

## **Femme Fatale or Fettered Faery? The ambivalence of Arthur Hughes' Interpretation of Keats' "La Belle Dames Sans Merci"**

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***Abstract:** This article will explore and analyse how Arthur Hughes' interpretation of John Keats' poem, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1819) offers ambivalence in its depiction of a 'faery's child' atop a knight's horse in the woods. The discussion will largely explore how this ambivalence, especially when considered alongside later approaches to the same subject, interacts with contemporary notions of female sexuality and power in society. Furthermore, this article will aim to investigate how Hughes' Pre-Raphaelite work preceded others in light of the various contemporary textual and social influences which cause the viewer to consider the numerous potential readings of Keats' texts and ask if the 'faery' in Hughes painting is a deadly precursor to the emergent femme fatale, a fettered victim of abduction, or, encapsulating the full ambivalence of both text and painting, neither.*

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The poetry of John Keats provided significant inspiration for the art and subject matter largely produced and approached by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. E. P Thompson proposes that 'within his work may be found the germ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, [particularly reflected in] the deepening influence of medievalism'.<sup>1</sup> William Morris supports this in his recollection that 'our clique was much influenced by Keats, who was a poet who represented semblances, as opposed to Shelley who had no eyes, and whose admiration was not critical but conventional'..<sup>2</sup> The word 'semblance' is of striking relevance to Keats' style and particularly to the poem to be discussed- 'La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad' (hereon *LBDSM*).<sup>3</sup> It delineates the tension in Keats' work

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<sup>1</sup> Edward P. Thompson, "William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary", (Oakland: PM Press, 2011) p.10. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=1158823>.

<sup>2</sup> William Morris and May Morris 'Introduction' in *The Collected Works of William Morris: With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris*, Cambridge Library Collection - Literary Studies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.xxxi.

<sup>3</sup> John Keats, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad', in *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 273-4.

between appearance and reality, exterior and interior perceptions as well as present observations and tainted recollections. Morris' criticism of Shelley's conventionality further embodies the Pre-Raphaelite admiration for critical, complex multiple perceptions.

Arthur Hughes was a Pre-Raphaelite painter and close associate, although not a direct member of the group. His interpretations of such material (covered by more prominent Pre-Raphaelite painters such as John William Waterhouse and William Holman Hunt) have been largely passed over in critical discussions of Pre-Raphaelite representations of mythology, be it of 'The Eve of St Agnes', or in this case his 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.<sup>4</sup> Keats' provision of such material enables Pre-Raphaelite artists to engage with the subject matter of his poems in ways which produced various visual interpretations over time. Such is particularly seen in *LBDSM*, which has seen contemporary influences and individual styles produce an array of approaches to the poem. Some of the earliest approaches to this text were taken by Pre-Raphaelite leader Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his wife-to-be at that time, Elizabeth Siddal. Both create a sense of female victimhood and captivity beside overpowering male ardour. This can be seen in the bound wrists and downward gaze of the female figure in Siddal's sketch, as the relatively featureless male figure looms possessively behind her with his hands atop her shoulders. Abduction and male possession are implied less strongly in Rossetti's sketch; a male figure- notably less obscured than Siddal's- kisses the lady's hand. The tight, almost forcible pulling of her hair, wrapped around the back of his neck and hand, turns her head to reveal a forlorn and fearful expression, casting doubt upon this being a romantic encounter. The perspectives of male and female artists can be revealing here, reflecting on the outlook of Siddal, whose sketch reveals scepticism of the male narrative provided and easily draws on the implications of male dominance, whilst Rossetti, sketching in the same year (c.1855), is more muted in his approach; his pair could be perceived as a passionate couple journeying together. What both sketches fail to capture, is that which becomes so heavily a focus in later interpretations of the late

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Hughes, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, 1863, oil on canvas, 152.5 cm x 122 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that which aligns most closely with the literal narrative of Keats' poem: the role of 'la belle dame' as the deadly and alluring captivator as opposed to the submissive captive. Grant F. Scott proposes that this early omission of presenting 'la belle dame' in this way is simply due to adherence to Victorian gender codes. However, the first hints of this interpretation can be seen in Hughes' representation. Hughes particularly had forces of patronage to contend with, which established conservative confines expected by the paintings commissioner, popular Pre-Raphaelite patron, Thomas Plint.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, Hughes appears to depict the poem in a way which conservatively hints at a deceptive power beneath the woman's innocent exterior, a power which possibly is derived from presumptions of helplessness and innocence. With the emergence of the New Woman later in the century, depictions of this nature became more overt and unabashed, revealing male anxieties about this cultural shift and female propensity for securing power. Even more frightening may have been the prospect of such power gained through beauty, sexuality or illusions of innocence. In this way, women displaying open awareness of their sexuality sometimes manifested in art as monstrous figures, shown to be unabashedly and animalistically hunting, fooling and bewitching unsuspecting and chivalrous men. This article does not argue that Hughes was a precursor to such paintings, which more closely follow the literal narrative of Keats' poem. Rather, this article will explore the ways in which Hughes' interpretation of Keats' 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' embodies the ambiguities of the poem and the tensions between male and female power it depicts. Overall it will be argued that although Hughes' interpretation is one of the lesser discussed works depicting 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', it most faithfully captures the equivocation of the text, the ambivalence of his representation, allowing the reading in Siddal's sketch to be realised for possibly the first time as an exhibited painting.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew C. Potter, *British Art for Australia, 1860-1953: The Acquisition of Artworks from the United Kingdom by Australian National Galleries* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019) p.175. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=5773136>>.

