

The Image of the  
Feminine in the Poetry  
of W.B. Yeats and  
Angelos Sikelianos



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By

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*In Memory of My Parents*



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## PRELUDE

### HOMER, BOETHIUS, DANTE AND JOHN KEATS

The main idea pursued throughout this study is that a gynocentric mythology permeates the work of W. B. Yeats and Angelos Sikelianos. I am using the term “gynocentric” in its original Greek synthesis which is the combination of the word *γυνή* (*gunē*-woman) and *κέντρον* (*kentron*-centre). By elevating the image of the feminine and by placing it at the heart of their poetry like an axis around which it rotates, the two poets are indeed constructing a “gynocentric mythology.”

In many cases the feminine appears as a known goddess, demi-goddess or faerie but she can also appear as a mortal, who may be accorded qualities that connect her with the divine, depending on the poet’s objective. As archaeology and anthropology have shown, gynocentric mythology is rooted in the religion of pre-historic and archaic societies where nature was perceived as a great force—neither good nor evil – just a Great Power, the Great Mother or the Great Goddess, who kept order<sup>1</sup>. She appeared in myths and rituals and was worshipped in all her various aspects or names depending on the context. According to Nilsson, it is accepted by many scholars that all the specialized features and functions shown by the representations of various goddess icons are fused into the person of one and the same goddess.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The appearance of Stone Age sculptures with the predominance of naked women characterized by an exaggerated emphasis on buttocks, breasts and belly, which extend from Siberia to the Pyrenees, seems to presuppose a unifying world view centering on the Great Mother. In fact, a widely accepted interpretation among archaeologists saw these figures as representations of the Great Goddess, the embodiment of fertility on earth. (See Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 11-12; E. Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 94-95ff; A. Baring & J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, (London: Penguin, 1993), 56; Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974, 1982.), 201 ff and throughout).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Nilsson, *The Minoan –Mycenean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, 2nd edn, (Lund: (no pub. 1950), 393-394.

A gynocentric mythology, with or without an active feminine persona in its centre, has been a vital theme in poetry and art throughout the ages. However, the poetic significance of the theme becomes clearer, when one examines its presence in certain well known poetic works, especially those that have influenced many poets and especially Yeats and Sikelianos.

Γουνούμαι σε, άνασσα·θεός νύ τις ή βροτός έσσι;  
Εί μεν τις θεός έσσι, τοί ουρανόν ευρύν έχουσιν,  
Αρτέμιδι σε εγώ γε, Διός κούρη μεγάληοιο,  
είδος τε μέγεθος τε φυήν τ' άγχιστα είσκω·  
[...] ου γαρ πω τοιούτον εγώ ίδον οφθαλμοίσιν,  
ουτ' άνδρα ούτε γυναίκα·σέβας μέχει εισορόωντα.  
(Od. VI, 149-161)<sup>3</sup>

Here, in one of the most celebrated moments in world literature, Homer stages the first meeting between Odysseus and Nausicaa. The words Odysseus uses to address her could be seen as the foundation of the way the female force functions in poetry and art and betrays the relationship between the hero, the poetic persona, and this feminine force. Odysseus, shipwrecked, exhausted and desperate, sees Nausicaa as a goddess sent to assist him in completing his *nostos*, or return; he expresses his thoughts and approaches her as if she were a goddess. Strangely enough the attractive maiden is depicted, even by the poet himself, as having the qualities of Artemis.<sup>4</sup>

The encounter between Odysseus and Nausicaa is auspicious and promising. It is the event that not only changes the route of Odysseus' journey, but transforms the man himself. After his encounter with the young princess, Odysseus becomes a different person, showing a part of his persona unknown to us before this point. He sheds the mask of the

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<sup>3</sup> 'Mistress, I throw myself on your mercy. But are you some goddess or a mortal woman? If you are one of the gods who live in the sky, it is Artemis, the Daughter of almighty Zeus, that your beauty, grace, and stature most remind me. [...] For never have I set eyes on such perfection in man or woman.' Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. E.V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 106-107.

<sup>4</sup> 'Among them Nausicaa, of the white arms, led them in their song; it was like Artemis, the arrow-shooter, who moves across the mountains, over long Taygetos or Erymanthos, delighting the boars and the swift running deer; and the wild rural nymphs, daughters of the Aegis-bearing Zeus, are playing with her and Leto is glad in her heart; and Artemis, standing tall, her head and forehead above them all, is easily recognized although all of them are beautiful; so did this virgin (princess) stand out among her handmaids'. Od., 6, 102-107. (tr. mine)

tough, hardened hero and appears sensitive, even vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> This transformation is significant: in the poems of Yeats and Sikelianos the goddess affects the poet (or the poetic persona) and a metamorphosis takes place, or rather a series of metamorphoses. The relationship between Odysseus and Nausicaa represents the connection between the hero and the benign feminine force, the ‘goddess’, a relationship which is discreetly erotic, as scholars have observed.<sup>6</sup> Even if the erotic desire is not consummated on the human level, the feeling remains and is expressed through the eyes. Homer, with the wisdom of those who know that the erotic in life and art has a stronger and deeper impact if it is merely hinted at, stages with intelligence their farewell scene: Nausicaa, ‘in all her heaven-sent beauty / [...] filled with admiration as her eyes fell on Odysseus,’<sup>7</sup> greeted Odysseus warmly and, wishing him good luck, she said to him: ‘remember me at times, since it is to me before all others that you owe your life’; and Odysseus, answering, said: ‘I will never fail to worship you all the rest of my days / For it was you, lady, who gave me back my life.’<sup>8</sup> In this subtly erotic scene, Odysseus’s last words allude to the sense of rebirth the hero experienced after his acquaintance with Nausica. Indeed, their meeting and their undeclared erotic connection becomes transformative for both players. Ever since Homer the image of the ‘goddess’ has continued to affect poetry and art, and, despite Plato’s condemnation of the poet, the intellectual and artistic world has continued to be inspired by the Homeric epics.<sup>9</sup> As Kaufmann rightly argues, we owe the birth of tragedy and poetic drama to Homer.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Homeric heroes, normally, do not cry easily; yet, Odysseus has become so sensitive that he cries twice while Demodokos, the bard, sings about the Trojan War and he cries like someone who lost a loved one, according to the Homeric simile employed there; each time it is only Alcinous that notices; Od. 8. 542- 550. Odysseus’s emotional outburst signifies perhaps the newly acquired sensitivity.

