

UNCERTAINTY AND INDETERMINACY OF MEANING IN “LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI” BY JOHN KEATS

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Ever since its publication in 1820, Keats's “La belle dame sans merci” has haunted the imagination of a great number of readers and critics. One of the most salient features of the poem is its mysterious atmosphere, fostered, no doubt, by the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity which pervades almost all of its details. It is, indeed, small wonder that much of the critical effort spent on it over the past one hundred and ninety years has gone into attempts to find the key to the enigma it embodies. Some of these attempts involve conscious moves to dispel certain ambiguities, while others are premised on some comprehensive preconception or other as to the meaning of the whole. Far from being able to dissipate the mist, I shall be attempting, in the unduly concise remarks that follow, to identify certain linguistic features in the poem which are crucial points of uncertainty and indeterminacy of meaning, by bringing into focus a few details which have not received much critical attention.

In the first three stanzas, we are introduced implicitly to an unidentified questioner and explicitly to a person addressed, through a description given by the questioner of his impression of his interlocutor's appearance:

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

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 cheek a fading rose
 Fast withereth, too.
 (Keats 160)

This opening description is rendered in highly suggestive, dense imagery. Although imagery always leaves some room for at least slightly different interpretations, the first three stanzas are a relatively straightforward part of the poem in comparison with what is to follow:

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.
 (Keats 161)

Here, of course, we cannot avoid wondering whether meeting a woman with long hair, light feet, and wild eyes in the meads bodes well or ill for a man. Much more importantly, there is an interesting narrative feature almost below the consciousness threshold of all but the most experienced reader in line 2, where the knight describes the lady he met as “a fairy’s child,” i.e., a creature with supernatural powers. This description forms part of a narrative of *past* events and, as it stands, does not tell us whether the knight was aware at the time that he was meeting a fairy, i.e., a creature with powers he was unlikely to be able to deal with, or, on the other hand, whether this piece of knowledge (or conjecture) is an inference of his arrived at in the light of later experience (including his interpretation of his own dream). To some extent, the idea of his initial ignorance seems to be confirmed by “latest dream” in line 3, stanza 9, as long as the phrase is understood as “the most belated,” i.e., too late to be of any avail to the man. This assumption leads us to the awkwardly bland suggestion that the knight might (or would) have avoided the lady if he had known what was in store for him, namely complete subjection to her. This does not seem a particularly exciting idea, but it should not be discarded from the outset, being clearly implied by one interpretation of the ambiguous narrative device.

By contrast, if we suppose that the knight was aware of meeting a fairy, and still there is something he regrets not having known beforehand, we are led to search for what that might be. One idea would be that he did not know *enough* about fairies, but this is not borne out by the rest of the poem. (It is not very revealing, either.) The idea that he *did* know just enough but hoped he would be able to control the development of the relationship is rather more promising. Finally, the idea that he was instantly spellbound, “blinded by desire,” as one might say with a somewhat hackneyed phrase, cannot be excluded either. Whether we can find a broader principle to lend some more profound meaning to the knight’s state of mind in entering the relationship or not, the indeterminacy of meaning is palpably there in the literal meaning of one of the building blocks of the narrative structure.

Stanza five:

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.
 (Keats 161)

Stanzas five, six, seven, and eight are all informed by the sense of indeterminacy of meaning which springs inevitably from actions and gestures which are open to several interpretations. What is reported is not words but sensual impressions—sight, sound, and touch—of which seeing and hearing the fairy emerge as the most powerful.

Stanza six:

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.
 (Keats 161)

The same holds for stanza six, but there is something additional that I have not seen in the critical literature I consulted. It is the extremely subtle suggestion of a direction underlying the knight’s approaches to the fairy daughter: there is a tendency in the parts of the woman’s body on which the knight’s gifts are meant to be placed, a direction from head via wrists to the waist, which imparts a sense of approaching a woman’s most intimate parts. There is another small detail here which has not been the focus of critical attention. As a matter of fact, “sweet” is the first collocation that springs to a native English speaker’s mind at hearing the word “fragrance.” Now, since the knight’s gift which advances closest to the irresistible focus of a man’s desire is a “fragrant zone” (i.e., a belt), the woman’s “sweet moan” forges a delicate link with the man’s gesture, which is rather difficult to explicate. It is as if the man’s hint were taken and reciprocated with what appears to be a promising response. Last but not least, if the word “as” is taken to mean “as if,” the phrase provides another case for the kind of indeterminacy I mentioned earlier in connection with stanza four, namely that the sense of doubt which is conveyed by the conditional might be recording a sense of doubt experienced at the time of these happenings, or a conclusion arrived at from the vantage point of the abrupt end of the relationship.

