

The Unforgiving Goddess

A Poem by William Page

The Unforgiving Goddess can be read as a tribute to *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (The Beautiful Lady without Mercy) a ballad by John Keats. Keats' poem is also a tribute to a 15th century French poem of the same name by Alain Chartier, which was translated by Chaucer.

What is it that troubles you, prophet of our time?
Your eyes are haggard and you look concerned?
Is it that our cities are overcrowded
or that our fields are burned?

What is it that troubles you, prophet of our time?
Why do you pace under the withered trees?
Is it that our granaries are poisoned
and our water, diseased?

Do not take the world's greed so much to heart?
In our time too much care troubles the mind.
In our time we must learn to scrape a little life
from the ravages of mankind.

“A lady came to me. She came like the dawn
while I was lounging under the withered trees.
She seemed to be of another world, a goddess
of no common beauty.

Her hair fell around her face like golden leaves.
Her arms and legs danced like a breeze in the willow.
Her skin was pure as if made of light, and her eyes,
like embers, glowed.

I had nothing to offer her; no green grass
for her bright step or flowered garland for her hair,
so I told her of man's waste: how he littered the land
and poisoned the air.

She smiled at my sad tale of our age of greed;
and when I said I was one of that age of man,
she took her bright hand and touched my woeful heart
and then smiled again.

‘The world,’ she said, ‘I cannot save. They deserve
the fate they sowed. For them I would not appear.’
Then she took my hand, turned me round, and whispered
now in my ear.

And as fast as light speeds from distance stars
we bounded up over the blue green seas,
up above the towering cites, far above this
forest of withered trees.

We stood on the top of the blue sky, and there
I saw nations grow and die like flowers,
generations murdered, and epochs played out
in the space of an hour.

I saw an image and that image was mankind.
I was witness to his smallness and his pride;
I saw good men exploited, saintly men martyred,
and great armies collide.

I saw beauty trampled and innocence abused,
foolishness praised and good judgment ignored;
I saw conflicts better decided with the mind
settled with the sword.

And when the goddess spoke, her voice was the voice
of many waters and it shook me to my core.
'Now you have seen man for what he is and for what
he was once before.

Time has told me all. I am the first and the last.
I have seen man's beginning and his end.
This is who you are, but not what you can become.
Is this who you defend?

Man fears death, but seeks only what passes away.
He wants us to light his path, but blocks our sun.
He talks of love, but loves only his self.
He wants mercy, but gives none.

I am Demeter, mother of the earth, and this race
or men has raped my daughter and defied me;
they have ravaged the earth, the beautiful
goddess Persephone.

And you, prophet, take this curse from me:
It falls to you to see where others are blind;
from now you will dream only of my campaign
to destroy mankind.'

It was then that my vision melted away;
I fell back to the earth and awoke with a start
For days I raved, and when I slept, I dreamt of her
and her unforgiving heart.

In black nightmares and waking dreams I saw
volcanoes erupt in fire, burning cities,
floods wash away continents, walls of insects,
and dead fish in dead seas.

I saw thick-skinned darkness, chaos, streets stained
with blood, and the barbarians at the gate,
I saw the sun ravage winter's darkest day,
and men live for only hate.

I saw diseased birds attack men, sickness run rampant,
crematoriums cough smoke, towering hurricanes,
earthquakes topple nations, and men and animals
made violent and insane.

And you, you call me prophet, but you don't believe it.
this is just an afternoon of fun for you.
You came to gawk at the madman
but what I say is true.

The campaign of the unforgiving goddess
has begun. Look around: the world is in a panic;
the young have no future and your hospitals
overflow with the sick.

Look around: the signs are everywhere.
the earth is alive and in rebellion;
she is holding this generation accountable
for mankind's sins.

You asked me to tell you why I pace
so pensively under the withered trees,
and now you know, you know the sad tale of the
rape of Persephone .'