<sup>6</sup> Maronitis, D., ‘Οδυσσεύως και Ναυσικάς ομιλία, *Ομήρου Οδύσσεια*, ραψωδία ζ’ (Athens: Stigmi, 1991), 43.

<sup>7</sup> [...] θεῶν ἄπο κάλλος ἔχουσα / [...] / θαύμαζεν δ’ Ὀδυσῆα ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὀρώσα.

<sup>8</sup> [...] κειῖθι θεῶν ὡς εὐχετομήμην / ἀεὶ ἡματα πάντα σὺ γάρ μ’ ἐβίωσας, κούρη. Od. 8. 457-468 and Homer, *The Odyssey*, transl. E.V. Rieu, 134-135.

<sup>9</sup> It is intriguing that Homer presents the Land of the Phaeacians (Scheria) as a soul journey into the Anima Mundi or a dream full of beauty, serenity and light. Some scholars see the Land of Scheria and the Court of Alkinoos as Homer’s distant memory of Minoan Culture.

<sup>10</sup> W. Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Princeton, N. Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 137-162.

Often the vision of the goddess-like figure appears when the artist-hero is in great distress, and then her appearance has an enormous restorative and transformative effect on the poet and the poetic persona, as Nausicaa on Odysseus. For instance, in Europe, in the sixth century, an important figure appears whose impact on modern literature may not have been adequately explored, Boethius (c 480-524), a philosopher and a scholar with a rich classical, literary and philosophical background. Boethius stands at the crossroads of the classical and medieval worlds and his well known work *The Consolation of Philosophy* became quite influential in the West.

Boethius came from a well known patrician family who, since their conversion to Christianity, had acquired great power and wealth. Boethius himself, at an early age, held an important office at the service of the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. A combination of circumstances, political and theological, led to his arrest; he was quickly sentenced and sent into exile in Pavia to await execution. It was at that time, during the period between his condemnation and his execution that Boethius, imprisoned in Pavia, wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>11</sup>

One day, the philosopher-poet under the shadow of his approaching execution was in despair and was trying to make sense out of his circumstances and the injustice he was suffering; at that moment, as he tells us, he became aware of a woman standing over him. At the first sight of her, his state of mind went quickly from frightful surprise to hope and calm as if there is some benevolent divine aura around her that changes despair into hope because she was not an ordinary being. This lady descends to Boethius from heaven, as he says, and although she is called Philosophy, because she represents wisdom, Boethius's description defines her as some divine being, that came from God.

I became aware of a woman standing over me. She was of awe-inspiring appearance, her eyes burning and keen beyond the usual power of men.<sup>12</sup>

Her height was also extraordinary but '*ambiguae*' (uncertain); at times she appeared with the normal human stature, at times she seemed to touch the very sky and when she raised herself even higher, she pierced the sky and then Boethius lost sight of her face.

As scholars have noticed, the three levels of Philosophy's height is a striking metaphor symbolising the three stages of her teaching.<sup>13</sup> In the

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<sup>11</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. V. E. Watts (London: The Folio Society, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. V. E. Watts, pp. 37-38.

first stage she starts with simple ideas connected with and easily accessible to ordinary human beings; in the second stage, when her height reaches the sky, she discusses elevated theoretical ideas; and in the third-and final stage-when her head pierces the sky, she is ready to lead her disciple to the highest levels of wisdom, directing his eyes towards the pure light of God. This process is comparable to initiation mysteries and recalls the three realms of the other world in Dante's *Divine Comedy*<sup>14</sup> which is also a symbolical visionary journey.<sup>15</sup> The symbolic metaphor is enhanced by the description of Lady Philosophy's garment. Her clothes, although old, 'were made of imperishable material...' Her garment, as the philosopher tells us, was also unusual:

On the bottom hem one could read the embroidered Greek (letter) Π (pi), and on the top hem the Greek (letter) Θ (theta); and, in between, in a manner of stairs, a ladder of steps could be clearly seen, which ascended from the lower to the higher element.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Klinger, F., *De Boethii Consolatione Philosophiae*, (Berlin: n. publ., 1921) p. 1ff;

<sup>14</sup> Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso.

<sup>15</sup> It is significant that the title *Divina Comedia* did not become usual until the middle of the sixteenth century; and two of the three editions of the seventeenth century are entitled *La Visione* influenced by the poem itself in which it is indicated that the it is a vision. See G. A., Scartazzini, *A Companion to Dante*, tr. A. J. Butler, (London: Macmillan, 1893), 411-412.

<sup>16</sup> Harum in extremo margine Π graecum, in supremo vero Θ legebatur intextum atque inter utrasque, (...) in scalarum modum gradus quidam insigniti vedebantur, quibus ab inferiore ad superius elementum esset ascensus. For Latin Text: See Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae Opuscula Theologica*, ed C. Moreschini, Bibliotheca Teubneriana, (Monachii et Lipsiae: Teubner, 2000), p. 5. The translation of this sentence is mine. Many translations created some confusion leading to the idea (and representations) that there was one Pi and one Theta. However, this sounds rather odd and brings up a lot of questions about the position of the letters and the ladder; if they are two letters where were they placed on the garment? (in the middle, on the left, on the right, sideways etc.) It is something which Boethius does not specify but it is important for the specification of Philosophy's status. I believe that the lower hem was decorated by a number of Pis and the bodice by a number of Thetas in a meander fashion, like ππππππ and θθθθθθ. It was a convention for ancient vase painters, to decorate the hems and bodices of garments with various symbolic representations (spirals, meanders etc) but mostly the garments of goddesses, demi-goddesses, nymphs, priestesses or queens and, occasionally, their male counterparts. See G. Richter, *Red-Figured Athenian Vases in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Vol II, (Yale, UP, 1936): 76 (fig.74), 77 (fig 73), 94 (fig.86) etc. and J. Boardman, *Athenian Red Figured*

The pi and theta represent the ascension from the ordinary life symbolised by Π (Πρακτική-Practical philosophy), to the spirit symbolised by Θ (Θεωρητική-Theoretical philosophy). As Büchner says of the letters: 'Es gehört zu den Hauptanliegen der Philosophie des Boethius, die Verbindung von Leben und Geist zu erforschen...'<sup>17</sup>

