

The Femme Fatale in Cinematic Reimaginings of La Belle Dame sans Merci

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Abstract:

John Keats's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1819) made one of the most long-lasting femme fatale personas in Romantic literature: a woman with her mysterious beauty and impossibility to be interpreted and understood makes the man who wants her queasy. Although much of the scholarship done on the poem has focused on Romantic, feminist, and psychoanalytic criticism, this figure has comparatively little focus in the understanding of how the aspect is reconfigured in cinematic representation. This paper fills in such a gap by making a comparative analysis of three screen versions shot during a century of film history: Germaine Dulac's 1921 silent short, Hidetoshi Oneda's 2005 adaptation, and Michael Velykorodnyy's 2025 production. Basing the analysis on the theories of adaptation by Dudley Andrew and the feminist theory of the gaze by Laura Mulvey, the paper discusses the ways in which the movies deal with the central ambiguity of the poem using the formal tools of the cinematic practices. It claims that such reimagines are not direct reproductions of the heroine of Keats but rather re-creations of her with the evolving cultural conceptualisations of gender, sexuality and agency.

Introduction:

One of the most persistent and ideologically charged archetypes in the history of Western culture is the femme fatale. Her union of beauty, sexual agency and the devastation she brings to the men who fall in love with her has manifested in mythology and literature, visual art and the cinema as the archetypal figure that captures the panic of patriarchy over women being autonomous. This character has been theorised by feminist criticism not as a type of character but rather as a cultural projection on behalf of masculine anxieties about female sexuality, where the theory of the cinematic male gaze (as developed by Laura Mulvey) and the analysis of strategic illegibility (as developed by Michelle Mercure) offer the theoretical instruments to test. The area of film adaptation is a particularly open space where this figure can be explored owing to the fact that it does not simply project gender but creates this figure with the help of formal resources of cinematography. The poem-to-film shift thus puts into question the way in which the literary embodiments of femininity are reconfigured once being re-turned into visual and audio-visual expression, especially in the context of varying time and space. It is here that *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1819) can be found as possibly the most condensed and contentious example of the femme fatale in Romantic literature. The story of the poem, which has no definite name, having her wild eyes, her honey voice, and elusive qualities, cannot be interpreted unambiguously. The knight that had met her is left “alone and palely loitering” on a cold hillside (Keats 2), and her “language strange” (Keats 27) is neither

accounted for nor of an intelligible interiority, and the attraction is an interpretative instability that has rendered the poem the focus of intractable critical debate over two centuries.

The paper fills this gap by examining the ways in which three film versions take up the perennial interpretive ambiguities in the poem and how these engagements are conditioned by the historical specificities in which these movies were made.

Gazes, Gaps, and Gender

The above two theoreticities, L. Mulvey's feminist film theory as presented in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), and Dudley Andrew's adaptation theory, as presented in *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984), are not parallel here but in combination: Mulvey elucidates the gendered operations of the cinematic gaze, and Andrew identifies the structural place each of the films takes within its literary origin.

1. The Male Gaze and the Cinematic Construction of the Femme Fatale

The key theoretical prism of this analysis is set by the foundational essay by Mulvey. She claims that the classical Hollywood cinema is coded with a male gaze in its image, so that the viewer is in the situation of peeking at the female erotic objects with men held at the position of active subjects in the narrative (Mulvey 11–12). The femme fatale is structurally overdetermined within this scopic economy: the ultimate object of the desiring gaze and a danger to the masculine viewer who gazes upon her, a danger which can traditionally be addressed within the classical film at the cost of suffering or even annihilation. In the context of the reinterpretations reviewed in this paper, the framework developed by Mulvey can be viewed as a diagnostic tool to be used in determining the gaze structures working in the specific film and, more importantly, when the gazes are challenged or manipulated by the very personal opaqueness of the lady.

