The Sub-Text of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”

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It is a commonplace that the greatest poems written by Keats embody the theme of love. Certainly his main preoccupation during the writing of the three long narrative poems published in the volume of 1820 was with the complexity of human love: its ambiguous nature (“Lamia”), its potential for pain and disaster (“Isabella”), and also its potential for ecstatic happiness (“The Eve of St. Agnes”). Enraptured as Keats was by his love for Fanny Brawne, he was not spared the agonies of frustration and jealousy. Since his torments were exacerbated by his weakening physical condition, there were times when he wished to banish love from his life; but it proved impossible to exclude altogether the motif of love from his work.

In the “Ode to a Nightingale,” as in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode on Melancholy,” Keats is concerned intellectually with the inexorable effects of the passage of time on beauty and on human love. The world of everyday realities is a place of weariness, frustration, and change, “Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow” (lines 29–30). What Keats wishes to do is to reach out to a world in which love and beauty are not subject to change. His prime symbol for the imaginative power that will take him on this journey is the nightingale, or more specifically its song.

His excursion in search of that unchanging world, made on “the viewless wings of Poesy” (line 33), carries him far away from the problems of humanity, out and up into the night sky, yet the trip does not provide him with a vision of an Elysian realm. There is nothing to be perceived, nothing to be recalled in tranquillity and set to paper, because “here there is no light” (line 38). After the “viewless” excursion is over, all that remains is the memory of the ineffable pleasure given by the nightingale’s song. That

music, exquisitely melodious at the beginning of the poem and plaintive at the end, calls forth from the underground workshop of the poet's mind a series of images deriving ultimately from ancient times, images that create an emotional sub-text for the poem. Through allusions to the experiences of those who have known the ecstasy of mortal love, Keats reveals his continuing delight at the thought of the joys of young lovers and his deep yearning for the fulfillment of his own unassuaged and incompletely suppressed desires.

I

The first of the images of love in "Ode to a Nightingale" is the apostrophe in stanza 1 to the nightingale as a "light-winged Dryad," pictured as being in "some melodious plot / Of beechen green" (lines 7–9). According to classical mythology, dryads were beautiful nymphs who inhabited the woods of the Mediterranean area; there they were passionately pursued by satyrs or fauns with what post-classical writers have variously regarded either as carefree amorousness or as brutish lust. Hence an allusion to dryads and satyrs (or fauns) has sufficed ever since classical times to conjure up the motif of the pursuit of love: as Joseph Spence put it, "The chief passion, both of the Fauns and Satyrs, seems to have been for the nymphs," and one of their chief characteristics "is their lasciviousness." Occasionally poets are concerned only with the amorousness of the dryads: thus in the Satires of Propertius (i.xx.10–12), Gallus is warned to protect his handsome slave-boy from the assaults of the dryads who burn to steal him; and in Paradise Lost, shortly before the seduction of Adam, Milton likens Eve to a "Wood-Nymph light, Oread or Dryad" (ix.386–387). Keats's awareness of the tradition is readily demonstrated: he alludes to it in Lamia when he states that "faery broods / Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods" and Oberon "Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns" (i.1–6); and in the poem "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," he sympathizes with the unfulfilled love of the nymph Syrinx and the Arcadian god Pan—
“Poor Nymph,—poor Pan” (lines 157–162). Hence when Keats writes in “Ode to a Nightingale” about the “happy lot” of the “light-winged Dryad” singing “of summer” (lines 5–10), the kind of song that he has in mind is one prompted by the natural preoccupation of the wood-nymphs in summertime—a song of love.

The nightingale was often linked with eros by classical, medieval, and Renaissance writers. It appears in Paradise Lost when Adam and Eve withdraw for their wedding night, and all creatures fall silent except for the nightingale singing “all night long her amorous descant” (iv.602–603); and it reappears when Milton tells how the primal couple celebrated “the Rites / Mysterious of connubial love” and “lull’d by Nightingales imbracing slept” (iv.742–743, 771). To Coleridge, the bird’s delicious notes were a “love-chant” (“The Nightingale,” lines 43–49). Keats’s use of this literary tradition is exemplified in Endymion, where the nightingale, perched high among the leaves, “sings but to her love” (1.828–830), and the summer melody which the bird in “Ode to a Nightingale” sings with “full-throated ease” is a symbol for the passion Keats yearned to be able to express without restraint.

