

1819

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI: A BALLAD

John Keats

Keats, John (1795-1821) - Widely regarded as the most talented of the English romantic poets, Keats, whose work was poorly received during his lifetime, could not have foreseen his later recognition. Ironically, he wrote for his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." La Belle Dame sans Merci:

A Ballad (1819) - Opening lines: O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, / So haggard and so woe-begone? ...

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

I

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

II

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. -

III

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

IV

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. -

V

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

VI

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. -

VII

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

VIII

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. -

IX

And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dream'd- Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill side. -

X

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!" -

XI

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

XII

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

THE END