

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

1819

1838

La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad¹

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge² has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

rushes

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 fairy'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;²
She look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

4. In the earlier version: "Half passionless, and so swoon on to death."
1. The title, though not the subject, was taken from a medieval poem by Alain Chartier and means "The Lovely Lady without Pity." The story of a mortal destroyed by his love for a supernatural femme fatale has been told repeatedly in myth, fairy tale, and ballad. The text printed here is

Keats's earlier version of the poem, as transcribed by Charles Brown. The version published in 1820 begins, "Ah, what can ail thee, wretched knight." Keats imitates a frequent procedure of folk ballads by casting the poem into the dialogue form. The first three stanzas are addressed to the knight, and the rest of the poem is his reply.
2. Belt (of flowers).

6

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

7

She found me roots of relish³ sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
"I love thee true."

flavor

8

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.³

cave

9

And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!
The latest⁴ dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill's side.

last

10

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;
They cried—"La belle dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

40

11

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam⁵
With horrid warning gap'd wide,
And I awoke and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

twilight

12

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

Apr. 1819

1820

3. Keats commented in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, "Why four kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have lain

said 'score' without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the imagination as the Critics say with Judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play."