The intimation in stanza 1 that the poem deals in a muted way with the theme of passionate love is supported by the implications of several images later in the poem. Thus stanza 2 contains allusions to manifestations of eros both in classical times and in the Middle Ages. The poet calls for wine, “Tasting of Flora and the country green, / Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!” (lines 13–14). Flora, whose festival was celebrated in Rome at the end of April and the beginning of May, was a goddess not

4. A verdant spot is described by Petronius Arbiter as suitable for making love because nightingales sing there (Satyricon chap. xvii). The Latin word for nightingale, philomela, was also the name of the beautiful maiden who inflamed Tereus with desire, was raped by him, and was then transformed into a nightingale (Ovid, Metamorphoses vi.424–674). In Chaucer’s translation from the Roman de la Rose, the god of love appears with “nyghtyngales, a full gret route” flying overhead (Romaunt, lines 909–910). In the debate of The Cuckoo and the Nightingale, the nightingale asserts that there is no “servyse” as good as that on which “loves servaunts” are employed, and it promises the listening lover “That al this May I wol thy singer be” (lines 224–231). For Shakespeare’s Valentine, the thought of being with his beloved at night evokes memories of the nightingale’s “music” (Two Gentlemen of Verona iii.i.178–179). To Milton, the bird was “the love-lorn Nightingale” (Comus, line 234). And in Filippo Picinelli’s Mundus Symbolicus, (iv.i.559), rev. ed. Augustine Erath (Cologne: Hermann Demen, 1694 [1681]), 1, 321, the nightingale is said to be a symbol of the human sex drive.
only of flowers but also of fertility. The festivities of the *Floralia* signalized
the annual renewal of life in nature, and they have been variously regarded
as joyous revels or as licentious orgies. Ovid, who gives a detailed account
of the activities (*Fasti* v.183–378), says that they are marked by wantonness
greater than that manifested at other festivals, because Flora warns her
devotees to use life's flower while it still blooms, and because the gifts she
brings lend themselves to delights.\(^5\) In spite of strong opposition by the
Church, the *Floralia* survived through the centuries as "the bringing in of
May," and evidence for the enduring popularity of the festival in Britain is
provided by the criticism of a sixteenth-century Puritan, by the poetry
of Spenser (*Shepheardes Calender* May 20–33), and by the accounts of
folklorists.\(^6\)

The traditional association of Flora with the activities of young lovers in
the spring is frequently reflected in literature. According to the *Roman de la
Rose*, Flora and her husband Zephyrus each year bring forth the flowered
counterpanes of the meadows for the encouragement of lovers everywhere
(8411–26).\(^7\) The myth was well known to Spenser, Jonson, and Milton,
and Keats himself makes frequent mention of it.\(^8\) Thus in the lyric "O

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5. The festival was denounced as obscene by Christian writers: see Ausonius, *Eclogues*
xxiii.25; Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* vi. xvii; Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* i.xx. According
to Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* ii.27, the festival of Flora was regarded by the pagans as devout
in proportion to its lewdness.

6. The erotic aspect of the May-Day festivities was denounced by Philip Stubbes in *The
149: "Against May,... all the yung men and maides, olde men and wiuues, run gadding ouer
the woods, groues, hils, & mountains, where they spend all the night in plesant
pastimes; & in the morning they return, bringing with them birch & branches of trees, to
deck their assemblies"; and "I have heard it credibly reported... that of fortie, threescore, or
a hundred maides going to the wood ouer night, there haue scarce the third part of them
returned home againe vnfiled." See also John Brand, *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*
(1777), 3rd ed. in 3 vols. by Henry Ellis (London: George Bell, 1875–77), i, 212–34. Brand-
Ellis reports on May-Day customs in various parts of Britain between 1632 and 1847.

Honoré Champion, 1914–24), iii, 81. This conceit is twice echoed by Chaucer (*Booke of the
Duchess* 397–404, *Legend of Good Woman* F, 171–177). In the pseudo-Chaucerian *Flower and
the Leaf*, the ladies and gentlemen who follow the Leaf, led by "Diane, goddess of chastitie"
(line 472), are contrasted with the amorous followers of the Flower, who, inspired by Flora,
love "to hunt... and pley in medes" (lines 536–538).