Stanza seven:

She found me roots of relish sweet,
 And honey wild and manna dew,
 And sure in language strange she said—
 “I love thee true.”
 (Keats 161)

Stanza seven is extremely rich in indeterminacy and suggestive power. To take indeterminacy first, the most ambiguous, almost paradoxical, phrase of the poem comes in lines 3 and 4. At this point the narrator expresses his certainty that the lady had told him she loved him truly, while being—on the testimony of the words—equally certain that she said so in a “strange” language. The word “strange” is ambiguous between “unusual or peculiar in *some way*” and “not the knight’s vernacular,” i.e., “foreign.” If one comes to think of it, certainty about what the words mean as uttered there and then is difficult to reconcile with certainty about their status as words of a foreign language, unless one assumes that the addressee is perfectly fluent in the particular foreign language concerned. The certainty that the language is foreign at least suggests the possibility of misinterpretation. Supposing that the knight was perfectly fluent in French (or any other foreign language) would be an utterly *ad hoc* supposition, poorly supported by the poem, if at all. By contrast, the idea of a “wishful” misinterpretation (i.e., misunderstanding) should not seem far-fetched even at this stage of the happenings reported, and even more so in light of the poem as a whole. Some measure of uncertainty about truthful interpretation is bound to linger even if “strange” is construed as meaning “unusual to the knight in some way” because if a language is “unusual” to someone, one’s ability to interpret it infallibly will also be uncertain to some extent at least.

One might object by saying that while the French description used by the pale figures in the dream seems to confirm the stronger reading of “strange” (i.e., foreign), the knight appears to have understood the description “la belle dame sans merci” in the dream. On second thought, however, this conjecture does not seem sufficiently supported. It is enough for the knight to take “la belle dame sans merci” to *refer* to the fairy *in some way* (possibly by similarity to the “language strange” she spoke to him earlier) and fully absorb the message of “hath thee in thrall,” whatever the identifying description might exactly mean. He does not have to be able to interpret French (or any other “foreign” language French may symbolize in the poem) impeccably in order to draw a sinister conclusion.

As if to make things more intricate, while considerable fragments of French are comprehensible to English speakers, as is English to French speakers, “I love thee true” (translating as “*Je t’aime vraiment*” or “*sincèrement*”) happens to be an exception. It is equally incontestable that at least “dame” and “merci” are likely to be understood by an English speaker of average ability. After careful consideration of the poem as a whole, the peculiar aura of partial affinity and partial strangeness between English and French can be seen to serve as a perfect medium for introducing a sense of uncertainty into the relationship of the protagonists, an uncertainty which grows most acute in lines 3 and 4 of this stanza, and leads to the unavoidable conclusion that the knight unwittingly identifies himself as an *unreliable narrator* of what happened between him and the attractive creature.

But that is not all that can be said about the stanza. When words rhyme, their meanings tend not only to acquire greater emphasis but also to come to interact with each other. If we are prepared to admit this much, we may become alert to a curious effect here, which has not received any critical attention. The rhyme between “dew” and “true” results in a subtle suggestion almost below the threshold of consciousness—which is probably why it has gone unnoticed—but which is poetically all the more effective. The upshot of the subtle interplay between the meanings of the two words is that the transitory nature of “dew” (melting away later in the day) is projected onto the meaning of “true” (love), as a result of which the chime of the words at the auditory and the semantic level becomes a

subtle prefiguring of an imminent end to the love affair. One's impression of the density of the stanza is further enhanced by the realization that in forging a link with heaven, the word "manna" invests the fairy not only with a sense of intimate acquaintance with nature's ways (enabling her to find sweet roots and wild honey) but also with overtones of a transcendent quality adumbrated by the Judeo-Christian religious origins of the word.

In fact, "manna" is a lexical element which poses a problem on account of the perplexing quantity of semantic information it potentially brings to bear. In the Judeo-Christian tradition manna is, first of all, the food provided for the Israelites in the desert by God in reply to one of their chronic murmurings (Exod. 16.4-36; Num. 11.6-9; Deut. 8.3). This "bread from heaven" appeared first in the second month after the Exodus as fine flakes on the ground. It was "like coriander seed, but white, and it tasted like wafers made with honey" (Exod. 16.31). Ground into flour, it made palatable loaves, and it helped sustain the people for 40 years.

