

But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new phoenix⁴ wings to fly at my desire.

Jan. 22, 1818

When I have fears that I may cease to be¹

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charactry,²

Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;

When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,

Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,

And think that I may never live to trace

Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;

And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,

That I shall never look upon thee more,

Never have relish in the faery power

Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think

Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Jan. 1818

To Homer

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,

Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,¹

As one who sits ashore and longs perchance

To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.

So wast thou blind;—but then the veil was rent,

For Jove uncurtain'd heaven to let thee live,

And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,

And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;

Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,

And precipices show untrodden green,

There is a budding morrow in midnight,

There is a triple sight in blindness keen;

Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel

To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.²

1818

4. The fabulous bird that periodically burns itself to death to rise anew from the ashes.

1. The first, and one of the most successful, of Keats's attempts at the sonnet in the Shakespearean rhyme scheme.

2. Characters; printed letters of the alphabet.

1. A group of islands in the Aegean Sea, off Greece. Keats's allusion is to his ignorance of the Greek language. Schooling in Greek was a badge

of gentlemanly identity in the period.

2. In late pagan cults Diana was worshipped as a three-figured goddess, the deity of nature and of the moon as well as the queen of hell. The "triple sight" that blind Homer paradoxically commands is of these three regions and also of heaven, sea, and earth (the realms of Jove, Neptune, and Pan, lines 6–8).

The Eve of St. Agnes¹

1

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's² fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

2

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre,^o barefoot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb^o orat'ries,^o
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think³ how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

lean

silent / chapels

3

Northward he turneth through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue
Flatter'd^o to tears this aged man and poor;
But no—already had his deathbell rung;
The joys of all his life were said and sung:
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve:
Another way he went, and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,^o
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.

charmed

salvation

4

That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;
And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,
From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,
The silver, snarling trumpets gan to chide:
The level chambers, ready with their pride,^o
Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:

ostentation

1. St. Agnes, martyred ca. 303 at the age of thirteen, is the patron saint of virgins. Legend has it that if a chaste young woman performs the proper ritual, she will dream of her future husband on the evening before St. Agnes's Day, January 21. Keats combines this superstition with the Romeo and Juliet theme of young love thwarted by feuding families and tells the story in a sequence of evolving Spenserian stanzas. The poem is Keats's

first complete success in sustained narrative romance. For the author's revisions while composing stanzas 26 and 30 of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, see "Poems in Process," in the NAEL Archive.

2. One who is paid to pray for his benefactor. He "tells" (counts) the beads of his rosary to keep track of his prayers.

3. I.e., when he thinks.

The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,
 35 Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,
 With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts.

5
 At length burst in the argent revelry,⁴
 With plume, tiara, and all rich array,
 Numerous as shadows haunting fairily
 40 The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay
 Of old romance.^o These let us wish away,
 And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,
 Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,
 On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,
 45 As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

6
 They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
 Young virgins might have visions of delight,
 And soft adorings from their loves receive
 Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
 50 If ceremonies due they did aright;
 As, supperless to bed they must retire,
 And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
 Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
 Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

7
 Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline:
 The music, yearning like a god in pain,
 She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,
 Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train⁵
 60 Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain
 Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,
 And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain;
 But she saw not: her heart was elsewhere:
 She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.

8
 She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,
 65 Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:
 The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs
 Amid the timbrels,^o and the throng'd resort
 Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;
 'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,
 70 Hoodwink'd⁶ with faery fancy; all amort,
 Save to St. Agnes⁷ and her lambs unshorn,⁸
 And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

4. Silver-adorned revelers.
 5. Skirts sweeping along the ground.
 6. Covered by a hood or blindfolded.
 7. Entirely oblivious or dead ("amort") to every-

thing except St. Agnes.
 8. On St. Agnes' Day it was the custom to offer lambs' wool at the altar, to be made into cloth by nuns.

9
 So, purposing each moment to retire,
 She linger'd still. Meantime, across the moors,
 75 Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire
 For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,
 Buttress'd from moonlight,⁹ stands he, and implores
 All saints to give him sight of Madeline,
 But for one moment in the tedious hours,
 80 That he might gaze and worship all unseen;
 Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been.

10
 He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:
 All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords
 Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:
 85 For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,
 Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,
 Whose very dogs would execrations howl
 Against his lineage: not one breast affords
 Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,
 90 Save one old beldame,¹ weak in body and in soul.

11
 Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,
 Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,^o
 To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,
 Behind a broad hall-pillar, far beyond
 95 The sound of merriment and chorus bland:^o
 He startled her; but soon she knew his face,
 And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,
 Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;
 They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!"

12
 "Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish Hildebrand;
 100 He had a fever late, and in the fit
 He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:
 Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit
 More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!
 105 Flit like a ghost away."—"Ah, Gossip² dear,
 We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,
 And tell me how"—"Good Saints! not here, not here;
 Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier."^o

9. Sheltered from the moonlight by the buttresses (the supports projecting from the wall).
 1. Old (and, usually, homely) woman; an ironic

development in English from the French meaning, "lovely lady."
 2. In the old sense: godmother or old friend.