8. In the *Faerie Queene*, Venus causes the Redcrosse Knight to dream amorously of his
lady, picturing her crowned by "freshest Flora" (i.48–49). Ben Jonson says it was from
Zephyr’s dancing when he wooed Flora that "Venus learnd to lead / Th’ Idalian Braules"
(*Vision of Delight*, lines 226–231)—the Cyprian festival sacred to the goddess of love. And
come, dearest Emma!” the “riches of Flora” provide the romantic setting for the persona’s “story of love” (lines 2–12); in “Sleep and Poetry,” the poet envisions the realm “Of Flora, and old Pan” as a place where he can pursue nymphs and “woo sweet kisses,” and where one of the nymphs will entice him on “Till in the bosom of a leafy world / We rest in silence” (101–121).9

It is appropriate that in “Ode to a Nightingale” Flora is linked in stanza 2 with the medieval troubadours, for their songs were primarily about those experiences of love that classical writers had associated with Flora and her festival. The love motif in Provençal literature proved to be more than merely a widely imitated literary convention: it helped to disseminate the idea that eros was potentially ennobling for the individual and to set in motion far-reaching changes in society.10 Although some critics feel skeptical about C. S. Lewis’s sweeping statement that the Renaissance itself is “a mere ripple on the surface of literature”11 compared with the ethical and artistic revolutions which began with the troubadours’ praise of human love, it is undeniable that the modern romantic treatment of love in western literature had its origins in Provençal poetry.

The works of the troubadours were not known directly to most English writers of the Neo-classical and Romantic periods, but continental authorities persuaded them of the innovative achievements of the Provençal literary phenomenon.12 Pope acknowledged that English love poetry origi—

when Milton’s Adam awakens “enamord” from his night of connubial bliss, he speaks mildly to his wife, “as when Zephyrus on Flora breathes” (Paradise Lost v.12–17).


10. Cf. Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, tr. John J. Parry (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1941), p. 31: Love “can endow a man even of the humblest birth with nobility of character; it . . . makes a man shine with so many virtues and teaches everyone, no matter who he is, so many good traits of character.” For the thesis that this motif led to great changes in social attitudes and customs, see René Nelli, L’Érotique des Troubadours (Toulouse: Édouard Privat, 1963), p. 11.


nated in the poetry of Provence; Warton, after demonstrating how the "Provincial" bards had inspired medieval poets like Dante and Chaucer, noted that the chief subject of troubadour poems was love; and Peacock commented on "the exaggerated love that pervades the songs of the troubadours." It is to their role in the evolution of love poetry that Keats alludes in "The Eve of St. Agnes" (lines 289–292) when he says that Porphyro’s love-song comes from Provence, and in stanza 2 of the Ode when he mentions "Provençal song."

In stanza 4, Keats returns to classical imagery as he enlarges on the concept of his imaginative journey through space:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy....
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry fays. (lines 31–37)

Here the imagery is more complex in its import. Keats’s disclaimer—the statement that his flight is made not in the chariot of Bacchus but on the wings of poesy—involves the rejection of one of the most dynamic images of classical antiquity. Bacchus is often depicted in art as a reveller accompanied by satyrs, and sometimes in a chariot drawn by pards. He was revered as the god who gave mankind the gift of wine, and who also inspired poets. In the long passage about him in Endymion (iv.193–267), his


14. In writing here of Bacchus, Keats probably had in mind Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne, showing the god leaping from his chariot to embrace Ariadne. The painting is reproduced by Ian Jack, Keats and the Mirror of Art, pl. xiii. Keats may have seen either a print of the masterpiece or the original, which was on display at the British Institute in London in 1816.

15. Cf. Ovid, Metamorphoses iv.14, xiii.650–654, and Amores iii.23–24, iii.xv.17–20; Horace, Carmina ii.xix.1–24; Juvenal, Satirae vii.64. Hence the comments by Spence, Polymetis (1747), pp. 131–132: "I suppose, it was under this joyous, or gayer character of Bacchus, that he was considered of old the inspirer of poets: several of them, (and he [Horace] who talks so modestly of him, in particular,) used sometimes to take a good share of that juice, that this god introduced into our part of the world: and as this kindled their spirits, and gave
chariot symbolizes the poetic means by which Keats hopes to go beyond the fascinating realm of his daydreams, inhabited by Flora and Pan (cf. "Sleep and Poetry," lines 101–102), and to reach, in Ian Jack’s words, "the more serious territory of poetry that lay beyond it."

In "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats still calls for a symbolic “draft of vintage” and “a beaker full of the warm South” (lines 11, 15). But Bacchus in his car is no longer a suitable image for the poet on his aesthetic journey toward a more significant realm of poetry, because more than intoxication and inspiration was involved in the god’s influence. The Bacchanalia had been an uninhibited celebration of life, marked by drunkenness, debauchery, and bloodshed. Bacchus was a god not only of inspiration but also of the wildest passions. The pards drawing his car, beautiful but terrifying in their savagery, symbolized the disorderly and sometimes violent manifestations of human sexuality. Hence in turning away from the pard-drawn chariot, Keats rejects the dangerous aspects of eros.

