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A Traumatic Encounter: Male in Distress in John Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*

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Abstract:

John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" *revolves around a controversial encounter, which arouses an anxiety in its central figure. Anxiety, in this poem, pertains to a loss. And the loss that underpins the verse relates to masculinity, and male solidarity as its guarantor/protector. The anxiety of such a loss is cried out after an encounter with the femme fatale figure, who highlights in the poem the fragility of the masculine identity and solidarity. And although there is only one instance of dream mentioned in it, this study argues that 'dream' reigns throughout the poem. Therefore, the poem literally functions as a dream-narrative for the male figure, whose anxiety is revealed through it.*

If the whole narrative rests upon a dream, then what the 'dream' stands for becomes a matter of question in this reading of the poem. Given that the initial inquiring person and the femme fatal may just be the self-induced visions of the knight, the meaning of dream needs to be further explored. If this is a self-produced narration on a dream-encounter, what does this encounter with the femme fatale signify? How can one explain the anxiety and distress she invokes in the knight? And why does he appear almost like a victim of a trauma, surviving the aftermath of a 'traumatic' experience? This paper seeks answers to these questions by reading Keats's poem through a particular perspective that addresses such issues.

Key words: Masculinity, Lilith, Femme Fatale, Gender roles, Anxiety

John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" revolves around a controversial encounter, which arouses an anxiety in its central

figure. Anxiety, in this poem, pertains to a loss. And the loss that underpins the verse relates to masculinity, and male solidarity as its guarantor/protector. The anxiety of such a loss is cried out after an encounter with the femme fatale figure, who highlights in the poem the fragility of the masculine identity and solidarity. And although there is only one instance of dream mentioned in it, this study argues that 'dream' reigns throughout the poem. Therefore, the poem literally functions as a dream-narrative for the male figure, whose anxiety is revealed through it.

The poem starts with a question, to which the whole narrative is offered as an answer. The owner of the question is not indicated in any line, it is left un-identified throughout the poem. And the fact that there is no hint as to the identity of the first speaker renders the call-response relation between the knight and him ambiguous.

> Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
> Alone and palely loitering?
> The sedge has withered from the lake,
> And no birds sing. (Keats 1912, 321)

In line with the incertitude of the initial speaker's presence, one may favor the possibility that he does not exist at all, at least physically. May the dialogue between him and the knight be a fictitious one? If so, we may assume that the question-answer relation between them is rather a monologue under the disguise of a dialogue. Cannot he be talking probably to himself by imagining that he is being addressed to by an external speaker? Above all, what does such a presumption amount to?

When considered as a product of imagination, the questioning person appears to be a pseudo-person in the knight's own narrative, which is constructed on the basis of the 'dream'. Accordingly, all words that are uttered by this persona function as the knight's own expressions, through which he questions himself. The significance of this self constructed and self-directed inquisition will be dwelled upon later with relation

to the traumatizing quality of his dream. Therefore, before plunging into that aspect of the discussion, we shall attempt to have a further insight into the dream-accounts of the knight.

With respect to the construction of the poem it should be noted that it is retrospective in style; the narrative does not offer any glimpse on what succeeds the moment of awakening. And similarly, no hint is available in the poem as to any event that precedes the dream. The absence of past and future engulfs the narrative in a present, which is shaped purely by the dream of the knight. The dream, hence, serves as the center for the narration with no notions of 'before' and 'after'. As suggested in the lines below, all that is recollected and recounted is the 'dream' itself.

> And there she lulled me asleep
> And there I dreamed – Ah woe betide!-
> The latest dream I ever dreamt
> On the cold hill side. (322)

The knight's dream brings forth the femme fatale, or it is merely is brought about by her. And considering the fact that the knight speaks of her after his awakening, the damsel can be regarded as an unreal figure. As can be noticed in the poem, there is only one justification as to her existence which is the the knight's recollection of her. However, the possibility that there has never been a 'she' for him in the physical world puts the reliability of his mournful accounts at stake. Then, what arouses this a suspicion against the plausibility of the narrative concerning the female figure? Why and how shall one doubt the reality of the knight's vision, and conceive all that he tells as an unpleasant, unsatisfying dream? In relation to these questions, we might take a look at the following stanza:

> 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. (321)

The point, to which I wish to draw attention in these lines is the concrete, yet incomplete description of the lady. Long hair, light foot and wild eyes are all what she seemingly represents. Portrayal of her features is sharp enough, but not sufficient. Apart from these three parts, we do not receive any account about her physical appearance, let alone her personal characteristics. This unelaborate and incomplete representation of her might be stemming from the failure of the knight: his failure to re-member the image of the lady entirely and satisfactorily. Just like a dream vision, she cannot be recollected completely, but only through fragmented pictures such as her hair, feet and eyes. Moreover, the focus on these parts of the body may be suggestive of the fact that the lady is just an illusory, fetishistic object of the knight's dream. "Fetishism is born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to accept the difference the female body represents for the male" Elisabeth Bronfen holds (2004, 108). And following the way she employs the notion 'fetishism', one may take the emphasis in the poem on the specific parts of the female body as the knight's inevitable ignorance of the lady's difference. As a matter of fact, she can in no way be different since she emerges as the construction of the male figure in the first place. Therefore, difference, in this context is that which the knight cannot dream of. He narrates only what he can conjure up, or he conjures up only what he can narrate.

