**Experiencing nightmare in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”**

—Not poppy, not mandragora,

Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world

Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep

Which thou owd’st yesterday.

—Shakespeare, Othello

Keats would have read this quote in the end of Thomas Beddoes’s first volume of Hÿgeia[[1]](#footnote-1), if not straight from Shakespeare’s play Othello. ‘Poppy’, ‘mandrake’ and their ‘syrupes’ among others, as Burton notes, were supposed to induce sleep[[2]](#footnote-2) and as Kauffman explained in The Dictionary of Merchandize, which Keats owned, opium was produced by the seed of poppies and was ‘the most sovereign remedy for easing pain, and procuring sleep’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Such a medicine as opium, because of its effect in producing visions, becomes a symbol for the imaginative poetic composition. Indeed, throughout Keats’s works, there are ‘echoes of Kubla Khan’ whose notoriously popular preface praised the effects of opium on poetic inspiration. However, as we will see in Keats’s popular ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci; A Ballad’ (1819),[[4]](#footnote-4) the imagination excited by potions will prove dangerous. The sensations of and in the poem, I will argue, are there to act as a warning for the readers.

Honey, another substance that could potentially excite the imagination, has in the poem the power to harm health by inducing nightmares. According to De Almeida, honey ‘was a complex substance that could on occasion convey virulent toxicity’ followed by ‘hallucination[s]’ and ‘a hyperactive imagination’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Likewise, during nightmares, ‘the senses […] become hallucinated’[[6]](#footnote-6) and thus, nightmare, as a species of dreams, appropriately follows the consumption of honey in ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’. In the ballad, the ‘knight-at-arms’ (I, 1) drinks such a compound before falling asleep, given to him by ‘a lady’ (IV, 1) he encountered ‘in the meads’ (1) who is ‘a faery’s child’ (2). It is made out of ‘roots of relish sweet, | And honey wild, and manna dew’ (VII, 1-2). The compound’s status is ambivalent; it is a medicine for procuring sleep and at the same time it acts as a poison which induces the nightmare that follows.

According to Beddoes ‘[s]pecifics’ would only ‘leave the patient sickly and wretched’ and ‘in some cases’ would increase the restlessness’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Any ‘derangement of the digestive organs, particularly of the stomach’ or the consumption of ‘heavy meals too close to bedtime’ was thought to produce nightmares.[[8]](#footnote-8) The knight drinks this compound just before going to sleep and it is probable that his nightmare is produced by indigestion. Furthermore, the nightmare or incubus was thought to be a completely different species of dream and was considered as a disease in such works as John Waller’s Treatise on the Incubus and the very early An Essay on the Incubus, or Night-Mare by John Bond.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nightmares were thought to be ‘the forerunners of dangerous and fatal diseases’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Indeed, the knight is portrayed as ‘haggard’ (II, 2) and ‘woe-begone’ (2). There is ‘anguish moist and fever dew’ (III, 2) on his ‘brow’ (1) while he is ‘[al]one and palely loitering’ (I, 2). Whether his fever is the result of the La Belle Dame’s potion or not, the nightmare that precedes it seems to prefigure the disease and the knight’s end.

Nightmare and consciousness were two of the topics Coleridge and Keats discussed when they met during a walk on Hampstead Heath. As Ford explains ‘Coleridge, often maintained […] that the terrible nightmares he experienced could never originate from his own consciousness’.[[11]](#footnote-11) In ‘street literature’ nightmares were ‘attributed […] to demonic possession or a witch’s spell’.[[12]](#footnote-12) This was Andrew Baxter’s ‘spirit theory’ which ‘was a popular one during the latter part of the eighteenth century’.[[13]](#footnote-13) It is evident that Keats knew about it from his writing in the epistle ‘To Reynolds’ that ‘[f]ew are there who escape these visitings’ (13) ‘[a]nd thro’ whose curtains peeps no hellish nose’ (15).[[14]](#footnote-14) It could be argued that the knight’s nightmare is a dream sent by the ‘[p]ale warriors’ (X, 2) whose objective is to wake him up, metaphorically, from his enthrallment.