In his visionary journey in "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats is not in search of Bacchic revelry, even with its possibility of inspiration; yet the dismissal of Bacchus does not imply a rejection of the whole classical experience. Keats seeks and achieves communion with the nightingale ("Already with thee"), and that communion yields an image for the kind of inspiration that is ardent and enthralling but without the Bacchic elements of disorder and destruction. The image which comes to his mind is that of the “Queen-Moon” enthroned and surrounded by her starry attendants.

The goddess of the moon, Cynthia or Diana, was the patroness of virgins. Although, historically, she was not commonly regarded as a patron of poetry, Keats’s allusion to Cynthia in the Ode is not surprising. He knew that she was Endymion’s muse; and in the poem "I stood tip-toe," he apostrophized the moon as a “Maker of sweet poets” (lines 113–116). In the same poem, as examples of the romantic stories told by moon-inspired poets, Keats mentions the myths of Psyche and Cupid, Syrinx and

a flow to their imagination, it was but justice in them to acknowledge him for one of their chief patrons.”


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Arcadian Pan, Narcissus and Echo, and that “sweetest of all songs” (line 182), the legend of Cynthia and her Endymion. As Ian Jack points out, “each of these stories . . . can be used to describe the origin of poetry.”

Of course, Cynthia was more than just a “Maker of sweet poets”: she was also the goddess of virginity. To some readers of the classics, this meant that the love she felt for Endymion was purely Platonic in nature.

Not so to Keats: he thinks of Cynthia-Diana as the patroness of chaste but earthly love. She appears in “Sleep and Poetry” as a timorous beauty attended by nymphs (lines 372-373), but there her brief role is enigmatic. Elsewhere, Keats clearly thinks of her as experiencing a heart-warming and ultimately consummated love: “Cynthia is from her silken curtains peeping / So scantily, that it seems her bridal night” (“To my Brother George,” lines 10-11); “Cynthia! I cannot tell the greater blisses, / That follow’d thine, and thy dear shepherd’s kisses” (“I stood tip-toe,” lines 239-240). Above all, in Endymion, the amorous youth exclaims that “Dian’s self must feel / Sometimes these very pangs [of love]” (II.984-985); Endymion dreams that Phoebe (Cynthia) is his “beauteous . . . bed-fellow”; he cannot “help but kiss her and adore” (IV.404-455); and at the end he is triumphant, as Cynthia confesses her love for him (IV.977-1002). In Keats’s view, as set forth in a letter to his sister Fanny, Endymion “was a young handsome Shepherd who . . . lived solitry among the trees and Plains little thinking—that such a beautiful Creature as the Moon was growing mad in Love with him.” It is this concept of the timorously yet ardently loving moon-goddess that is present in Keats’s reference to the “Queen-Moon” in “Ode to a Nightingale.”

The whole of stanza 5 is concerned with flowers and blossoms, unseen by Keats but nevertheless identifiable in the scented (“embalmed”) darkness. Four in particular are mentioned: white hawthorn, eglantine, violets, and musk-roses. It has been said that the flowers named “are important

19. Cf. Joseph Spence, Polymetis, 2nd ed. (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1755), p. 184: Diana “was fabled to fall in love with Endymion; and if we consider the occasion of her love for him, . . . it may appear perhaps to have been only a philosophical amour, or what we call Platonic love: and so may not interfere with this goddess’s general character of chastity.”
chiefly for their pastoral associations." More specifically, they have a long history of use as symbols of love.

The violet is the most frequently used of these images. In classical mythology the flower sprang from the blood of Attis, the youth loved by Cybele. In Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, the goddess attempts to seduce the stripling as they recline on a bed of violets (lines 121–126); in Donne’s lyric “The Ecstasie,” the violet symbolizes the persona’s passion (lines 3–37); the lady in Herrick’s “Meditation for his Mistresse” (lines 7–16) is a “dainty Violet”; and according to Lovelace (“Love Made in the First Age: To Chloris,” lines 25–26), lovers at one time could enjoy each other without sinning, on banks “Diaper’d with Violets Eyes.” Keats uses the image comparably. In *Endymion*, the young lover tells of a dream in which, as he madly kissed his beloved, he became aware of “A scent of violets, and blossoming limes” (1.651–668); later in the poem he comes across Adonis asleep in a “chamber, myrtle wall’d” (myrtle being sacred to Venus), and there a cupid “Rain’d violets upon his sleeping eyes” (11.387–427). The description of the violets in “Ode to a Nightingale” as “Fast fading” points, of course, to the transitory nature of human love.

