, and, to quote Wasserman, "haunting power of its rhythm" (1953, 65). With regard to its grandeur of composition, an early critic has hit the mark by claiming "besides being good and original in metre, it is simple, passionate, sensuous, and, above all, truly musical."¹²

As far as it adheres to certain harmonic patterns and can be regarded as orphic in its tone and enchanting by its rhythm, the ballad encompasses key qualities of an ideal song or even of an archetypical singer. In this respect, one feels tempted to reverse Keats's famous dictum and to claim that "unheard melodies are sweet, yet those heard are sweeter" (see "Ode on a Grecian Urn," II, 1-2). While the music "[o]n the cold hill's side" (36) has stopped, "no birds sing" (48), and the world described in the poem has fallen silent, the ballad plays on. Indeed, it cannot

¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, Problem XXX.1. (1994, 154-155). This would furthermore account for the fact that the knight seems to have adopted this expression of his fairy's eyes since the adjective "haggard" (2) also carries the meaning of "wild." For the connection between poetic force and frenzy see Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which Keats definitely read: "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" as well as "The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* [Shakespeare 1997], V.i.7-8 und V.i.12).

¹¹ Not until the fourth century BC did Agriope become 'Eurydice.' Cf. Willrich 1907, 1323. For Eurydice's identification with a goddess of the underworld see Harrison 1961, 604.

¹² Coventry Patmore on "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (extract from an unsigned review in the *North British Review*, X [November 1848], 69-76), quoted from Hill 1989, 65.

die away because the final verse, which conveys an apocalyptic vision of a desolate and devastatingly silent nature, is but the upbeat for the stranger to pose his question "O what can ail thee, knight at arms" (1) yet again. As Giuseppe Galigani has demonstrated, the musical canon, which suggests itself in the circular narrative structure, relies on certain chiasmic paradigms that can be traced on both a semantic and a phonological level. For the former, Galigani for instance refers to the shift between the human face and a flower ("a lily" – "on thy brow" – "on thy cheek" – "a fading rose") in lines nine to eleven (cf. Galigani 2000, 295). Concerning the phonological scheme, particularly the succession of vowels becomes relevant: Thus, in the sentence "I see a lily on thy brow," the phoneme /ai/ 'embraces' the phoneme /i:/ and its counterpart, which is formed by the two /i/ of *lily*. Hence, the narrative structure that takes the ballad full circle also becomes audible.

Interestingly, the stranger and the knight equally take part in composing this piece of music, which urges the recipient to engage in the ballad's symphony, to participate in its multi-layered score, and to continue to play on. Once the reader has finished reading, he is implored to start again. Regarding its musical quality, Keats's "La Belle Dame" not only recalls a mythological figure but also identifies with it as far as it presents itself as an orphic creation. Pointing to the splendour of Keats's opus while, at the same time, appearing as a late literary product of an orphic tradition, this ballad, it might be argued, extols its creator as successor to Orpheus and thus aligns him with the offspring of Apollo.

Considering the antithetical stratagem construed and enacted by Keats's "La Belle Dame," it is hardly convincing to approach the "knight at arms" (1) as a projection of the poet himself. Critics have read either Keats's relationship to Fanny Browne or some precognition of his diminishing health into the ballad's narrative (cf. Bloom 2001, 104), which seems too simple to be plausible. In opposition to these views, I would argue that, in contrast to its decaying protagonist, the ballad celebrates a victory over poetic failure. While the knight has lost his source of inspiration together with the fairy-like creature, Keats succeeds in retaining his muse: By the time he had composed "La Belle Dame," a lot more than his great poem "Hyperion" still remained to be written. Thus, the break-up with the "fair creature of an hour" ("When I have fears that I may cease to be," 9), whose loss is equivalent to death, is only dreaded: not experienced. Unlike the knight in "La Belle Dame," who could serve as a negative projection of the poet-figure, Keats is not left alone "on the shore / Of the wild world [...] Till love and fame to nothingness do sink" ("When I have fears that I may cease to be," 12-4). The scenario evoked in the sonnet, which conveys the poet's fear of losing his creative force, of literally drying up being deprived of "relish in the fairy power" (11), is strongly reminiscent of "La Belle Dame." And yet, although the latter mirrors its content, it goes one step further and counters its message. Especially in terms of musicality, the poet surpasses his fictional pendant in the same manner as his writing endeavours to outshine its literary model by means of poetic *aemulatio*.