Philosophy's status as a goddess-like figure becomes obvious when she angrily asks the Muses, that Boethius had called, to go away: 'be gone, and leave him for my own Muses to heal and cure'<sup>18</sup> she says, and the fact that she has her own Muses puts her in a much higher position than a Muse.<sup>19</sup> Boethius started crying like a child showing that in the presence of this divine being something shifted inside him and the petrified pain began to melt. After that, Philosophy started singing a sad song that describes Boethius's present desperate situation and finally, wiping his tears with her dress, like a maternal figure, she promises to lift him up. Boethius felt relief, as he tells us: 'the night was put to flight, the darkness fled, / and to my eyes the former strength returned.'<sup>20</sup>

In her own way, with her teaching and the dialectic discourse she initiates, Philosophy helps Boethius's soul to ascend and see God in a different light. She encourages him and leads him to new spheres of wisdom and when she leaves him she offers her final advice: 'hope is not placed in God in vain and prayers are not made in vain, for if they are the right kind, they cannot but be efficacious.'<sup>21</sup>

The appearance of this divine figure may have not set Boethius free, on a human level, because, in the end, after being tortured he was bludgeoned to death;<sup>22</sup> yet the connection with this being gave him not only the strength to endure, but also the inspiration and ability to complete a work

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*Vases, the Classical Period: a handbook*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p. 21 fig. 6, p.105, fig.146.2, p.124 fig.195, p. 129, fig. 213. (I do not include details about the errors scholars have noticed in the translations of Boethius's text, as this is not the aim of this thesis.)

<sup>17</sup> It constitutes the main interest of Boethius's philosophy: to discover the connecting line between ordinary life and spirit. (Transl. mine.) Karl Büchner, *Boethius, Trost der Philosophie*, intr. F. Klingner, (Bremen: no publ. 1964), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation*, tr. V. E. Watts, 38-39.

<sup>19</sup> Muses were minor goddesses under the authority of a more powerful god, for example, Apollo, in ancient Greece.

<sup>20</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. V. E. Watts, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Watts in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 175.

<sup>22</sup> Watts, V. E., Boethius *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 23.

that was destined to influence many writers and poets, most importantly, Dante (1265-1321) whose admiration for the philosopher was great.<sup>23</sup>

It is commonly accepted that Dante engaged Beatrice to lead him to God. Yet, on another level he constructs a gynocentric mythology with Beatrice in its centre as a goddess-like figure or a high priestess. Even when she is not there, her angelic appearance, her soft tone, her loving thoughts are felt in the background. Being in a *selva oscura*<sup>24</sup> Dante had almost lost hope, when Virgil, sent by Beatrice, appeared to guide him through his dangerous journey. From that time onwards, we witness the metamorphosis of Beatrice from a woman who lit up Dante's erotic desire in *La Vita Nuova* to a figure transmuted, within him, into a saint-like being.

During the course of Dante's journey through the Paradiso, Beatrice does not only become the guide but also the religious teacher of Dante the pilgrim. As Ferrante says, Dante, in his heaven, gives the role of a teacher-theologian to Beatrice, 'someone whose sex would have shocked virtually all the doctors of the Church there',<sup>25</sup> because Beatrice is not only teaching, but correcting some of the great thinkers including Thomas Aquinas and the Fathers, and she appears quite authoritative in her pronouncements. (Par. 29. 85-96). She is reminiscent of Lady Philosophy in Boethius and sometimes, like Philosophy with Boethius, she is trying to get Dante to give his opinion on a subject and then she corrects him.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that Dante's whole journey until the final vision of God was instigated by a female 'trinity', Mary, Lucy and Beatrice, suggests, as Ferrante has pointed out, that 'Dante is intentionally emphasising the feminine side of salvation, counterbalancing the intensely male tone of religious teaching'.<sup>27</sup> Setting aside Ferrante's notion that Dante wants to convey the idea of an androgynous God,<sup>28</sup> I would like to consider Beatrice and her role from another point of view, relevant to my theme.

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<sup>23</sup> Dante places Boethius in the heaven of the Sun, among the sages that surround him and Beatrice and refers to him '*that joy who strips the world's hypocrisies*'. Par., 10, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Dark forest.

<sup>25</sup> Ferrante, J. M., 'Dante's Beatrice: priest of an androgynous God', Occasional Papers, No 2, Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies (New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992), 11-13. Beatrice recalls Graves's Muse who can transform herself into a dove or a tigress, as we shall see.

<sup>26</sup> Most emphatically in Book 4, II, (Boethius, *The Consolation*, tr V. E. Watts, 123-128.) Boethius's way of getting Philosophy to reach the truth by questioning is nearer to the Platonic dialogues.

<sup>27</sup> Ferrante, 'Dante's Beatrice', 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ferrante, 'Dante's Beatrice', 25-26.



Dante's journey, like that of Odysseus, is a dramatic journey of transformation telling us what may happen when the hero-pilgrim is connected with a feminine archetypal power; for Odysseus that power was the Goddess Athena who sends her people to help the hero before she, herself, appears to him in person; for Dante that power is Beatrice and she is given a role similar to that of Athena.

Indeed, Dante, the poet, in order to organise the final salvation of Dante, the pilgrim, carefully and gradually, constructs a gynocentric mythology which becomes more obvious from canto 28 of the *Purgatory* onwards and in the *Paradise*. Although the thematic development of *The Divine Comedy* appears basically Christian, much of the content is connected with pagan mythology. Dante invokes gods and goddesses of this mythology creating conflicting images; images which belong to two different, contradictory worlds: the ancient Graeco-Roman pagan world with its gynocentric mythology and the world of Christianity.<sup>29</sup> There are many such images in *The Divine Comedy* but I will look only at two.

At the beginning of canto 28 of the *Purgatory*, for example, the pilgrim wanders in a 'heavenly forest' when a most important appearance, a harbinger of Dante's salvation by Beatrice, enters the scene; she is Matilda, and I believe the poet refers to St Matilda.<sup>30</sup> The poet sees her as a 'solitary lady' who 'went along singing, and culling flower after flower' (cantando ed iscegliento fior da fiore),<sup>31</sup> and as a miraculous apparition; 'and there appeared as – sometimes will appear/ an unexpected sight so

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<sup>29</sup> Dante invokes Apollo several times to whom he prays more passionately in Par. I. 13-32; he also invokes the Muses a number of times.