On May-Day eve in earlier centuries, lovers went out into the countryside to gather branches of blossoming hawthorn and decorate their homes. Herrick’s “Corinna’s going a Maying” celebrates this festival: “There’s not a budding Boy or Girle, this day, / But is got up, and gone to bring in May,” returning “with White-thorn laden” (lines 43–46); “Many a green-gown has been given; / Many a kisse... , / Many a glance too has

22. Cf. Ovid, *Fasti* iv.215–246, V.227; Catullus, *Carmina* lxiii.1–90. In Virgil’s *Eclogues* (iv.47), a naiad gathers violets as a token of her love for Alexis. In the *Satyricon* (chap. xvii), the secluded spot where nightingales sing is suited to love because it is a place where violets intermingle with the grass. Hence it is appropriate that when the god of love appears in the *Roman de la Rose*, his garments are decorated with violets as well as roses (Chaucer’s *Romaunt of the Rose* 896–906).
23. Milton also uses the image. In *L’Allegro* (lines 19–24), Zephyr begets a daughter upon Aurora while playing with her “on Beds of Violets blue, / And fresh-blow’d Roses”; and in *Paradise Lost* (ix.1034–45), the bed on which the fallen Adam and Eve guiltily take “thir fill of Love” is made of violets and other flowers of comparable symbolic significance; see my paper “Paradise Lost IX: The Garden and the Flowered Couch,” *Milton Quarterly*, 13 (1979), 134–141.
been sent / From out the eye, Love's Firmament" (lines 51–54); and the
door of each house is now a tabernacle “Made up of white-thorn neatly
erterwove: / As if here were those cooler shades of love” (lines 30–36). The festival survived in some areas of Britain until the mid-nineteenth
century.

The image of the hawthorn is common in the literature of the Middle
Ages and later. In The Shepheardes Calendar (“May,” line 10), the first
of the May-Day ceremonies undertaken by young people is the gathering
of “may buskets”—a phrase glossed by E.K. as “little bushes of hau-thorne”;
in As You Like It (iii.ii.359–362), Rosalind reports that Orlando is hanging
love odes “upon hawthorns”; and the landscape in Goldsmith’s Deserted
Village (lines 13–14) includes a “hawthorn bush with seats beneath the
shade, / For talking age and whispering lovers made.” In Keats’s poem “I
stood tip-toe” (line 130), the amorous persona has a feeling of safety in “a
hawthorn glade” precisely because the tree was believed to be propitious
to lovers.

Next in literary popularity among the unseen flowers in “Ode to a
Nightingale” whose fragrance Keats identifies is the eglantine or sweet-
briar. Spenser is fond of the image: the Shepheardes Calendar for May tells
how “loue lads” and “Yougthes folke now flocken in euery where,” to
gather “Hawthorne buds, and swete Eglantine” (lines 1–13); and in the
Faerie Queene, Cymochles dallies with “loose Ladies and lasciuious boyes”
in an arbor “Through which the fragrant Eglantine did spred / His prick-
ing armes” (p.v.28–29). The persona in Shelley’s lyric “The Question”

25. In the romance Guy of Warwick the rendezvous of the lovers Tirri and Oisel is fre-
quently “vnder an hawe-born” (4723–4871); see The Romance of Guy of Warwick, ed. Julius
Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale,” love-lorn Arcite observes May by fashioning a lover’s garland
“of wodebynde or hawethorn leves” (Canterbury Tales 1.497–1508); a similar chaplet is
worn by “Fraw Mynn” (Lady Love) in the romance Der Spiegel, repr. in Meister Altswert,
ein krantz / Von grüenen hagdorn lag” (lines 23–27). In The Cuckoo and the Nightingale,
when the cuckoo is placed on trial for disparaging love, the nightingale flies “into an hawe-
born . . . and song upon that tree” to celebrate love (lines 287–288).