13

He follow'd through a lowly arched way,
Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,
And as she mutter'd "Well-a—well-a-day!"
He found him in a little moonlight room,
Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb.
"Now tell me where is Madeline," said he,
"O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom
Which none but secret sisterhood may see,
When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously."

14

"St. Agnes! Ah! it is St. Agnes' Eve—
Yet men will murder upon holy days:
Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,³
And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,
To venture so: it fills me with amaze
To see thee, Porphyro!—St. Agnes' Eve!
God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays⁴
This very night: good angels her deceive!
But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle^o time to grieve."

15

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,
While Porphyro upon her face doth look,
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone
Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,
As spectacted she sits in chimney nook.
But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told
His lady's purpose; and he scarce could brook^o
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,
And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.

16

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
Made purple riot: then doth he propose
A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:
"A cruel man and impious thou art:
Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream
Alone with her good angels, far apart
From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem
Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem."

17

"I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,"
Quoth Porphyro: "O may I ne'er find grace

3. A sieve made to hold water by witchcraft.

4. I.e., uses magic in her attempt to evoke the vision of her lover.

When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,
If one of her soft ringlets I displace,
Or look with ruffian passion in her face:
Good Angela, believe me by these tears;
Or I will, even in a moment's space,
Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,
And beard^o them, though they be more fang'd than wolves and
bears."

18

"Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,
Whose passing-bell^o may ere the midnight toll;
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,
Were never miss'd."—Thus plaining,^o doth she bring
A gentler speech from burning Porphyro;
So woful, and of such deep sorrowing,
That Angela gives promise she will do
Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.⁵

19

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespied,
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,
While legion'd fairies pac'd the coverlet,
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.
Never on such a night have lovers met,
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.⁶

20

"It shall be as thou wishest," said the Dame:
"All cates^o and dainties shall be stored there
Quickly on this feast-night: by the tambour frame⁷
Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,
For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer
The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,
Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."

21

So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.
The lover's endless minutes slowly pass'd;
The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear
To follow her; with aged eyes aghast

5. I.e., whether good or ill befalls her.

6. Probably the episode in the Arthurian legends in which Merlin, the magician, lost his life

when the wily Vivien turned one of his own spells against him.

7. A drum-shaped embroidery frame.

185 From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,
Through many a dusky gallery, they gain°
The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;
Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd amain.°
His poor guide hurried back with agues° in her brain.

22

190 Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,
Old Angela was feeling for the stair,
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,
Rose, like a mission'd spirit,⁸ unaware:
With silver taper's light, and pious care,
195 She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led
To a safe level matting. Now prepare,
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;
She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd° and fled.

23

200 Out went the taper as she hurried in;
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:
She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin
To spirits of the air, and visions wide:
No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,
205 Paining with eloquence her balmy side;
As though a tongueless nightingale⁹ should swell
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

24

A casement° high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
210 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
215 And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.¹

25

220 Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules° on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;°
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,

8. I.e., like an angel sent on a mission.

9. An allusion to Ovid's story, in the *Metamorphoses*, of Philomel, who was raped by Tereus, her sister's husband. He cut out Philomel's tongue to prevent her from speaking of his crime, but she managed to weave her story and make herself understood to her sister, Procne. Just as Tereus

was about to kill both women, Philomel and Procne were metamorphosed into a nightingale and a swallow.

1. I.e., among the genealogical emblems ("heraldries") and other devices ("emblazonings"), a heraldic shield signified by its colors that the family was of royal blood.

And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory,° like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:
225 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

26

230 Her eyes were open, but she still held
Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;²
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;
Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

27

235 Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,
In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd³ she lay,
Until the poppi'd warmth of sleep oppress'd
Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;
Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;
240 Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;
Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;⁴
Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

28

245 Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,
Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress,
And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced
To wake into a slumberous tenderness;
Which when he heard, that minute did he bless,
And breath'd himself: then from the closet crept,
250 Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,
And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,
And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where, lo!—how fast she slept.

29

255 Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon
Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set
A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—
O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!⁵

2. The Pre-Raphaelite-inspired painter Daniel Maclise represented this moment in Keats's romance in his painting of 1868, *Madeline after Prayer*.

3. In a confused state between waking and sleeping.

4. Various interpretations; perhaps: held tightly, cherished (or else kept shut, fastened with a clasp), like a Christian prayer book ("missal") in a land where the religion is that of dark-skinned pagans ("swart Paynims").

260 The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,^o *high-pitched trumpet*
 The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,
 Affray^o his ears, though but in dying tone:— *frighten*
 The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.