The manna of the Exodus was certainly providential and may even have been miraculous with reference to the times at which and the quantity in which it was supplied. Basically, however, it is a natural product, widely found in the Middle East to this day. It is produced by excretion of certain scale insects and is similar to the honeydew of many types of plant lice; it falls to the ground as drops and there hardens into the grains described in the Bible.

That a deeply religious significance was seen in the providential supply of manna is already evident in the accounts in Exodus and Numbers and becomes more apparent in Deut. 8.3, in the midrash in Wis. 16.20-29, and in the New Testament. In 1 Cor. 10.1-6 manna is termed "spiritual food" and refers to Christ, together with water from the rock. In John 6.32-48 Jesus contrasts manna with the "true bread from heaven" given by His Father. He leads his audience from physical bread (the loaves multiplied for them) to divine teaching, and finally, to the sacrament of His flesh (6.51-56). Part of the background of this miracle was the rabbinic belief that the manna would reappear in the messianic era.

The wealth of information contained even in this brief recapitulation of the contexts in which the word acquires its significance confronts us with the awkward question of selection: which of these associations are we to favor in an interpretation of this crucial passage of "La belle dame"? Or had we better extract some sort of generalized concept of manna instead? Are we supposed to look after other occurrences of the word in Keats's oeuvre? Or even in his letters? The questions multiply and keep haunting us because even with an incomplete understanding of stanza seven, it is obvious that the fairy's offering of "heavenly" or "spiritual" or "God-sent" substance marks an important stage in the development of this curious relationship between a mortal man and an immortal woman. It is difficult to resist the conjecture that just as the "confession of true love" gives an uneasy hint of barriers in communication between the protagonists, the knight's response to the offering of transcendent manna may be seen as foreshadowing a breakdown in the relationship. Although the knight's response to the manna is not implied, let alone stated, there seems to be a very subtle implication in lines 1 and 2, to the effect that the simple and unquestioning manner in which the knight *lists* what she found for him seems to suggest that he is treating all three as on a par, of the same kind, i.e., as simply sweet food. Another subtle suggestion is made by the gradually ascending direction intimated by roots (in the ground), honey (in the trees, i.e., somewhat higher up) and manna, which, though lying on

the ground, clearly “points” higher upwards. Arguably, manna is ambiguous between a stuff that lies on the ground and is edible just as roots or honey, and something that retains its link with a higher spiritual realm, something that is a “miracle on earth” pointing heavenwards, and the subtle suggestion expressed by the simple “listing” of the lady’s pleasurable offerings might hint at some barrier of communication between the protagonists perceived by one of them while going unperceived by the other. It is no mere accident that this stanza has been seen by almost all critics as the first suggestion of failure and doom.

Stanza eight:

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.
 (Keats 161)

The sense of uncertainty which permeates this stanza comes from the fact that the reader is left without explicit clues as to the cause of the woman’s crying and weeping. There is strikingly little interpretation on the narrator’s part in this stanza: with the only exception of the qualifying “full sore,” the narrator merely records what is directly accessible to the human eye and ear. (I will just mention in passing that “full sore” is arguably ambiguous between a mere adverb of degree and an adverbial phrase which suggests being aggrieved by someone or something, perhaps a sense of disappointment.) At the same time, “elfin grot” is another example of the “narrative ambiguity” pointed out in previous stanzas: the reader has no clue for deciding whether or not the knight knew the grot was not just a beautiful woman’s dwelling place but a fairy’s.

Stanza nine:

And there she lullèd me asleep,
 And there I dream’d, ah, woe betide!
 The latest dream I ever dreamt
 On the cold hill side.
 (Keats 161)

As before with verbs describing actions, we are left in the dark about the exact nature of the act of “lulling asleep.” It is also here that the word “latest” (probably meaning “the most belated”) occurs, supporting the assumption that the knight was either initially not aware of meeting a fairy (as opposed to an exceptionally attractive mortal woman) or perhaps that, even if he did, he trusted he could control a relationship with an immortal creature to his satisfaction. Further food for thought is provided by the knight’s describing the place where he had his dream as “the cold hill side.” According to the story up to that point, he must have fallen asleep in what he had recognized as “her elfin grot.” The reader is thereby led to assume that he had a dream in the same place as where he was sleeping, i.e., in the elfin grot, and yet what we have at the end of the stanza is that he had his dream on the cold hill side. In other words, a careful, literal reading of the stanza leads to a strictly implied statement of identity between the elfin grot and the cold hill side. Obviously, Keats needed a

word to rhyme with "betide," but that does not prevent us from having to make sense of the words. There seems to be a shift in narrative point of view at this point: the earlier mode of narration (relying on words like "faery" and "elfin grot") did not seem to question the reality or validity of the supernatural attributes (what was in question was only whether it was reporting events as they happened or events as interpreted later), but now the sudden switch to "cold hill side" as opposed to "elfin grot" seems to introduce an undertone of doubt as to the very reality of the whole story, or at least of some of the attributes imputed earlier.