1.1 Subversive Agency and the Double Logic of the Femme Fatale

The feminine aspect of the femme fatale as a gender tactician by Michelle Mercure builds upon the model by Mulvey by acknowledging the ability of the femme fatale to have a subversive agency within patriarchal structures. That this is the power of the femme fatale and this power is not to be found in her visibility in the patriarchal structure but in her inability to be understood by it is the central argument of Mercure: she “speaks from within the patriarchal structure without letting it understand her meaning” (Mercure 114). With her ability to enact femininity upon the male subject but at the same time leave his understanding of her performance incomprehensible to him, the femme fatale foils his need to fix and dominate her; she “voices feminism through her performance by rendering it unreadable to the male subject” (Mercure 115). This idea of the femme fatale as a strategic illegible phenomenon, versus a

merely subversive one, can be directly related to the examination of the film versions of this poem: in each movie, the question is whether or not the silence and unintelligibility of the lady in question have been portrayed as a threatening absence or as an agency that the camera is unable to fully capture and trap.

1.2 Sound, Silence, and the Aural Construction of Gender

Stephen Andriano-Moore and Xinyu Guo analyse aural gender construction in the film *Sounding Out the Femme Fatale-ness of Mia Wallace in Pulp Fiction* (1994), which demonstrates that the sound components of film: music, dialogue, silence, and effects – play a supporting and subversive role in constructing femme fatale characters, simultaneously reinforcing and distorting the norms of gender hegemony (Andriano-Moore and Guo 1, 5, 15). This framework gifts the vocabulary to examine how the adaptation approaches the scenario of the lady being silent and whether it is a threatening absence or a form of agency beyond the abilities of the cinematic sound to capture and hold.

2. Adaptation Theory

The tripartite model presented by Andrew opposes the evaluative logic, according to which fidelity to the source is judged as the main criterion of the successful adaptation of a film by a filmmaking author, and considers adaptation as a spectrum of potential connections between a film and a literary source (Andrew 98). According to Andrew, there are three main modes: borrowing, in which a director sets a storehouse of the cultural prestige of a source text; intersection, when the source cannot be fully assimilated by the means of the film; and fidelity of transformation, whereby the director attempts to capture the very essence of the source with the unique tools of the cinema (Andrew 98–101). These classifications are not exclusive, and the most fascinating adaptations usually swing between them. Thereafter, these categories become interpretive lenses the readers can use to read three versions that end up as positions on the same source that are quite dissenting.

The combination of these structures does not simply describe how something adapts but reveals the ideological labour of this process; what is bequeathed to or changed to or rejected by a film is always equally a production of power. It is this twofold prism through which the ensuing analysis of scholarship frames the three films in the critical and cultural backdrop.

The Lady in the Archive

The critical-literary tradition about *La Belle Dame sans Merci* is broad and theoretically diverse. The textual instability, as Noah Comet notes, is caused by the fact that the poem exists in two forms, the 1820 (indicator) text and the 1848 Charles Brown text; the text introduces a

formal ambiguity to the poem that supports the interpretive uncertainty inherent in the narrative form of the ballad and places both the author and the reader in a collaborative relation to understand the text (Comet). The multimedia analysis of the adaptation of Oneda done by Comet shows that the film is able to show the interpretive dynamics elusive in the text version to the student viewer, to whom the unreliability of the knight is not completely visible as a fact of visual and auditory perception (Comet).

The longest feminist approach to the poem is offered by Arda Bade Şenli, who argues that the Belle Dame is not a demon but a woman exercising sexual autonomy and that the knight's narrative is a self-serving account structured to contain a woman who has unsettled his sense of masculine control (Şenli 515–17). The interpretation of the poem presented by Judith Weissman earlier is an interpretive prompt offering a point of contrast. Weissman interprets the lady as elemental and impersonal and as having power over the knight instead of being psychologically or morally complex; her power is of natural indifference instead of intentional agency (Weissman 99). The contextual analysis of Keats within the interpretation of the 19th-century notions of gendering and sexuality that is provided by Rachel Schulkins also helps to delineate the cultural atmosphere in which the poem was created: a setting where the agency of female sexuality was, by all standards, morally perverse and socially predatory (Schulkins 109).

On the cinematic side, Tami Williams's analysis of Dulac's 1921 film in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* wherein Tami Williams analyses the 1921 film by Dulac. Williams contextualises the cinematic interpretation of Dulac in the context of her own larger programme of formal experiment and interprets the Impressionist vocabulary of the film as a politically significant formal decision and not an aesthetic one (Williams 404, 406).