The knight's depiction of the lady becomes desperately uneven when he cannot help calling her "a faery's child". So incapable of representing her in a realistic manner, the knight applies such a supernatural simile as a last resort. Destitute of the words that would presence the lady in his narrative, all he is able to offer is an exaggerated, incomplete, hence, unconvincing imagery of her. Accordingly, the physical presence of the damsel turns out to be quite a controversial one in the poem. She might indeed be merely a constitute of his 'dream'.

If the whole narrative rests upon a dream, then what

the 'dream' stands for becomes a matter of question at this point. Given that the initial inquiring person and the femme fatal are just the self-induced visions of the knight, the meaning of dream needs to be further explored. If this is a self-produced narration on a dream-encounter, what does this encounter with the femme fatale signify? How can one explain the anxiety and distress she invokes in the knight? And why does he appear almost like a victim of a trauma, surviving the aftermath of a 'traumatic' experience?

Considering the knight's dream as the manifestation of an anxiety he suffers, the initial speaker can be denoted as a tool to stress his distress. Anxiety, in this poem, relates to the fear of loss, which can be taken in the case of the knight, as the loss of proper masculinity. And even though the anxiety of loss probably precedes and succeeds the dreamy encounter, the dream climaxes this uneasiness. It shows the male figure in the face, the inescapable possibility of that loss.. And because the dream evokes this distress in him, the dream itself appears to be traumatic, bringing the inherent anxiety back to the surface. In order to articulate and recuperate his anxiety, the knight consults to a pseudo speaker, through whom he can ease his woe.

> Oh what can ail thee, knight at arms,
> So haggard and so woe-begone?
> The squirrel's granary is full,
> And the harvest's done. (321)

The tone of the interrogative persona is fierce and inquisitive, as well as naïve and compassionate. The modal verb "can" applied here and the emphasis on the "arms" highlights the sense of potency, which the inquisitor fails to perceive in the knight. The psychological state of the knight does not comply with his erect physical stance, and this discrepancy disappoints the questioner. The imagery of order and fertility is utilized as a contrast to the disordered and infertile mood of the knight. However, such a contrast reveals no empathy regarding the

"woe-begone" knight; on the contrary it harshly judges the misdemeanor of him and even blames him for the frailty he exhibits. And returning to our argument that the questioner is nothing but the mouthpiece of the knight himself, the first three stanzas can be taken as the part, where the male figure scrutinizes himself and demands excuses from himself as to the unbecoming posture he miserably assumes. Hence, this fragment of the poem is dominated by the self-accusing, and almost schizophrenic monologue of the knight, which seeks a reason for this inconvenience, this anxiety.

Following the excuses offered by himself at the beginning, the knight endeavors to convince himself that he did his best to conform to the conventions. Quite apologetically, he cries that he performed what is expected from him, and clang to the codes of masculinity till the very last minute of this encounter.

> 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. (321)

These lines expose how the knight craves to give a shape, or rather, a meaning to the damsel by endowing her with ornaments. This imagery of accessories might be the reflection of the male figure's desire to relate to the female body as a property. Cherished with possessions like garland and bracelets, the female body is treated as a space of possession. The attempt to attach these signs of commodity can be the marker of his will to possess the lady. Along with the possession-oriented approach, one might note the knight's wish to figure out a meaning out of the indecipherable language of the damsel. Whether she loved him or not, though unclear in the poem, is not doubted by him at all; rather, he attributes to her the vague signs of love like 'sweet moan', which she verbally never confirms. This self-projected notion of love is more radically detectable in the lines, "And sure in language strange

she said 'I love thee true'". In addition to such self-serving attributions he poses on the damsel, he yearns to keep her still and stable, by means of which he apparently aims to perform his masculine authority.

> 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. (322)

The first line of this quatrain lets us observe that the knight wishes to assume a regulative power over the damsel. By setting her on his 'pacing steed' he strives to stabilize her position, imposing a rigid passiveness on the female body. Situated and monitored by the male gaze, the damsel is oppressed to confirm this subject-object relationship founded by the knight.