30

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
 In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
 While he from forth the closet brought a heap,
 265 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;^o *melon*
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
 From Fez,⁵ and spiced dainties, every one,
 270 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

31

These delicacies he heap'd with glowing hand
 On golden dishes and in baskets bright
 Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand
 In the retired quiet of the night,
 275 Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—
 "And now, my love, my seraph⁶ fair, awake!
 Thou art my heaven, and I thine hermit:⁷
 Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake,
 Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache."

32

280 Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved^o arm *unmanned, weak*
 Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream
 By the dusk curtains:—'twas a midnight charm
 Impossible to melt as iced stream:
 285 The lustrous salvers^o in the moonlight gleam; *trays*
 Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:
 It seem'd he never, never could redeem
 From such a steadfast spell his lady's eyes;
 So mus'd awhile, entoil'd in woofed phantasies.⁸

33

290 Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—
 Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,
 He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,
 In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":⁹
 Close to her ear touching the melody;—
 Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:

5. I.e., jellies softer ("soother") than the curds of cream, clear ("lucent") syrups tinged with cinnamon, and sweet gums ("manna") and dates transported in a great merchant ship ("argosy") from Fez, in Morocco.
 6. One of the highest orders of angels.

7. Hermit, religious solitary.

8. Entangled in a weave of fantasies.

9. "The Lovely Lady without Pity," title of a work by the medieval poet Alain Chartier. Keats later adopted the title for his own ballad.

295 He ceased—she panted quick—and suddenly
 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:
 Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

34

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
 Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
 300 There was a painful change, that nigh^o expell'd *nearly*
 The blisses of her dream so pure and deep:
 At which fair Madeline began to weep,
 And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;
 While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
 305 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,
 Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

35

"Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now
 Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
 Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
 310 And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
 How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
 Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
 Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
 Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
 315 For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go."

36

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
 320 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose:
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,—
 Solution^o sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows *fusion*
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
 Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

37

325 'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown^o sleet: *gust-blown*
 "This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"
 'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:
 "No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!
 Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—
 330 Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?
 I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,
 Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—
 A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."

38

335 "My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!
Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil^o dyed? *vermilion, bright red*
Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
After so many hours of toil and quest,
A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.
340 Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

39

345 "Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,
Of haggard¹ seeming, but a boon indeed:
Arise—arise! the morning is at hand;—
The bloated wassaillers^o will never heed:— *drunken carousers*
Let us away, my love, with happy speed;
There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,—
Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:²
350 Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,
For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee."

40

She hurried at his words, beset with fears,
For there were sleeping dragons all around,
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—
355 Down the wide stairs a darkling^o way they found.— *in the dark*
In all the house was heard no human sound.
A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;
The arras,^o rich with horseman, hawk, and hound, *tapestry*
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;
360 And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

41

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:
365 The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:³
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

1. Wild, untamed (originally, a wild hawk).
2. Rhine wine and the sleep-producing mead (a

heavy fermented drink made with honey).
3. Acknowledges a member of the household.

42

370 And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
375 Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old—
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;
The Beadsman, after thousand aves⁴ told,
For aye^o unsought for slept among his ashes cold. *ever*

Jan.—Feb. 1819

1820

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell¹

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:
No god, no demon of severe response,
Deigns to reply from heaven or from hell.
Then to my human heart I turn at once—
5 Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;
Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!
O darkness! darkness! ever must I moan,
To question heaven and hell and heart in vain!
Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease—
10 My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:
Yet could I on this very midnight cease,
And the world's gaudy ensigns^o see in shreds. *banners*
Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,
But death intenser—death is life's high meed.^o *reward*

Mar. 1819

1848

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art¹

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,²
5 The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution³ round earth's human shores,

4. The prayers beginning *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary").
1. In the letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, into which he copied this sonnet, March 19, 1819, Keats wrote: "Though the first steps to it were through my human passions, they went away, and I wrote with my Mind—and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart. . . . I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep. Sane I went to bed and sane I arose."
1. While on a tour of the Lake District in 1818, Keats had said that the austere scenes "refine

one's sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and steadfast over the wonders of the great Power." The thought developed into this sonnet, which Keats drafted in 1819, then copied into his volume of Shakespeare's poems at the end of September or the beginning of October 1820, while on his way to Italy, where he died.
2. Hermit, religious solitary.
3. Washing, as part of a religious rite.

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;
 No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
 10 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.⁴

1819

1838

La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad¹

1
 O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
 Alone and palely loitering?
 The sedge^o has wither'd from the lake,
 5 And no birds sing. *rushes*

2
 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.

3
 I see a lily on thy brow
 10 With anguish moist and fever dew,
 And on thy cheeks a fading rose
 Fast withereth too.

4
 I met a lady in the meads,
 Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
 15 Her hair was long, her foot was light,
 And her eyes were wild.

5
 I made a garland for her head,
 And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;²
 She look'd at me as she did love,
 20 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 wight."

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

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

flavor

8

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

cave

9

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

last

10

40 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!"

11

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

twilight

12

45 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 fain

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."