<sup>30</sup> Dante does not tell us who Matilda really is, but because she was given a name, scholars attempted to connect her with a historical person and this created a controversy. See M. Musa in Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 2, *Purgatory*, 350-51. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 305. Additionally, some scholars believe she is St Matilda, while others say that she is a lady who, in life, was one of Beatrice's friends; this last theory seems to me unlikely as the lady, by appearing and reappearing in the poem, holds a pivotal position from Canto 28 to Canto 33. Saint Matilda, though, who died in 968 and was venerated immediately after her death, was a well known personality in Dante's time because she was queen of Germany and mother of Emperor Otto of Germany. Her feast is celebrated on 14 March, the beginning of spring and this may be of some importance considering the role Dante gave her in this section of the poem. ([http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic-Encyclopedia-\(1913\)/St.-Matilda](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic-Encyclopedia-(1913)/St.-Matilda))

<sup>31</sup> *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, ed. I. Gollancz, tr. T. Okey, (London: Dent, 1929), 28.40-41.

marvellous, / all other thoughts are driven from the mind'.<sup>32</sup> As soon as he sees her, Dante calls in Persephone, the ancient pagan goddess, placing her in a parallel universe, so he creates two conflicting images: the Christian saint and the pagan goddess. The two ladies merge, but the ancient goddess, as a presence, is dominating. The poet tells Matilda about Persephone, as if he wants to honour both the saint and the goddess, or consciously link them:

You bring to mind what Proserpine was like,  
and where she was, when her mother lost her,  
and she, in her turn, lost eternal spring.<sup>33</sup>

Describing the saint and her actions Dante, perhaps consciously, reminds us of Persephone's life. Matilda moves 'in a virgin modesty' 'among the red and yellow flowers' like Persephone did as she was gathering flowers alone, when Pluto, full of love and desire took her away. At this point the poet brings in another ancient goddess, Aphrodite, a main character in Ovid's 'The Rape of Proserpine'. In Ovid's poem it was Aphrodite who asked her son to pierce Pluto's heart with his arrows so that he would fall in love with Persephone.<sup>34</sup>

I do not believe that so bright a light shone forth  
under the eyelids of Venus.<sup>35</sup>

Bringing in ancient goddesses, the poet signalises that by shuffling pagan and Christian patterns he is really recreating his own gynocentric mythology, unifying the two worlds. The image of the forest seems a celebration of spring, the time when, traditionally, Persephone comes out from the depths of the underworld; like Matilda, she stands 'gathering more flowers with her hands / which the high land bears without seeds,'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> e là m' apparve, si com' egli appare / subitamente cosa che disvia / per meraviglia tutt' altro pensare. Ibid, 28. 37-39; transl. M. Musa, *Dante, The Divine Comedy, Il Purgatory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985) 301.

<sup>33</sup> Tu mi fai rimemrar, dove e qual era / Proserpina nel tempo che perdette / La madre lei, ed ella primavera. *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, 28. 49-51; transl. M. Musa, *Dante, The Divine Comedy, Purgatory*, 301.

<sup>34</sup> Scholars agree that Dante had read Ovid extensively. He shows himself well acquainted with Latin literature quoting and drawing from Virgil, Horace, Lucan and Ovid. See Scartazzini, *Companion to Dante*, 53, 384, 388

<sup>35</sup> Non credo che splendesse tanto lume / Sotto le ciglia a Venere trafitta. *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, 28. 64-66.

<sup>36</sup> traendo piu color con le sue mani, / che l' alta senza seme gitta. Ibid. 28.68-69.

and everything appears to be given life again as from the magic touch of Persephone, the spirit of spring. Matilda explains to Dante that she would guide him to drink the powerful water of two springs: Lethe and Eunoë, something that Persephone would do as queen of the underworld. According to the myth, Persephone's ascent symbolises rebirth and when, eventually, Dante, guided by Matilda-Persephone, drinks water from the two springs he emphasises this power of rebirth:

I came back from the most holy waves born  
again, even as new trees renewed with new foliage  
pure and ready to mount to the stars.<sup>37</sup>

By merging two contradictory images of the feminine, Matilda and Persephone, Dante creates a revolutionary world in the art of poetry; the device recalls Heraclitus's words, εκ των διαφερόντων καλλίστην αρμονίαν και πάντα κατ' έριν γίνεσθαι,<sup>38</sup> and also what much later W. B. Yeats pointed out from the poet's point of view, 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves poetry'.<sup>39</sup> It seems that for Dante the contradiction was already inside him: on one side there were the Christian doctrines he grew up with and on the other, the pagan gynocentric mythology with its beauty and richness that he experienced by reading, and perhaps underwent in longing for his lost childhood friend and love, Beatrice.

Another example of this blending of conflicting worlds follows Matilda's appearance; it is the arrival of Beatrice. Beatrice appears to Dante, in person, first in the *Purgatory* (29) where a gynocentric mythological setting created by the poet prepares the reader for her coming. The whole festive setting appears as a celebration for the advent of the goddess of love, and is reminiscent of a celebration of the advent of Christ, the God of Love: 'And lo, a sudden brightness flooded on all sides / the great forest, such that it set me in doubt / if 'twere lightning'.<sup>40</sup> There, sweet music is coming out of the woods and the poet, in a blissful trance,

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<sup>37</sup> Io ritornai dalla santissim' onda / rifatto sì, come piante novella / rinnovate di novella fronda, / puro e disposto a salire alle stele. *Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, Purg. 33. 142-145; transl. T. Okey

<sup>38</sup> and from tones of variance comes perfect attunement, and all things come to pass through conflict.' See C.H. Kahn, *The art and thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), frag. LXXV, 62.

<sup>39</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Per amica silentia lunae,' *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 331.

<sup>40</sup> ed ecco un lustro subito trascorse / da tutte parti per la gran foresta, / tal che di balenar mi mise in forse. Purg. 29, 16-18 in *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*.

invokes first the Muses, especially Urania, calling them ‘holy Virgins’ (*sacrosante Vergini*); while the divine pageant advances, Dante tells us that the whole image with its colours reminds him of an ancient goddess Delia<sup>41</sup> (Artemis) or perhaps another aspect of Aphrodite, since he mentions her girdle, a symbol linked with the goddess of love.<sup>42</sup>

Among a number of different appearances a chariot drawn by a griffin approaches slowly.<sup>43</sup> According to the Christian theological interpretations,<sup>44</sup> the griffin here represents the Church and its dual nature symbolises Christ’s two natures, the human and the divine. However, in a non-Christian context, the griffin or gryphon is a very old symbol of wisdom, strength and power and in Greece it was sacred to both Apollo and Athena,<sup>45</sup> while in prehistoric times, where societies appeared to be gynocentric,<sup>46</sup> the griffin in Crete, for example, was the symbol of the Minoan goddess who was represented in seal rings flanked by two griffins.<sup>47</sup> The griffin and other combinations of different animals or animals with men, denote an early phase in society when the primordial archetype of the Great Goddess, combined both positive and negative attributes, a union of opposites, and was worshipped as a Lady of the Beasts from India to the Mediterranean.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the chariot itself, drawn by dragons recalls the celestial chariot of the earth mysteries, which

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<sup>41</sup> Artemis (Diana) sister of Apollo, was born in Delos, hence the name Delia.

