

Five British Writers

Day 17
(of 28 total)



La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Verbal Visions?

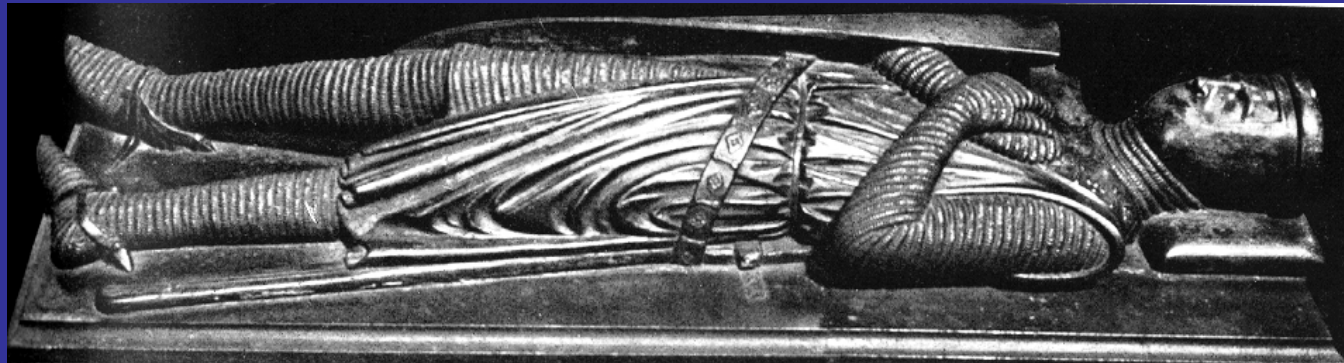
Keats's Poem inspired a group of painters known as the 'pre-Raphaelites' (because they aimed to imitate the style of Italian painters before Raphael). The three paintings of the 'belle dame' shown here are by John William Waterhouse, Frank Cowper, and Sir Frank Dicksee.

Which do you think best represents the poem?



Encountering the Past

Effigies (envisioned in the *Eve of St. Agnes*)



Encountering the Past: Poetic form

- Single 14-line stanza (“Written in a blank...”)

Rhymed, syllabic and metrical verse (iambic pentameter)

- Spencerian stanza (*Eve of St. Agnes*)

Rhymed, metrical verse

- Ballad stanza (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*)

Rhymed, metrical verse

--What is the difference between metrical and syllabic verse? Why might a poet use one or the other (or both)?

--Why might a poet use a stanzaic or a non-stanzaic verse form?

Sounds and Senses

- Assonance

‘Ah, what can ail’ vs. ‘O what can ail’

- Alliteration

‘wretched wight’ vs. ‘knight-at-arms’

- Synaesthesia

“*taste* the *music* of that *vision* pale” (392)

The poetic form of *Isabella*

Written in *octava rima* (Italian phrase for ‘rhyme in eight’), stanzas of eight lines with a rhyme pattern of abababcc

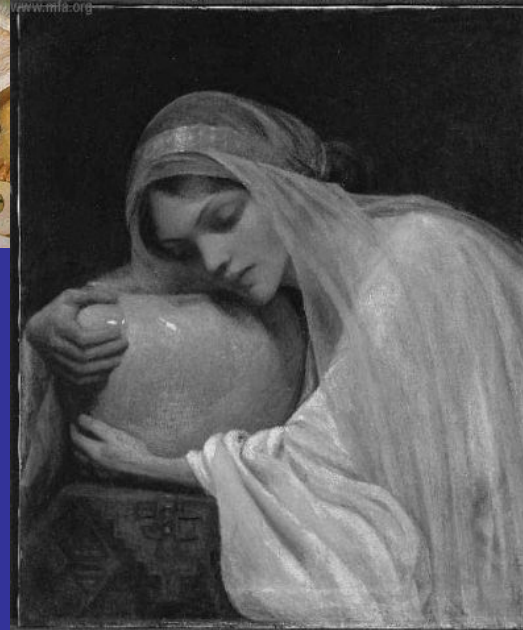
Boccaccio was the first to use *octava rima*, with hendecasyllabic (11 syllable) lines, in 1341

Keats thus borrows both his verse form and his tale from Boccaccio

But in doing so, Keats is also copying Chaucer, who similarly retold a tale from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in his *Canterbury Tales*... and Keats uses the meter which Chaucer innovated in English: iambic pentameter, a decasyllabic (10 syllable) line.

Isabella vs. Agnes

- How does this poem compare with the *Eve of St. Agnes* (with which it was published)?
- What role does a dream/vision of a male lover play in each?



Five Isabellas:

Millais 1849

Hunt 1867

Strudwick 1879

Alexander 1897

Waterhouse 1907

Macomber 1908

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UMass Boston
English 201
Dr. Kamath

Isabella and the East

How do both Keats's alterations to Boccaccio's legend (emphasis on commerce, 'Jews' 'Indians'), and Hunt's liberties in painting from Keats's work reflect not only attitudes to the past but the 19th-century 'British' perspective on their world?



“Negative Capability”

“...several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature which Shakespeare possessed so enormously -- I mean negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”

John Keats to his brothers, December 1817
(page 492 in your edition)



Benjamin West's *Death on a Pale Horse*, 1783-1803

“there is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth”

“This Living Hand”

- probably written in winter 1819
- copied on unpublished manuscript of *Cap and Bells*
- not rhymed, but in verse: iambic pentameter for seven lines and then an incomplete half a line

Hirsch discusses the power of this poem in his introduction to your edition—what do you make of this poem?

Bright Star

--copied into Keats's volume of Shakespeare's poems in the fall of 1820

--very possibly the last poem Keats wrote

Its form is an Elizabethan Sonnet, fourteen lines of iambic pentameter verse with a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*: it is formed from a combination of three quatrains (four lines with an abab pattern) and a couplet (a pair of rhyming lines aa).

Look at the use of the word 'hermit' here—Keats envisions a natural wonder like a star in same role as his Porphyro and Shakespeare's Romeo

How does the poem emphasize change/changelessness in last lines?

Next Class:

- Read three of Keats's most famous odes:
On a Grecian Urn, To a Nightingale, To Autumn
- Read the Commentary section in your edition.
- Think about why and how these past scholars formed their opinions about Keats's poetry.