Stanzas ten, eleven, and twelve:

I saw pale kings and princes, too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all,
Who cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

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

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.
(Keats 162)

Stanzas ten and eleven, the knight's dream, have occasioned several rash interpretations. One kind of misguided response has been to account for the identity of the lady directly in terms of the female figure of *another* poem, namely Chartier's, as if one had no choice other than trying to disambiguate Keats's poem with reference to an "original," or as if there were a fundamental idea of *the* beautiful, merciless woman which united the poems at some unidentified deeper level. (A basic flaw in either approach is the obvious fact that—putting it crudely—her speaking French in the one is not the same thing as her speaking French in the other.) Another variant of the strategy of deriving the lady's identity from Chartier is to view her simply as a calculating temptress (which Chartier's figure *undoubtedly* is), who has ruined a great number of men by frustrating the desire she has aroused in them. Closely related to this interpretative strategy is the utterly arbitrary move of putting down the pale warriors and noblemen simply as the lady's *past lovers*. Although this possibility is not to be ruled out from the start, one must first reflect on the exact nature of the relationship between the two protagonists. Careful weighing of all one can learn about the relationship from the poem reveals that certain qualities (enthralment, dependence, expectations, tacit promises, etc.) are much more unambiguously conveyed than a consummation of the affair in a sexual act. One should not jump to the conclusion that the other men's anguished cries confirm their status as past lovers. Even their "starved lips" are not necessarily lips that have once tasted what they now desire. One may come to desire passionately what one has never had, and one may even die of such an unfulfilled longing. To mention

just one alternative, the knight's dream about men of great earthly power craving the sensuous delights attainable with a particular woman may be seen as an unconscious, or just dimly conscious, attempt on his part to *justify* what he considers his weakness in yielding to the lady's charms despite the sense of danger inherent in his recognizing her as a fairy (in one interpretation of the ambiguous narrative devices discussed above). One should be able to decisively discard this hypothesis (and any number of others that are plausible) before concluding *with any degree of certainty* that the lady has sexually seduced a number of kings, princes, and warriors, only to leave them alone whimsically with a desire never to be fulfilled again.

As far as the revelatory power of the dream is concerned, many critics have not quite avoided speaking as if they could be sure that the death-stricken male figures spelled out the ultimate truth about the lady or, more modestly, as if the knight himself were sure that his dream had revealed to him *the* key to his recent experiences. To be sure, we know that he deeply regrets something, but whether it is the discontinuation of the relationship he regrets or the fact that he had succumbed to the temptation at all remains unclear. To mention just one possibility, his final state of indecision may be seen as resulting from the antithetical pull of two dim forces which remain equally impenetrable to him. However strong the temptation is to extort a definite meaning out of the dream, any such attempt must first be subjected to testing in terms of the literal meanings of the words and their indisputable implications under strict abstinence from comprehensive preconceptions about the meaning of the whole.

The comments above hardly provide anything better than rudiments for a complete "bottom up" interpretation of the poem, i.e., one that is built on a firm groundwork constructed out of the results of an examination of what the words literally mean, as opposed to an untimely recourse to some unifying "top down" hypothesis, i.e., a hypothesis about the meaning of the *whole* which derives attributions of meaning to small details from a unifying vision, the adoption of which is no less arbitrary than that of another one of its kind. At worst, the "bottom up" approach might lead to the conclusion that the poem defies interpretation without some relatively arbitrary unifying idea. Perhaps "La belle dame sans merci" is, indeed, a poem in which atmosphere is more accessible than overall meaning. As long as we have only comprehensive interpretations premised on general assumptions with an equal claim to coherence but without sufficient attention to detail, the kind of close reading adumbrated in these all too brief remarks might be seen as doing the corrective job of showing them what they are to do to make their case stronger.

WORKS CITED

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