<sup>42</sup> Ed Urania m’ aiuti col suo coro, .....and Urania aid me with her choir (Purg. 29, 37-41); also *tutte in quei colori / onde fa l’ arc oil sole Delia il cinto*. (all in those colours whereof / the sun makes his bow, and Delia her girdle.) (Dante, *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, 29. 76-78 and 29. 76-78.

<sup>43</sup> Dante, *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, 29. 106-108.

<sup>44</sup> M. Musa in Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, vol.2: Purgatory, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 315.

<sup>45</sup> J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), see word.

<sup>46</sup> M. Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. One of the sources of pre-existing gynocentric societies is the Minoan culture which came to light in 1900. The importance of the Minoan culture will be dealt with later.

<sup>47</sup> Nanno Marinatos, *Minoan Religion: Ritual Image and Symbol*, (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 143. See also *Herakleion Archaeological Museum*, text A Vasilakis, (n pl. or d.), 112, 150. Moreover, it appears that, initially, in Christianity, it was a symbol of evil, and only with Dante it started symbolising the two natures of Christ. (J. C. Cooper, *Traditional Symbols*; see also M. Musa in *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 2, Purgatory, 315.

<sup>48</sup> E. Neumann, *The Great Mother*, 12-13 and 268-269.

has grown from the Great Earth Mother.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps, through reading Virgil, Dante had become familiar with these symbols in their original mythological context.

The image of the chariot entering the scene, with all the movement that takes place around it, is the central focus and exudes grace and power. The gynocentric element is apparent here, and powerful, although male figures are present too: beside the chariot, dancing around by its right wheel, there were three ladies all of them appearing luminous; one was red, like a flame, the second looked like a piece of emerald, 'both in flesh and bone', and the third was shining like a 'new fallen snow'.<sup>50</sup> More ladies were dancing beside the left wheel of the chariot all clad in purple. Suddenly, the chariot stopped in front of Dante and after the sound of thunder, a song was heard, and, among a cloud of flowers and angels, the focus is concentrated on a lady sitting in the centre. Here she strikes one as a goddess-like figure, or a high priestess of an ancient pageant; but it is Beatrice herself, and although she is veiled, the poet, in his heart, recognised her, and, without seeing her face, turned to her 'with all the trust with which / the little child runs to his mother when he is / frightened or when he is afflicted.'<sup>51</sup>

The reference to the mother is characteristic and telling; it is the archetypal image summarising the whole scope of the basic feminine functions – nourishment, warmth, protection; in the gynocentric mythology of ancient societies the Great Goddess is a maternal figure, and both an idealised virgin and a love goddess, a Queen of Heaven and Earth, like Aphrodite.<sup>52</sup> All those images and the action around Beatrice, such as the angels who sing for her with words reminiscent of religious odes and psalms (*Purg.* 30, 82-84) mark the activity around the glorification of Beatrice which starts in the *Purgatory* and reaches the highest possible levels in *Paradise*. Beatrice takes Dante to all nine heavens until he is ready to see the living light of God and the celestial white rose, symbol of divine love.<sup>53</sup> After such an experience, Dante fell silent in amazement and

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<sup>49</sup> Usually the chariot carries her son who is holding branches of wheat, symbol of spiritual gold that leads to transformation and resurrection, but here Beatrice is given this role. (Ibid, 321.)

<sup>50</sup> La terza pareva neve testè mosca; (*Purg.* 29, 126.)

<sup>51</sup> Volsimi alla sinistra col rispetto / col quale il fantolin corre alla mamma / quando ha paura o quando egli è afflito. Dante, *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri*, 30, 43-45.

<sup>52</sup> A. Baring & J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, 357-364.

<sup>53</sup> 'The rose in mediaeval literature was the symbol of earthly love; Dante's white rose is the symbol of divine love.' Sayers and Reynolds in Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 3, *Paradise*, 324.

when he recovered, he lifted his eyes and realized that she had ascended; she was ‘enthroned where merit destined her to be’,<sup>54</sup> and before long Dante saw her almost deified; ‘and there I saw her in her glory crowned / reflecting from herself the eternal rays’.<sup>55</sup>

Daringly, Dante blends Christianity with the ancient religious gynocentric mythology something that, centuries later, Yeats and Sikelianos would do, creating their own mythical world. The poet performs an alchemical union between two conflicting worlds, the strict thirteenth-century Catholic Christianity and the pagan religious world of prehistoric and ancient societies; Dante, although a Christian, was also a poet with an eclectic imagination, and he could not narrow his scope by ignoring the richness he found in the pagan worlds of Virgil and Ovid, and as Caraher points out, talking about contradiction in literature, one should not see ‘contraries as negating one another but as inhering in some sort of metaphysical singleness or organic unity.’<sup>56</sup>

Dante, the pilgrim, can be seen as a ‘hero’ connected with the power of the Eternal Feminine, Beatrice, who, in the poet’s consciousness, seems to be exalted to the status of a goddess-like figure. She guides him into the depths of his soul and transforms him by leading him to the ultimate transcendence which is the prerequisite for creation. Dante feels the benefit of this transformation and acknowledges it in a kind of thanksgiving prayer to her:

‘Thou hast led me, a slave, to liberty,  
By every path, and using every means.

and further

Keep turned towards me thy munificence  
So that my soul which thou has remedied  
May please thee when it quits the bonds of sense.<sup>57</sup>

Such praise may remind the reader of Odysseus when he said to Nausicaa ‘I will never fail to worship you all the rest of my days.’

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<sup>54</sup> Nel trono che suoi meriti le sortiro (Par. 31, 67-69).

<sup>55</sup> E vidi lei che si faceva corona / Reflettendo da sè li eterni rai. Par. 31, 70- 72, translation Sayers and Reynolds in Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 3, *Paradise*.