<sup>6</sup> Grant F. Scott, 'Language Strange: A Visual History of Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 38, no. 4 (1999), 503- 535 (p.514).

*LBDSM* relays the story of a knight's deadly tryst between with a beautiful 'faery's child' who ultimately leaves him 'alone and palely loitering', endlessly dying beside a lake. A traveller prompts him to tell his story, which forms the rest of the poem. Visual interpretations such as Hughes' however, draw attention to the possibility that accounts between the male knight and elfin female may vary; the reader only receives his version of the story. The poem's title, which translates as "the beautiful woman without pity" implies a particular reading from the offset, which characterises the 'faery's child' as a *femme fatale*, meaning a "deadly woman", usually one who uses the allure of her beauty to beguile, deceive and harm men for personal gratification. Such is suggested when the knight makes repeated reference to her 'wild eyes', repeating the word 'wild', juxtaposing her deadly nature and delicate female beauty. Describing only her eyes as 'wild' implies that the 'faery child's' overall impression is one of beauty but that a threat lies concealed beneath the surface. This suggestion is carried throughout the poem, implying that the seemingly loving gestures the knight receives from the lady actually form part of her snare.

The moment Hughes visually depicts sees the lady bend 'sidelong' whilst atop the knight's horse, as he walks alongside her. In the poem, she sings 'a faery's song', which the knight cannot understand, later confirmed when he recalls her speaking in 'language strange'. This moment in both painting and poem, casts doubt as to whether or not Keats' lady is truly a *femme fatale*. In the poem particularly, the ambiguity lies in the effect of the song; is it a spell to enthrall and entrance the knight? Or is it a lover's serenade? Similar ambiguity lies in the positioning of Hughes' figures; she leans towards him and locks eyes with him, her child-like features and rosy cheeks purporting innocence; however, the dead intensity of her stare and the looming nature of her pose hints at an underlying malevolence. The lines of composition in the painting also draw attention to the hypnotic tightness with which she holds his gaze, with the back of the knight's shield strap continuing through their eyeline, making him appear enthralled as he looks up with a glazed expression. Such is the effect that it is possible to interpret his expression, entranced by her song as being more innocuous than hers. Robyn Cooper elaborates that the lineal composition of the leftmost trees,

which lean towards one another, mimicking the figures in the foreground, could also be symbolic; the straight-standing tree on the left representing ‘masculine power and strength’ and the crooked tree on the right representing ‘feminine vulnerability and weakness’.<sup>7</sup> Thus, she argues that the continuation of the crooked tree, down the front of the knight’s shield-strap and shoulder could highlight his potential emasculation and vulnerability in the face of the femme fatale who looms over him.<sup>8</sup> This holds further water when compiled with the implications of the placement of the knight’s sword in the lady’s lap. Whilst the phallic imagery and symbolism of his “sword” in her possession further illustrates her potential to emasculate the knight, more pragmatically, Hughes depicts the knight as having made himself completely vulnerable to the woman. She has unarmed him, as he has neither sword nor shield ready, indicating that she has completely and dangerously rid him of his inhibitions and protections. Furthermore, a small snake adorns the lady’s neck, harking back to biblical suggestions of damning female temptation. Although these symbols are absent from Keats’ poem, Hughes’ use of these visual cues relay the duplicity and seduction which Keats implies with her ambiguous actions. From scavenging sweet undefined ‘roots’ and luring the knight to her ‘Elfin grot’, to speaking in an unintelligible language and lulling him to sleep, all of these actions, tainted with a threatening undertone of mystery can be interpreted as a ploy resulting in the knight’s seduction, abduction and fated damnation.

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<sup>7</sup> Robyn Cooper, ‘Arthur Hughes’s *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and the Femme Fatale’, *Art Bulletin of Victoria*, 27 (1986) < <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/arthur-hughess-la-belle-dame-sans-merci-and-the-femme-fatale/> > [Accessed 16 January 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1. Arthur Hughes, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1863). Oil on canvas. 153.7 × 123.0 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1919.