Beside its relevance for textual interpretation, the suggested affinity to the Orpheus-and-Eurydice-myth sheds some light on the principle and process

of literary reception. As indicated by the French title, Keats's poem deals with translation.¹³ Yet, unlike suggested by the language gap between the ballad and Chartier's poem, the transference from one realm to another is not literal but literary and cultural. Keats does not translate but receive, adopt, transfer, and eventually transcend the model cited. His ballad encapsulates the process of reception of a legendary *topos*. In its passage through different forms and eras, Chartier's piece of work merely marks a momentary stage. Keats's adaptation, however, does not only contribute to the literary tradition by reshaping the myth but also encourages its progression and fosters its future revitalization.

Leaving the knight in a transitory state, placing him in-between the seasonal change of nature where he keeps on loitering to tell his story anew to anyone who passes by, the ballad secures its reception. Critics have argued that the stranger's initial question "O what can ail thee, knight at arms" (1) remains unanswered. However, the answer is self-explanatory as the knight's proposed conclusion "[a]nd this is why I sojourn here" (45) suggests. His looks provoke questions that lead to his tale. He is there to tell his story, which on being revisited becomes a different text and thus revitalizes itself in order to be further received and reinvented. Hence, the ballad enters the same circuit of embodiment and disembodiment as the knight, who by re-telling his story can re-enter the realm of his dreamlike vision. By maintaining this sense of in-between-ness, Keats inaugurates a dialogue between the 'original' and its adaptation, whose success, however, heavily relies on the participation of the reader, who is drawn into the ongoing process of reception. Facing "an overabundance of semantic and an attenuation of narrative information" (Bennett 1994, 113), he must fill in the gaps and not only receive but also reconstruct what is being presented to him. In this position, he is intimately connected to the stranger, who enquires after the cause of the knight's grief, takes his story with him into the world and thus serves as a medium of translation, contributing to the tale's proliferation. The knight's tale operates like an epigram: Being noticed in passing it invites its reader to carry its content to other times and places. For the recipient of the epigram as well as for the listener to the knight's tale, there are two means to revitalize the story: either to quote what he or she has read or heard with the intention of keeping its 'original' shape, or to transmit the tale in his or her own words. In the case of the latter, the content is naturally at risk of being modified or, to a certain extent, reinvented. Keats's ballad is a compound of these two means. While citing Chartier's title, it draws heavily on Latin and Greek sources of the Orpheus-myth and thus eventually presents a different story, which despite its novel shape is still closely linked to its origin.

As far as it raises the topic of translation and reception, the explicit reference to the medieval ballad serves two aims. While it enacts the "psychic drama between poet and precursor[s]" (Aske 1985, 2-3), which, according to Martin Aske and Harold Bloom, characterizes Keats's writings, it also provides an opportunity for

¹³ Cf. Levinson 1988, 64: "To read 'La Belle Dame' by the rubric of translation is to learn a great deal about that poem's genetic, rhetorical, canonical, and social logic, about all Keats's poems, and about Romantic poetry."

the poet to overcome the conflict arising from his "anxiety of influence" (Loreck 2000, 33). The poet's relationship to medieval and ancient texts is as profitable as it is problematic. On the one hand, the latter serve as poetic stimulants and literary repositories, inspiring new writings. In this respect, they correspond to the figure of the fairy. On the other hand, the poet always finds himself at risk of succumbing to the attractiveness and grandeur of his sources while thwarting his own artistry. Hence the ballad might be read as a parable on both the need for and the unfeasibility of emancipation from poetic predecessors. Unlike Henry Fuseli's artist, who despairs in view of the grandeur of ancient relics, Keats, in "La Belle Dame," takes on the challenge and both implicitly and explicitly inaugurates a dialogue with medieval as well as with classical sources. Thus his avowal in the preface to "Endymion" to only try "once more" (Keats 1975, 48) before bidding the ancients farewell does not hold true. Instead, like the melodist on the Grecian urn, he continues "for ever piping songs for ever new" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn," 24) and thus overcomes the nostalgia personified in the knight who will be left and eventually forgotten while 'his' story lives on. It can only do so because it accepts its transmission through other voices. By reflecting its classical-medieval provenance, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" emerges not so much as the product of, but rather as a guide to, and as a plea for creative literary reception. Fixed and yet destined to be perceived, set down in print and yet being part of an oral tradition, it can be regarded as a landmark in the ongoing process of mythopoetic writing, which has its readers in thrall and thus itself takes over the position of "la belle dame sans merci."

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