<sup>56</sup> B. G. Caraher in *Intimate Conflict: Contradiction in Literary and Philosophical Discourse*, ed. B. G. Caraher, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 16-17.

<sup>57</sup> Par. 31.85-90.

Although, Yeats knew Homer, his model in constructing a gynocentric mythology was Dante. It appears that Yeats felt an affinity with Dante; Dante creates his poetry using lucid visual images combining contradictory elements: the mythical and the political, the scientific and the spiritual, sexual and romantic love; he seems to be on a quest for unity, the unity a poet or artist seeks in a world full of contrary elements. Constructing a gynocentric mythology with the Eternal Feminine, Beatrice, at the centre, Dante creates a point of unity; a figure that amalgamates contradictory elements and becomes the spirit of art, which unites with the poet-hero to help him reach transcendence. She represents the elementary character of the feminine that contains the whole universe.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Yeats refers to Dante (and others) as an archetype:<sup>59</sup> the artist who achieved the Unity of Being, the state where all antinomies are reconciled and time ceases for a short while; it is the state which in the mystical tradition is equated with enlightenment or unification with the godhead. This state is achieved by Dante gradually through Beatrice who is at the centre of a gynocentric mythology, rooted in the world of nature.

Sikelianos also knew Dante quite well, much better than many Modern Greek poets and intellectuals because, being a Heptanesian, he had studied Dante in the original. After the Fourth Crusade (1204), the Ionian Islands (Heptanese) fell under Venetian rule and remained under Venetian control for centuries while most of Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Turks. The fact that the islands were never – or some only very briefly – under Ottoman rule is significant; it led to the Italianization of the Ionian Islands and the islanders became exposed to all important cultural movements of the West, from the Renaissance onwards; the main language on the islands was Italian and many families spoke Italian even amongst themselves, while it was a usual practice to send their children to study in Italian universities. Such was the background of educated Heptanesian families at the time.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Neumann, *The Great Mother*, 211-212.

<sup>59</sup> The idea is explored by Foster, R. F., *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, Two Vols. (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1998), II, 71. Yeats may have been influenced by M. Arnold who recognizes as great poets Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton; Arnold does not use the term, 'archetype' but says that great poets are masters and should be applied as 'a touchstone' to other poetry to detect 'the presence or absence of high poetic quality.' (Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Poetry in Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. W. S. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass: Riverside Press, 1913), 64 (55-86).

<sup>60</sup> The above circumstances gave the islanders the opportunity to lead their life in a highly cultured environment that proved of great importance in the formation of Modern Greek life, literature and art in the mainland after Independence. See C.

However, Sikelianos felt himself to be the heir and successor to both Homer and the Heptanesian Solomos; and this attitude of his is obvious in his first collection *A Visionary*. In Homer the natural world is of great significance; it is not praised by a poet-spectator as if it were simply a picturesque environment; on the contrary every aspect of the world of Nature, both good and evil, is celebrated: the poet describes human life and attitudes as echoing the natural world and reverberating in harmony with it. The Homeric world is gynocentric; goddesses and other female personae abound, and it is this gynocentric element, which survived in the folklore that provided Sikelianos with a poetic model.<sup>61</sup> Sikelianos's preoccupation with Homer, as a spirit, faded away over the years, as the poet turned to more secret mystical traditions such as Orphism. However, gynocentric mythology, still in the Homeric manner, continued to be an important part of his poetry and poetics.

Yeats, too, had a vivid interest in Greek thought and, over the years, he, increasingly, turned to Classical mythology, more Greek than Latin.<sup>62</sup> He also believed that there are close analogies between Greek and Celtic mythology, and that Greek myths had a special significance for Ireland.<sup>63</sup> His interest in Greek thought increased significantly over the years, as several great classicists, some of them members of the Rhymers' Club, exerted considerable influence on the poet.<sup>64</sup>

Although Yeats's and Sikelianos's love for ancient Greek thought cannot be considered their most significant similarity, one figure played an important role in the poetry and poetics of both poets, not only by exerting an almost metaphysical influence, but also by becoming, for both, a bridge

M. Woodhouse, *Modern Greece: A Short History*, 5th edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1991); Georgios Zoras, 'Η Ιστορία και η Κοινωνική και Πνευματική Κατάσταση εν Επτανήσω' in *Ελληνική Δημιουργία*, 135 (September, 1953), 327-341.

<sup>61</sup> About Sikelianos and Homer see David Ricks, *The Shade of Homer in Modern Greek Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 57-83.

<sup>62</sup> It is known that during his school years Yeats had a very limited knowledge of Greek and Latin; but he recognised the importance of the classics and read extensively mythology, philosophy and literature in translation. See Brian Arkins, *Builders of My Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1990), 22-23.

<sup>63</sup> D. Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press 1967), 67-69.

<sup>64</sup> As early as 1893 Lionel Johnson (1867-1902), a key figure among Yeats's friends who are described by the poet as 'The Tragic Generation', gave Yeats a copy of Plato's dialogues and made him read them, thus starting the poet's lifelong preoccupation with the Platonic tradition. See Arkins, *Builders of My Soul*, 5-23.



between the ancient Greek world and the European world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: this figure was John Keats (1795-1821). The idea may seem a paradox for the Greek Sikelianos, but as Ricks notes, Modern Greece acquired Homer from the West, and Sikelianos sees in the face of John Keats, the Western contribution to modern Hellenism. In an essay on Landor, De Quincey says:

‘When it was a matter of wonder, Landor wrote, how Keats, who was ignorant of Greek, could have written his “Hyperion”, Shelley, whom envy never touched, gave as a reason-“because he *was* Greek.”’<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, the Greek poet acknowledges Keats’s contribution ‘generously’ with his famous poem ‘Yannis Keats’, in which ‘through the allusion of Homer Sikelianos is seeking to bring the spiritually Grecian poet into the actual Greek world of literature and life.’<sup>66</sup> The poet recreates Homer’s world, and it is there that the spirits of Keats and Sikelianos meet.

Both Yeats and Sikelianos knew Keats’s poetry from childhood and were inspired by him. Yeats’s father, who thought Keats a greater poet than Shelley, first brought Keats to his son’s attention. Later, in a letter to John Quinn, Yeats wrote that

Keats’s line telling how Homer left great verses to a little clan seemed to my imagination when I was a boy a description of the happiest fate that would come to a poet.<sup>67</sup>

And Sikelianos, recalling the role of Keats in his young life, confesses:

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<sup>65</sup> John E. Jordan, ed. *De Quincey as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 469.