This notion that the dream originates from outside the dreamer lays ‘emphasis upon the dreamer’s passiveness’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The powerlessness of the knight is reinforced by ‘a progressive shrinkage of the ‘I’ throughout the poem while ‘a corresponding dominance of the ‘she” is observed.[[16]](#footnote-16) The knight’s identity is gradually diminished as La Belle Dame becomes the sole object of his attention. From stanzas IV to IX, the knight admits that he ‘nothing else saw all day long’ (VI, 2) except for his lady. His identity is, thus, subsumed and incorporated into hers. As Darwin notes ‘[i]n perfect sleep, since volition is suspended, ideas about the dreamer’s identity or consciousness do not enter his dream’.[[17]](#footnote-17) In a way, the knight experiences a dream on earth through his love with a ‘faery’s child’ (IV, 2) and thus, as a consequence of becoming immersed in this dream of love, he loses his identity.

Nevertheless, in nightmares ‘the degree of consciousness […] is so much greater than ever happens in a dream’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, the knight uses the personal pronoun ‘I’ very often —‘I dream’d (IX, 2), ‘I saw’ (X and XI, 1)— to differentiate between himself and the ‘[p]ale warriors’ (X, 2) of his dream. This implies that the knight retains a degree of consciousness relating to his identity during his nightmare. It was commonly believed that in nightmares the dreamer often ‘sees, some figure, either human, or otherwise, standing by him, threatening him, or deriding, or oppressing him’.[[19]](#footnote-19) When the dream ‘contains painful sensations, the half-waking, half-sleeping mind is deceived and attributes those painful sensations to a ‘correspondent’ agent’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus, the mind reacts to the pain, which is internal, ‘commonly originating in the lower stomach’, by differentiating between the self and the pain. [[21]](#footnote-21) As a consequence, it ‘permits the nightmairish terror to enter into the dream’.[[22]](#footnote-22) The terror or fear which is inherent in nightmares is produced by the imagination as a defensive measure and thus, ‘stifles the dreamer’ eventually.[[23]](#footnote-23) Likewise, the knight, experiencing indigestive pain, imagines the ‘[p]ale warriors’ (X, 2) oppressing him with their deathly countenances. Thus, the knight very quickly wakes up (XI, 3) because of the terror that his nightmare contained.

In nightmares, as in all other dreams, the senses are ‘frequently imposed upon’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Keats reproduces the experience of the nightmare for the reader who receives, through the articulation of the lines, the same sensations as the knight. As Abrams observes, Keats ‘makes us sense […] the changing size and shape of our mouth and the configuration of our lips as we articulate a vowel’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Initially, sight is emphasised in the knight’s nightmare, which appears to be as static as an image. He sees ‘pale kings and princes too, | Pale warriors, death-pale’ (X, 1-2) whose ‘starved lips in the gloam, | With horrid warning gaped wide’ (XI, 1-2). The verb ‘saw’ (X and XI, 1) is used twice and the emphasis is on the warriors’ appearance. The repetition of the word ‘pale’ (X, 1 and 2) and its inversion in the third repetition emphasise the warriors’ death-like countenances. Moreover, in pronouncing ‘horrid’ and ‘warning’, the lips are rounded and the mouth mimics the shape of ‘o’. For the articulation of ‘aI’ in ‘wide’ in the end of the line, it is necessary for the mouth to open wider and thus, the meaning of the word is exemplified in the shape of the reader’s mouth; that is, the ‘verbal medium is intrinsically appropriate to its referents’ and thus, by pronouncing all these words together the reader’s mouth remains in an open shape long enough to mimic the perpetually open mouths of the dead warriors. [[26]](#footnote-26) Thus, the reader experiences the nightmare as a picture at the same time he is reading the lines out loud.

The static quality of the nightmare is manifested in the use of the simple past and the illusion of duration it implies. ‘[S]aw’ (XI, 1) and ‘gaped’ (2) allow for a permanent continuity in the past. What is more, the illusion of duration is reinforced by the articulation of the line ‘horrid warning gaped wide’ (2). The line’s many consecutive vowel sounds without the interference of consonant sounds create the illusion of duration since the dominant sound in ‘horrid’ and ‘warning’ is the long sound ‘ɔː’. Sound is very important in recreating the experience of the nightmare. The haunting quality of the nightmare is exemplified by the long duration of the sound ‘ɔː’ in ‘horrid’ (2) and ‘warning’ (2) and by the position of the tongue near the back of the mouth it necessitates. These two prefigure the warriors’ warning sound; a deep unceasing ‘o’.