Hughes' work conflates a number of the stanzas in the poem, particularly those in which the lady sits atop the knight's horse, and in which the knight dreams of warnings from her previous victims, convincing him that he shall be the latest. This is depicted in the background of Hughes' painting, where dream-like figures waft through space behind the central figures, confusing place and time. It is as if they, like the trees behind them, are being swayed by the wind. This sense of movement behind the frozen central figures, who appear locked in their gaze, further highlights the power the woman atop the horse has over the helpless knight, pinned motionless by her stare, to pause time and perceptions, and distract him from the warning signs that float behind her.

With this reading, all indicators in Hughes' painting point towards characterising the female figure as an ensnaring femme fatale and threat to the innocent knight, who becomes helplessly enthralled by her. As with Keats' poem, an alternate reading lifts a layer of meaning from the subject, revealing a potentially alternate account of events, which sees the faery no longer presented as a seductress, but as an abductee, and possible victim of rape. With this reading, there is potential to decipher a more disturbing version of events than the knight reveals, in which the 'faery's song' is a pleading cry and her 'language strange' is deceptively relayed by the knight as a message of love, rationalising his actions and preserving his chivalrous image. Hughes also wrestles with the equivocation of Keats' double entendres. His painting displays no perceptible 'garland' upon the lady's head, but bracelets can be seen clearly and from her pose, they more closely resemble ornate handcuffs, suggesting she might have been forcibly placed upon the knight's 'pacing steed' (another sexual allusion) as a prisoner rather than a seductress. The last two lines of the fifth stanza could have further sexual connotations, as could the phrase 'fragrant zone'.

Further possibilities of a selective account are presented by the phrase 'sweet moan', with opportunity for the knight to present a moan of objection or surrender as a moan of pleasure. More disturbingly, if the knight were a true villain, as dangerous and predatory as the femme fatale described, he could have considered a moan of distress 'sweet'. Likewise, a look 'as she did love', is entirely up to the discretion of an unreliable narrator to discern. In the eighth stanza the lines 'And there she wept and sighed full sore | And there I shut her wild wild eyes | With kisses four [...]' are possibly revealing about the knight's temperament; he makes no attempt to consider or explain why she cries after the implication that they have sex. Keats leaves this ambiguous. The knight *does* take pains to emphasise her 'wild eyes', which he shuts with 'kisses'. As with the knight's bracelets, it is possible that what the knight relays as kisses could have a violent alternate. Upon closer inspection, one could doubt that *LBDSM* depicts a reciprocal courtship, or that the knight was powerlessly in the thrall of an enchantress. Hughes' painting captures this by including symbols which threaten the knight's masculinity and power, whilst simultaneously showing the 'faery' as being feeble in

the face of masculine power.<sup>9</sup> This could imply that the threat of the femme fatale is ultimately pale in the face of man, despite flattering illusions of power and allure. Hughes' painting could suggest that the knight pretends to be enchanted by the woman's gaze, unarmed with her sword in his lap, worshipping her atop his horse with him below, all the while, it is still *she* who is bound, weighed down with his sword, positioned as a phallic belt of chastity and ownership. Moreover, a far larger snake than the one around the lady's neck is shown crushed forebodingly on the knight's tunic, towards which her head bends uncomfortably as she looks towards him pleadingly. Perhaps in Hughes' interpretation, 'la belle dame' possesses only an illusion of threat, which in reality is easily thwarted by the physical power of man whenever he chooses. In this way, power is given to the male figure to not only control the narrative, but control the power balance, allowing the lady to take on (or rather attempt and appear to take on), the role of seducer, whilst he himself truly holds the power. Arguably, as in Hughes' painting, the threat of the femme fatale is simply symbolic, with no basis in reality.

The ambiguity of meaning and language between the two 'lovers' also serves to give the knight narrative power. He can choose to attribute any meaning to her expressions, whether it be in retrospective public narratives or introspective recollections. Similarly, Anne Mellor describes how the elusiveness of a reliable, clear or chronological narrative might lead the reader to discount the obvious. With the haziness of the knight's recollections, the reader might initially fail to question why his dream, likely based in imagination instead of reality, is the only real reason given to believe the woman is 'la belle dame sans merci'.<sup>10</sup> Mellor questions why the knight should so readily believe this dream, and what he stands to gain from characterising his once-lover as an evil seductress. Once again, male control of the narrative is something Keats' *LDBSM* seems bent on maintaining, contrary to Hughes' representation. This control is maintained by Keats through the abandoned and

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<sup>9</sup> Scott, p.516.

