

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci – A Ballad” by John Keats

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel’s granary is full,
And the harvest’s done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery’s child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery’s song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
‘I love thee true’.

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



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

I saw pale kings and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—’La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!’

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
On the cold hill’s side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Keats’s pseudo-medieval ballad may have been inspired by an old French example by Alain Chartier or by Walter Scott’s *Border Ballads* (1802)—but it is very much his own treatment of the ‘knight errant’ theme. In it he seems to imagine a *femme fatale* who is sought by the young man and then bewitched by her and left in a morbid state of mind. In spite of his engagement to Fanny Brawne shortly before his impending death Keats was uneasy in the company of women and once wrote to his brother: “When I am among women I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen—I cannot speak or be silent—I am full of suspicions and therefore listen to no thing—I am in a hurry to be gone ... I must absolutely get over this—but how?” (Letter, 1818.)