By means of this subordinating gesture, the male figure seems to affirm his gender position. That he deprives the damsel of any motion underlines his urge to perform his masculine roles. In these last two stanzas quoted, the knight apologetically struggles to assert that he did all he could to meet the expectations with respect to the gender performatives in the social milieu. And so as to explicate the notion of gender as the constitution of socio-culturally defined performatives, Judith Butler's words can be recalled at this point:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler 1999, 179).

Butler's argument addresses the fragility and in-authenticity of gender, which, when related to this reading,

points at the anxiety of the knight in the poem. While attempting to stabilize the position and posture of the female, he simultaneously tries to achieve an intact, stable image of his 'gendered self'. In and trough such acts as ornamenting and locating the damsel, the knight repetitively aims to persuade himself that there is nothing wrong with his masculine identity. If it is the case, what is it that triggers an anxiety as to that particular loss? How can one situate the anxiety in such a self-convincing, or better, self-deceiving narrative?

Even though he miserably endeavors to excuse himself and believe that he performed his due roles, the knight still cannot deny that the structure of his masculinity is cracked by the dream he had. The encounter he experiences in his dream seems to re-enact the anxiety that is inherent in him: he undergoes the trauma of the realization that the truth he takes for granted may turn out to be bitterly false. He confronts the disorienting fact that the masculine identity he is assured of may shatter. And the encounter with the femme fatale addresses this very anxiety of loss by interrupting the ordinary course of performatives.

> 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. (322)

No matter how decidedly he sticks to the repetitive gestures of masculinity, the fragility of the gendered self is revealed when he cannot resist the female figure any longer. In the lines mentioned, the knight recalls the moment when the damsel takes the lead, the moment when he is led astray. Despite the fact that he literally tried his chances to be a proper male by strictly watching and instructing the female, he fails eventually to do so: the femme fatale is not controllable or moldable at all. And this failure to stabilize the female brings along his anxiety of achieving a stable masculine identity. Even his final dominative act on the damsel is rendered useless, as it is *she* in

the end who puts the other into sleep.

The emphasis on sleep and solitude in the poem proves more than an arbitrary point in the light of our discussion. Sleep and loneliness emerge as catalysts for the rupture in the structure of masculine-experience in the knight's case. The fact that he encounters the damsel while he 'loiters alone' and is imbued with a disturbing/unwilled sleep hints at the vulnerability of his condition: when unguarded and unaccompanied by the male society, the performatives of masculinity become prone to disruption.

Almost identical with Lilith, the femme fatale figure haunts the male when he is alone and apt to sleep, thanks to which she can defile his male dignity. In the poem she is represented like Lilith who "goes and roams at night, and goes all about the world and makes sport with man and causes them to emit seed. In every place where a man sleeps alone in a house, she visits him and grabs him and attaches herself to him and has her desire from him, and bears from him" (Patai 1964, 302). And the resemblance between Lilith and the femme fatale of the poem gets sharper when the manner they distress the male is not overlooked: both figures 'ruin' men when they are alone, which means, when they are not in the community of other men, safe and sound. The influence of the femme fatale, like that of Lilith, pre-requisites the absence of the male solidarity, which one can note in the following quatrain:

> 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!' (322)

Kings, princes, warriors… All these male figures of power are presented in their utmost morbidity and impotency. Having encountered the femme fatale, each fell from their elevated status. And their downfall is induced by her specifically when they were alone. These fallen figures signify the inevitable fracture in the masculine performatives, which is most likely to

occur when there is no male union to grant and guard them. The disintegration of male solidarity, hence, amounts to the invalidation of the masculinity. And the femme fatale figure leaks into the structure of gender, benefitting from the absence of such an observant fraternity. She unsettles the gender codes, on which the knight was supposed to rely for the sake of asserting his manly self.

Unobserved by a collective force, the knight's masculine identity is put at stake during his dreamy encounter with the damsel. The disfunction of the male solidarity leaves him vulnerable to that anxiety as to the loss of the gendered self. His anxiety increases when he confronts this possibility of loss, especially when there is no one else to prevent it, and to protect him from it. The femme fatale figure in his dream, therefore, happens to unsettle his demeanor and render his anxiety visible.

The knight's dream, thus, serves as a reflection of his anxiety, which he begins to express by means of a pseudo-inquisitor. With the help of his schizophrenic monologue, he firstly insults and interrogates himself with respect to the reasons why he is in such a state, unconventional and unlikely for a knight. And offering excuses for his misery mainly by recounting his dream vision(s), by which he ironically brings forth his anxiety, he sorely strives to justify and sooth his nervous breakdown. The very last stanza, which ends our discussion, provides us with the clue as to how the knight wishes to account for his anxiety after all his apologetic accounts:

> And this is why I sojourn here
> Alone and palely loitering,
> Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
> And no birds sing. (323)

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