Reimagining the Lady through Cinematic Adaptation of Keats's *Femme Fatale*

1. Ambiguity as Foundation: Keats's Construction of the *Femme Fatale*

Close reading identifies the exact unreliability and how wholesale a process it is that is generated into the ballad on the plane of grammar and syntax, a system of formal operations of which the poem is generally accredited as a consequence of a menacing atmosphere. The instability presented in the poem is most obvious on the level of narration as such. The knight gives explanations as facts many times when the language of the poem does not provide that. In the line "look'd at me as she did love" (Keats 19), the comparative "as" is not in a resolution as to whether the lady loved him or just seemed to love him. In the same way, as he tells that she told him, "I love thee true" in a "language strange" (Keats 27–28), the reader is not made

acquainted with her speech but with that which was translated by the knight, as he could not comprehend her own words. Female threat was thus formed by the poem by narration as opposed to verification, in that there was uncertainty that is an actual feature of the poem as opposed to a question of the uncertainty that will be instilled on the poem later by the critics. The poem never confirms whether she is genuinely dangerous, only that the knight reads her as such, meaning the femme fatale of the source text is a hermeneutic construction, not a character fact: she is created to be dangerous by a narration which the poem invokes and refutes at the same time. The three constructions, the suspended “as”, the untranslatable declaration, and the unreliable retrospect, which every filmmaker arrives at, denies, or alters, are what are inherited, denied or modified.

2. Atmospheric Borrowing and the Impressionist Femme Fatale: Germaine Dulac's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1921)

Among the three filmmakers analysed in this paper, Dulac takes the most radical interpretive decision: she never takes a side in the ambiguity of the narrative in the poem but rather avoids it altogether; she leaves the story told in the source text alone, preserving its archetypal power. Her 1921 silent version is more in line with the mode of borrowing that Andrew has. Being a silent movie, the work of Dulac is pushed to the formality of absolute instability of the aurality of the poem, as, in the work of Dulac, there is no voice whatsoever, as only image, shadow and structural silence of the intertitle can be heard. Onscreen, this visual practice makes possible what Weissman had already discerned in the poem: that the lady is best characterised as “a manifestation of seductive nature”, a power, not a person. The Impressionist approach used by Dulac, as illustrated by Williams, was a politically motivated formal technique: she generated meaning out of spatial relationships, atmosphere, and the shock of paradoxical association images instead of out of plot-prima-facie action, a technique she specifically differentiated from the standard variety of commercial film production (Williams 411–12). This official vow causes the femme fatale to be a glowing, slippery surface: present but psychologically withheld, seen but never known. Dulac is denying the archetypal logic of punishing women who commit transgressions so thoroughly by shirking traditional melodrama and structuring the film around cycles of ambiguity instead of the classical logic of narrative resolution. There is no dramatic declaration of supernatural threat but a prolongation of the feeling of uncertainty, which resembles the poem to determine the status of the lady herself.



Figure 1. Close-up of the lady in jewelled headdress and layered pearls, her face emerging from near-total darkness. Dulac's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1921).

This dynamic is simply caught in one frame (see fig. 1). In this high angle the woman is loaded with theatrical jewellery, overlaid pearls, and a lace headpiece; her face is made out of almost complete darkness, and her eyes are directed downwards, not towards the camera. The chiaroscuro light makes femininity an overtly produced act: she is the organising centre of the composition, but she does not give herself to the interpretive scope of the viewer. The frame makes her squarely a part of the economy of the male gaze as spectacle; though in declining to give back the gaze, she is also acting in the vein of the strategic illegibility that she speaks of, speaking as part of the scopic arrangement, not giving way to its interpretative imperative. That these two processes, spectralisation and illegibility, in the same compositional moment, is where the practice of borrowing, itself, becomes more dialectical in nature: the ambiguity created by Dulac, with its visual resistance to narrative resolution, rhetorically replicates the resistance to settling the meaning of the lady that the poem itself refuses to perform. The composition invites the male gaze and gets frustrated with the subject that it creates.