<sup>66</sup> Ricks, *The Shade of Homer*, 68. ‘Yannis’ is the Modern Greek equivalent, for Ioannis, John, and is a form initially shaped by the folk tradition. Using this familiar form of the name, Sikelianos emphasises the Greekness of Keats and his own affectionate feelings towards him; these feelings are obvious also in the poet’s lecture on Keats, delivered in the British Council in Athens in 1946, a very critical time for Greece. (See Sikelianos Πεζός Λόγος (Pezos Logos), (Word in Prose)] V, 126-143. For more about the poem see David Ricks, *The Shade of Homer*, 65-83 and A. Psoni, ‘The presence of Sikelianos in the poetry of George Seferis’ in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, vol.27, 230-232, where Sikelianos’s ‘Yannis Keats’ is compared with Seferis’s ‘The King of Asine’.

<sup>67</sup> Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*. I, 302-303. Yeats refers to Keats line, ‘By bards who died content in pleasant sward, /Leaving great verse unto a little clan?’ (From ‘Ode to May’. Fragment. It was written in May 1818 a month after the poem ‘To Homer’.

I was at an age when holding an immortal book we feel as if we hold the hand of the author and in the pages we do not see printed words, but the presence of his soul, alive.<sup>68</sup>

In poetry, Keats has been identified with the ideas of beauty and truth; beauty and poetry become the antidote for the harshness of everyday life, inspiring people. Coote believes that for Keats ‘beauty’ became a talismanic word,<sup>69</sup> a word which can have healing qualities.<sup>70</sup> In the Keatsian idea of ‘beauty,’ Yeats too identifies a dimension which transcends ordinary thought; he sees Keats as the poet ‘who sang of beauty so wholly preoccupied with itself that its contemplation is a kind of lingering trance.’<sup>71</sup>

Sikelianos, too, recognises that in Keats beauty is not a stationary state of being but ‘the secret truce in the battle of contrary powers, *the concordatio oppositorum*, and, as such, beauty is, for a great creator, deeply and absolutely a supreme ethical principle’.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Keats appears to have been in the background of both Yeats’s and Sikelianos’s ideas about poetry, though they employed Keats’s poetry and poetics in different ways.

But let us concentrate now on the image of the feminine in the poetry of John Keats. As we have seen, in Boethius and Dante the key image of the feminine is a benign being, loving and protective, although, sometimes, strict and authoritarian. In the passage from Homer we saw Nausicaa, the goddess-like figure, both innocent and highly erotic, yet also strong and practical. However, in Homer the image of the feminine can also appear demonic: Circe, for example, who plays on sexual desire as Odysseus’s companions, after their long voyage, are at the mercy of their sexual passions.

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<sup>68</sup> A. Sikelianos, *Πεζός Λόγος* (Word in Prose) V, 126.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Coote, *John Keats: A Life* (London: Sceptre, 1996), 40.

<sup>70</sup> I believe that Keats, with his strong perception, had what some call ‘a mythical consciousness’ which, as I understand it, connects nature, beauty, truth and the divine creating a healing transcendental reality. However, Keats’s ideas of beauty and truth have been discussed extensively and it appears that readers can see different aspects of his expression of beauty and truth.

<sup>71</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works: Early Essays*, Vol. iv, 272-273, 274.

<sup>72</sup> Sikelianos, *Πεζός Λόγος* V, (Prose) p. 138. Sikelianos believes that this truth was revealed to Keats for the first time when he saw the Elgin Marbles and that it was then that he felt this ‘pure energy principle’. Keats, with his painter friend Benjamin Haydon, did visit the British Museum to see the Elgin Marbles, in March 1816. (Coote, *John Keats*, 68-69).

Keats's portrayal of the feminine shows his often noted ambivalence, expressing his own self-consciousness in front of women.<sup>73</sup> Writing to his sister-in-law Georgiana about an intensely attractive woman he had met,<sup>74</sup> who had awakened in him 'the divine erotic daemon although he did not fall in love with her.'<sup>75</sup> While Keats's sexuality was strong, he felt that this attraction was potentially dangerous. 'As a Man in the world I love the rich talk of a Charmian; as an eternal Being I love the thought of you. [...] I should like her to ruin me, as I should like you to save me.'<sup>76</sup> As Coote notes, Keats's division of women into saints and temptresses underlines his uncertainties and inexperience of women.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, however, the poet's words indicate the connection he saw between sexual desire and death. Keats maintained this attitude throughout his life, and he, himself, called it, the 'gordian complication'<sup>78</sup> of his feelings. Moreover, the poet transferred this contradictory vision of the feminine to his poetry.

Indeed, the figure of the feminine appears variously as an innocent beauty or as a powerful temptress and potential threat to the man she seduces. Keats's feelings about this demonic aspect of female personae are perfectly expressed in a powerful poem, one of his greatest ballads, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'; the central image of the feminine in the poem appears beautiful and alluring, but also threatening and destructive. With this change in the character of the feminine, the poem and the female figure become alive, and although the poem is short, it radiates some strange magic; it reaches into the subconscious, creating an ambiguity which prompts us to question the reality of what is happening in the poem.

The poem has come to us in two versions, the original form and the revised one. We owe the preservation of the much more poetical and meaningful original version to William Morris, who, after reading the original text of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', discarded in indignation, the revised edition.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> S. Coote, *John Keats: A Life*, 28, 174, 193-194; E. C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats*, 222; Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year*, p 140.

<sup>74</sup> It was Jane Cox, a relative of the Reynolds family whom Keats met in their house.

<sup>75</sup> Coote, *John Keats*, 193-194.

<sup>76</sup> Keats, Letter to Georgiana Keats, October, 1918, *Letters*, I, 394-95. Quoted in Coote, 337, note 10.