Furthermore, in articulating the second line of the tenth stanza the reader experiences the breathlessness associated with nightmares; in order to pronounce the lines ‘I saw pale kings and princes too, | Pale warriors, death-pale were they all’ (X, 1-2) an extra breath is required since the coma following close after ‘warriors’ creates a break in the middle of the line. This mimics the knight’s ‘difficulty of breathing’, due ‘to the inability of inflating the lungs’, which according to Waller is inherent in nightmares.[[27]](#footnote-27) Furthermore, in the articulation of the sound ‘ɔː’ in ‘horrid’ (2) and ‘warning’ (2) in the eleventh stanza, the vocal tract remains open and the air needs to be extruded with a conscious effort by the reader. This creates the illusion of forced breathing. Thus, this feeling of breathlessness, mimicking ‘the dread of suffocation’ during nightmares, is experienced by the reader after he has finished pronouncing this line.[[28]](#footnote-28) In this way, the poem fittingly becomes a personal experience, as it is the case with dreaming.

Concluding, in ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, the knight’s nightmare stems from a potion given to him before sleep by La Belle Dame. Since nightmares were considered as prognostics of disease, Keats presents the knight as suffering from an ailment and adds contemporary known characteristics of nightmares, even through a clever manipulation of sounds, to convey to the reader the sensation of suffocation and dread. It is thus that Keats re-creates for the reader the sensations felt by the knight, so that the experience of reading resembles a nightmare and acts as a warning to the readers, lest they forget to be a ‘friend to man’ and attach themselves to fanciful ideas. Then, they might be like the knight, eternally trapped into a dream, ‘alone and palely loitering’ (XII, 2).

1. Beddoes, Thomas, ‘Essay IV’, in Hygёia: Or Essays Moral and Medical on the Causes Affecting the Personal State of our Middling and Affluent Classes, 3 vols (Bristol: Mills, 1802), I, 3-98 (p. 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Burton, Robert, The Anatomy of Melancholy, ed. by Nicolas K. Kiessling, Thomas C. Faulkner and Rhonda L. Blair, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), II, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kauffman, C. H., The Dictionary of Merchandize and Nomenclature in All Languages; for the Use of Counting-Houses (London: Rufy and Evans, 1803). Google ebook. <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=8NkvAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+dictionary+of+merchandize&hl=el&sa=X&ved=0CB8Q6AEwAGoVChMI5uiXweqoxwIVSH0aCh02CgxW#v=onepage&q=the%20dictionary%20of%20merchandize&f=false>, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Keats; Poetical Works, ed. by H. W. Garrod (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1956; 1967) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. De Almeida, Hermione, Romantic Medicine and John Keats (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 178; p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Waller, John, A Treatise on the Incubus, or Night-Mare, Disturbed Sleep, Terrific Dreams, and Nocturnal Visions. With the Means of Removing these Distressing Complaints (London: E. Cox and Son, 1816), p.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Essay IV’, in Hÿgeia, I, 97; Observations on the Nature and Cure of Calculus, Sea Scurvy, Consumption, Catarrh, and Fever: Together with Conjectures upon Several Other Subjects of Physiology and Pathology (London: J. Murray, 1793). Google ebook <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=IFkSAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=beddoes+calculous&hl=el&sa=X&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAmoVChMI2KTi49jfxwIVwdYaCh1NYg0M#v=snippet&q=cessation&f=false>, p.80 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Waller, p. 2; Ford, Jennifer, Coleridge on Dreaming; Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Bond, An Essay on the Incubus, or Night-Mare (London: D. Wilson and T. Durham, 1753). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Waller, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. p.142. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Phyllis Mack, ‘The Unbounded Self; Dreaming and Identity in the British Enlightenment’, in Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions; The Early Modern Atlantic World, ed. by Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle, foreword by Anthony F. C. Wallace (Philadelphia: University of Pensylvannia Press, 2013), pp. 207-225 (p. 209). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ford, p.142. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, ed. by Maurice Buxton Forman, 4th edn (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1931; 1952) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ford, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wasserman, Earl Reeves, The Finer Tone: Keats’ Major Poems (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1953), p.79. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Darwin, Erasmus, Zoonomia Or, the Laws of Organic Life, 2 vols (Dublin: P. Byrne and W. Jones, 1796), II, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Waller, p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ford, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Waller, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Abrams, M. H., ‘Keats’s Poems: The Material Dimensions’ in The Persistence of Poetry; Bicentennial Essays on Keats, ed. by Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), pp. 36-53 (p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)