3. Poetic Ambiguity Made Visible: Hidetoshi Oneda's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (2005)

Where Dulac is evading the narrative of the poem in order to appropriate its archetype, Oneda goes right into it, engaging the story closely enough that the poem and the film remain in a tense, productive, and unresolved relationship. His 2005 adaptation is devoted more or less to the mode of intersection of Andrew, the film being delivered by an older knight, recounting his experience, which is a structural choice enthusiastic to create another level of discontinuity between the spectator and the action, a discontinuity between memory and whatever meaning the memory creates medium, though the intersection of Oneda is not absolute: the retrospective framing, the incomprehensible voice, and the skull substitution are all attempts to put the ambiguity inherent to the end state of the poem into an encounter with the resources of cinema, such that the film also shares with the mode of fidelity of transformation at its most interpretively committed moments.

The most significant formal choice of the movie is its attitude towards the voice of the lady. Oneda makes the unreliability of the knight, as Comet notes, a literal visual and auditory reality as the lady speaks, or, to be more exact, not in a “language strange” as given in testimony but an experience shot through a movie camera (Comet). This incomprehensibility, in its turn, is also analytical: Andriano-Moore and Guo prove that the aural elements of the femme fatale, the vocal unintelligibility comprises, at the same time, reinforce the conventions of the gender hegemony and corrupt them (Andriano-Moore and Guo 1, 15). Throughout the movie, the lady is constantly placed in space and emotional distance: she comes into the scene out of the dark and disappears without any explanation; her presence is identified not by character but by visual phenomenon. Oneda makes the strategic illegibility expressible: the lady is talking, but what she is saying cannot be digested but can only be experienced as a limit to the viewer’s interpretive access.



Figure 2. The lady's face briefly replaced by a skull, secondary figures receding into darkness. Oneda's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (2005).

This dynamic is focused on a single frame (see fig. 2). The face of the lady is masked with a skull, which is replaced by the female image only after a few seconds: hair, the dark cloak, and the feminine framing are all present such that the skull fills the face without taking the woman out of the frame completely. This is where the composition will challenge the reasoning of the male gaze: the woman is perceived, though not identified. The mechanism as laid out by Mulvey makes sense: the male gaze typically resolves the castration anxiety the female image inspires by either administering the voyeuristic punishment or the astute overvaluation of the fetish (Mulvey 14). The skull replacement is triggered in ways that neither open up the former nor close the latter; it invokes death without affirming guilt, it prompts the fetishistic gaze and then momentarily fades the object. Instead of locating the femme fatale with death, the momentary replacement opens the possibility that what the skull tells us could

be the projection of the knight as much as her character, which the language of the poem refuses to do and does not rule out.

4. The Lady Looks Back: Michael Velykorodnyy's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (2025)

The one formal decision of the 2025 adaptation of Velykorodnyy is one the poem does not authorise: for a sustained sequence, we observe events through the eyes of the lady, rather than those of the knight in the encounter. At the point in the shot where the unnamed travellers stand in the foreground on a rocky peak, when the lady is raised in the calf-dark red, both faces turned towards each other across the space the composition puts between them, the film reaches the turning point. After this moment of spatial and emotional separation, the narrative point of view shifts to the lady. The narrative point of view of the story changes after this instance of temporal and emotional isolation. The action is perceived through her eyes in the battle at one point. The text has nothing in the source text. The poem is constructed around the testimony of the knight in retrospect, as we only get the word of the lady via a narrator who has no clue as to what the lady said and what he had to believe. In granting her a perspective, the film does not resolve the poem's structural openness; it relocates it. The question ceases to ask what the knight saw or what she saw and whether either of the two testimonies is to be believed.



Figure 3. The lady's direct returned gaze against a wide moorland valley. Velykorodnyy's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (2025).