<sup>77</sup> Coote, *Keats, A Life*, 194.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> The incident took place in February 1894, when the Kelmscott Press was preparing an edition of Keats's poems; a specimen of every sheet of the printed material was brought to William Morris for approval. See Dorothy Hewlett, *A Life of John Keats* (London: Hurst & Blackett Ltd, 1937), 307 and also Sir Sidney

‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ became the ‘masterpiece of romantic and tragic symbolism on the wasting power of Love’.<sup>80</sup> The title of the poem is taken from a poem by the Old French court poet Alain Chartier (c.1392-c.1430) which Keats knew, probably in the translation ascribed to Chaucer.<sup>81</sup> Another source could be Spenser, but the poem owes much to Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*.<sup>82</sup> Graves believes that the most important source of all is the *Ballad of Thomas the Rhymer* where the figure of the feminine ‘was the mediaeval successor of the pre-Celtic White Goddess.’<sup>83</sup>

The poem was written two months after ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, but Keats had probably already written the first drafts because in ‘The Eve of St Agnes’ Porphyro, playing Madeline’s lute, sang ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ (lines 289-294):

He played an ancient ditty, long since mute,  
In Provence called ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’,  
Close to her ear touching the melody-

Madeline was so disturbed with the story that uttered ‘a soft moan.’

Keats composed ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ in iambic tetrameter shortening the last line of every stanza to two feet prompting the reader to slow down in reading it; this device adds a strange haunting cadence to each stanza, emphasizing its magical effect.

The poem is presented as a drama, starting with a bystander’s observations and questions, followed by the Knight’s dramatic monologue, as he recreates his past. The bystander’s descriptions of both the appearance of the Knight and the topography of the scene emphasise

Colvin, *John Keats: His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics and After-Fame*, (London: Macmillan, 1917), 470. The incident is based on the testimony of Sir Sydney Cockerell (1867-1962), museum curator and collector, who was with Morris at that moment and kept the cancelled sheet. Sidney Colvin believes that the changes of the revised edition of the poem ‘which are all in the direction of the slipshod and the commonplace’, were Hunt’s suggestions, in which Keats acquiesced from fatigue. See Sidney Colvin, *John Keats: His Life and Poetry, His Friends Critics and After-Fame* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 469. In my discussion of the poem I will use the original version.

<sup>80</sup> Colvin, *John Keats: His Life*.... 350.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* Coote believes that Chartier medievalised a number of Celtic myths. Coote, *John Keats*, 237

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, 423.

sterility: the sedge of the lake is 'withered' and 'no birds sing,' while the Knight is 'alone and palely loitering'.

The narrator goes on to specific details in the face of the Knight which denote some intrinsic reality, using as metaphors two flowers: the lily and the rose which are showing either illness (anguish and fever for the lily) or are fading (the rose), signs of both physical and psychological weakness. These observations show a simultaneous insight into the facts of the Knight's life and his morale, prompting his answer: his narrative of the events of his past.

The reader follows the Knight's description as the light falls on the Lady's beauty, their mutual love, and the 'fragrant' environment of the faery world of beauty, happiness, and song. The poem gains energy as the lovers travel on a 'pacing steed', until they reach 'her elfin grot' where the Lady 'lulls' the Knight asleep.

The scene then changes fearfully, becoming dark and desolate as the Knight's dream becomes a nightmare: shadows of pale kings, princes and warriors parade before his eyes like shadows in the valley of death, warning him of the demonic aspect of 'La Belle Dame'. The poem takes the reader from darkness to light and then to darkness again and, performing a full circle, it ends in 'present time' where it all started: in a desolate landscape, a kind of purgatory, where the dead Knight will be 'palely loitering' perhaps forever.

Keats's choice of words emphasizes both the visual and the auditory, whence Yeats's admiration for the poet's imagery; in a letter to his father Yeats says about Keats, 'He makes pictures one cannot forget & sees them as full of rhythm as a Chinese painting.' He goes on to emphasise that 'poetry is rhythm.'<sup>84</sup> Keats's lexical configuration produces a striking incantatory effect and, as much is left unsaid, a mysterious ambiguity is created, inviting different readings. Critics offer various interpretations, but, as the protagonists of this enchanting romance are well known archetypes in a gynocentric mythology – the Knight and the Lady or the Hero and the Goddess – many agree that the poem is about the significance of idealised love and its destructive effects.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, II, 36.

<sup>85</sup> E. R. Wasserman maintains that the poem touches on three themes that dominate Keats: the oxymoronic heaven's bourne towards which his spirit yearned; the pleasure thermometer he conceived of as the spiritual path towards that goal; and the self-annihilation that he understood to be the condition necessary for the journey. *The Finer Tone*, 63-83.

Robert Graves, with his poetic sensitivity and insight, offers several interpretations but, as he believes, the poem may be really susceptible to all of them.<sup>86</sup> Most significantly, Graves sees 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' as Poetry herself: the formidable lady who brings death to the poets, the victims she has seduced, in exchange for poetic immortality. Yeats and Sikelianos consciously see Poetry as a manifestation of the feminine, beautiful but demanding as we shall see.

Although the image of the feminine, both as an innocent beauty and as *femme fatale*, or manipulative woman, appears in various of Keats's poems (such as 'Lamia' and even 'The Eve of St Agnes'<sup>87</sup>), 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', because of the ambiguity surrounding the events it describes, is an enchanting and mysterious poem which can function on different levels.

Indeed, we could suppose the Knight's story to be very different from the tale he tells: the Knight could be a solitary wanderer who saw his lord and kinsmen's downfall and is now wandering weary and sorrowful, stripped of his prestigious identity and with no expectation of further heroic duty. It is possible then, that, in an effort to explain his wretchedness and regain prestige through his victimization, he invented the story of the beautiful lady, the 'faery-child', who first pretended love and then left him desolate.<sup>88</sup> If one allows such a reading, all the incidents in the poem can be seen from a different angle. The personality of the Lady is split, in line with Keats's idea of woman: she is innocently

E.C. Pettet believes that the underlying theme is the significance of love and its fatal consequences. E.C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), 213, 229.

<sup>86</sup> Graves sees that in one aspect 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' was 'the elfish Fanny Brawne, whom he figuratively placed before him on the saddle of his Pegasus; he sees the 'kisses four' phrase as an autobiographical reference and not just a modification of the ballad convention 'kisses three'. 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' could also be a personification of Consumption; Graves sees the sterility as an allusion to Keats's condition as consumption was wearing him away at the time. The 'pale princes' could be the other victims of the disease, warning him. See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 418-423.

<sup>87</sup> Scott has noticed that Madeline appears cold, blank and impassive; even her eyes do not look; she is more like a painting, a sculpture or a virtual reality. (Grant F. Scott, *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis and the Visual Arts* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 93-95.

<sup>88</sup> There are medieval poems of Anglo-Saxon origin which tell the story of the wandering Knight; one of them is *The Wanderer*, depicting the Knight as a 'solitary' and 'wretched' spirit. See Kevin, Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).