<sup>10</sup> Anne K. Mellor, 'Keats and the complexities of gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by S. J. Wolfson, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 214–229 <doi: 10.1017/CCOL0521651263.014>, pp. 223-4.

scorned knight as ‘even though his harsh dream has become [...] reality and he remains unloved, unloving, even dying, *he* gets to tell the story[...] and silence the female’.(Italics mine).<sup>11</sup> Thus, what is carried through from Keats’ poem to Hughes’ painting most strikingly is the oscillating and perplexing power tension between the male and female figures. He shuts her eyes, but she lulls him to sleep. He sets her on his horse, but it is her grotto they escape to. Both poem and painting ultimately beg the same questions: who is in control here? Who is the real victim?

The omission of multiple narratives in Keats’ poem is accounted for in the ambivalent visual narrative of Hughes’ painting, potentially widening the scope for readings of *LBDSM*. Whilst Hughes’ painting makes no solid allusion to the female’s power to enthrall, such as is heavily implied in the poem, interpretations are available which allow for her propensity to be a femme fatale, whilst still being victim to the physical tyranny of the knight. It is possible the woman, elfin or not, is overpowered, abducted and raped, her powerlessness suggested by her pose and expression. A further reading could posit a turning of the tables and villainy from both figures, implied by the oscillating threat and conquest of the lady’s symbols. It could be that the knight’s ailments at the beginning of the poem are penance for his overpowering of the faery, and that after the rape she takes him back to her grotto in anger and tears, to enact her revenge, in the only way she is able to; without tactile male strength, but with female deceptions, or supernatural powers, still possibly under the guise of powerlessness and innocence. Such may be a likely interpretation of how the knight came to be ‘palely loitering’ with ‘a lily on thy brow’ by the lakeside. Wishing to avoid an unchivalrous perception from the traveller, the embittered knight could easily have vilified the lady, omitting the events which may have instigated her turning of the tables. Such a reading could foreshadow the fears which were to arise about women’s proclivity for harm with increased or realised rights or ‘powers’; the faery’s powers enacting a metaphor for the threats posed by developing the role of women in society.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

On a base level, the reading encapsulates the more relative, true-to-life possibilities of romantic subjects, of whom only one party is seldom wholly innocent. In this vein, the text provides opportunities to reveal a more commonplace encounter, such as a failed courtship, superimposed onto the backdrop of medieval mythology. The knight, or (if the subject is transposed to that of a contemporary relationship) man, may truly believe or simply relay that the faery (or woman) seduced him and abandoned him in a deathly state, when in fact he may simply be lovesick. Indeed, the poem could be a dramatisation or parallel narrative of a simple courtship which ended abruptly, upon which the embittered, jilted knight, sought to restore his self-esteem by portraying the woman as a monster who bewitched him with mysterious songs and wild eyes. Such does not directly align with Hughes' painting, of course; however, the ambivalent style of his painting draws further attention to the room Keats' poetry gives for conflicting and various accounts.

E.P Thompson argues that Keats' poetry provided 'a refuge from a social reality which he felt to be unbearably hostile'.<sup>12</sup> However, in his approach to *LBDSM*, Keats can be seen to embrace the hostile and painful social realities which can arise from romance, as well as its contradictions. A head-on approach to conflict and paradox appear central to Keats' poetry, and in a way his poetry at times appears performative of an attempt to reconcile contradictory perspectives. Such can be seen where there is a power tension between perspectives of harsh reality and comforting imagination in poems such as 'Isabella'; likewise, a similar power tension is created between the male and female figures in *LBDSM*. Hughes captures this visually, causing similar uncertainty and challenge to perceptions of reality. Instead of achieving this in the same way as Keats, through offering only the perspective of the knight, whose recollections may take on a sinister tone if seen in an alternative light, Hughes achieves this equivocation by providing opportunity (through compositional and symbolic considerations), to oscillate between readings and perspectives as in Keats' poem, providing equal inability to discern any "truth" from the subject. Whilst Keats allows debate about the knight's reliability, Hughes painting similarly highlights the conflict between the role of the

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<sup>12</sup> Edward P. Thompson, p.11.

woman as monstrous femme fatale, or conquered abductee. Hughes arguably captures that which no other artist attempts; an interpretation which captures the essence of Keats' poem, fluctuating between perspectives, possibilities and perceptions. Quite as in ordinary love and relationships (omitting the staples of Arthurian mythology) recollections and perceptions vary, emotions and egos run high, and parties can be unduly vilified, with key events remembered with a hindsight heavily influenced by the relationships outcome. Furthermore, Hughes' painting illustrates the accuracy of Keats' depiction of love gone awry, foregrounding the equivocation and confusion which can arise from this, regardless of the Arthurian setting in which the central characters reside.

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