This transformation is the sharpest of visuals in a single frame (see fig. 3). The woman is standing on high open land with a wide valley of moorland that opens behind her and the elemental feminine figure entrenched in the landscape. However, she turns to the camera and looks straight and with a steady gaze at the viewer. Through giving the lady an eye, Velykorodnyy transforms into an elemental force, the impersonal aspect of the matter into a subject, one who consumes the gaze whose point of view there is. The lady in the poem by Keats is completely formed by the knight looking at her; she does not have a look of her own as described in the text. According to Mulvey, Velykorodnyy denies that asymmetry. The woman who had been looked upon comes to be the one who looks. Her stare is straightforward

yet not readable, threatening or engaging the friendly sense of nothing in that regard. By turning straight into the camera, she does not become transparent; the straightforwardness of the look makes her no easier to fix. The modern femme fatale, so created by the film, seems to have real agency over her: she is the one who rules the visual field, she is the one who initiates the encounter, and she is the one who sets its conditions. Towards the gaze sent back in Velykorodnyy's film, which is the equivalent of the incomprehensible voice in Onega's, are directness, but on the other hand, invisibility. Mercure's formulation clarifies the mechanism; the performance remains unintelligible to a viewer looking directly at it, but in the case where Mercure obtains no meaning by the performance of passivity, Velykorodnyy obtains no meaning through the performance of agency.

5. The Lady Reconstituted: Continuity and Change in Three Screen Version of La Belle Dame sans Merci

It is the presentation of the three reinterpretations in comparative sequence that is the only way to see the complete structural logic of the afterlife that the poem engages with. The traces that the individual analyses examine tally as local sectors of form: Dulac's atmospheric evasion, Oneda's interruptive illegibility, and Velykorodnyy's agential opacity serve as stages of one underlying situation: each cinematic approach produces a variant of withholding, not a variant of a greater withholding.

Placed in a relative order, it becomes possible to see the adaptive logic of the treatment of each of the films in ways that could not be fully revealed by the individual analyses. The feminist implications of Dulac are affected more by formal means than by direct proclamation; this is again the province of the expressive means of the early medium but again also a circumstance inherent in the structure of the borrowing. Instead, the film of Oneda makes the feminist subtext that can only be placed atmospherically in Dulac and makes it readable visually and audibly: the divergences of the poem containing the skull-like replacement, the retrospective frame, and the unintelligible voice take their place as the most significant of the critical statements of the film, interpretative decisions that demonstrate the ideological labour which the source text has both already practised and then not addressed, at moments where intersection begins to move toward fidelity of transformation. Velykorodnyy, then, takes the formal decision which neither of the two predecessors undertook and which accords the lady a viewpoint. By doing so, he moves most closely toward Andrew's mode of fidelity of transformation, placing the viewer in direct relation to the lady's returned gaze rather than the knight's retrospective testimony.

Collectively, the three movies show that adaptive mode influences the fashion in which the lady is made unreadable without removing her unreadability. Borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation generate various strategies for the cinema, but they lead to the same interpretive limit: each movie ultimately leads to the same interpretive limit, despite taking radically different abiding approaches. That shared limit is, therefore, to be dealt with, and it gives meaning to what it shows us of the future cultural life of the poem and of how far that life persists.

Conclusion

This analysis has triple implications. To the cultural afterlife of the poem, it proves that *La Belle Dame sans Merci* has not only been feeling its way through a century of rethinking but has also been made alive by it: every new move towards the poem which is made by historically distant places adds to its indeterminacy, instead of draining it away. It is the ability of the archetypes to be renegotiated rather than the stability of the archetypes which has helped the poem stand the test of time, as the main character is always opposed to the ultimate meaning and her archetypes beg the new generations to renegotiate their own anxieties about the culture in which she exists. In the case of adaptation studies, it proposes that an adaptation position and a gaze structure are ideologically indismissible to each other; being in charge of a mode of adaptation is at the same time being in charge of a politics of gaze. To the *femme fatale* type more generally, it is made clear that the cultural longevity of the figure is not due to some quality in her that is present in the poem but to the structural labour her unreadability accomplishes over her historically separate reimaginings: she is not a solution that the poem provides but a problem it repeatedly replenishes.

The application of Andrew and Mulvey, which is used in all these case studies, leads to a larger principle of feminist adaptation studies: studies of how films respond to literary ambiguity with visual structure offer a means of documenting the ideological assumptions underlying both the state of adaptation and the state of representation in a historical context. Future scholarship could expand this comparative framework to a larger array of adaptations, such as international and non-Western adaptation of the poem, and could attend to how digital production and distribution played a role in the formation of the latest versions of the archetype.

A hundred years of reimagining have not settled Keats's lady. She has been multiplied.