26. There is a similar arbor in Spenser’s Garden of Adonis, where Venus takes her “pleasure
of the wanton boy”; the bower is of trees entwined with “wanton yuie . . . / And Eglantine”
(Faerie Queene iii.vi.44–46). See also Greene’s romance Arbasto, where the infatuated hero
declares that in spite of rejection by Doralicia, he will not “leae the sweet eglantine because
it pricks [his] finger”; cited from The Life and Complete Works of Robert Greene, ed. Alex-
ander B. Grosart (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964 [1881–86]), ii, 235. The eglantine con-
gathers a lover’s nosegay including violets, roses, and eglantine. The same traditional significance is reflected in Endymion: the love-sick youth envisions a spot where he might dwell with his beloved, and there he promises to plant eglantine (iv.670–700).

The remaining flower named by Keats in stanza 5 of the Ode is the musk-rose, a rambling rose with white blooms; and like the other three flowers, it is found in poetry in settings redolent of the joys or pains of eros. All roses, of course, were sacred to Venus; and her son Cupid was said by Chaucer to wear a chaplet of roses (Romaut, lines 907–908). The mention of the musk-rose in “Ode to a Nightingale” in conjunction with violets and eglantine may have been prompted by the similar linkage in Shakespeare’s description of the spot where Titania will fall in love and dally with Bottom (A Midsummer Night’s Dream ii.i.250–252). The strains of a shepherd’s love-song in Comus are praised as having “sweeten’d every musk-rose of the dale” (493–496). And Keats’s Endymion declares his beloved to be as “Sweet as a muskrose upon new-made hay” (iv.102). There, as in “Ode to a Nightingale,” the flower’s powerful odor is an image for the attractiveness of love.

The last element in the erotic imagery of the Ode may seem at first sight to be out of place. After stating in stanza 7 that the song of the nightingale was heard in ancient days by emperor and by “clown,” Keats goes on to strike a Biblical note:

The voice I hear this passing night was . . .
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn. (lines 63–67)

tributes to the fragrance of the bank on which Shakespeare’s Titania is lulled with amorous delight (A Midsummer Night’s Dream ii.i.249–254). In the pseudo-Marlovian description of a locus amoenus (“I walk’d along a stream”), the bank where “A thousand naked nymphs” might appear is described as covered with “eglantine and rose” entwined with trees in such a way as to remind the poet of “Turtle-taught lovers:” see The Plays of Christopher Marlowe, ed. Edward Thomas (London: J. M. Dent, 1912 [1909]), p. 435, “Fragment.”

27. See also Matheo Aleman’s The Rogue, or The Life of Guzman de Alfarache, tr. James Mabbe (Oxford: Robert Allot, 1630), p. 200, where a basket of “Mirtles, . . . Muske–roses, & other sweet flowers” (ii.i.xx) is used to seduce a beautiful lady. In Tennyson’s Maud, the lover calls to his lady to come out into the garden: “I am here at the gate alone; / And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad / And the musk of the rose is blown” (xxii.852–855).
What is the pertinence to "Ode to a Nightingale" of Ruth's story, the only element in the imagery of the poem that is both specific and historical?

In this stanza, Keats adverts for the first time to the effect that the nightingale’s song has on others than himself, in fact on the whole spectrum of society, from the ruler to the lowest of the ruled. By introducing a notable Old Testament figure, he expands the scope of his meditations to embrace not only the pagan world of Flora, Bacchus, and Diana but also the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, the Biblical image serves as a link between the imaginative world of untrammelled joy conjured up by the images in stanzas 1–2 and 4–5, and the prosaic world of unceasing pain and death reflected in stanzas 3 and 6, since even Ruth was ultimately happy. Of course Keats does not think of the emperor, the peasant, and Ruth as being moved to speculate, as he is doing, on philosophical and aesthetic matters. To rulers, ruled, and displaced persons alike, the bird’s melodious song would have been a token of happiness or of consolation for unhappiness, especially in affairs of the heart.

There has been some uncertainty as to Keats’s intention in introducing the un-Biblical description of Ruth as being “sick for home . . . amid the alien corn” (lines, 66, 67). The scriptural account of Ruth the Moabitite tells how, after the death of her Israelite husband, she accompanied her mother-in-law Naomi to Judah, a land alien to Ruth; and there, with Naomi’s encouragement she took steps to obtain a new husband, Boaz (Ruth, chaps. 2–4). It is likely that for Keats, it was not only the change of domicile but also, and more importantly, the loss of the marital love she had enjoyed that made her heart sad. This interpretation aligns the reference to Ruth with the other images in the poem having as their common denominator the motif of love. It is noteworthy that Thomas Hood’s "Ruth" (1827), a poem apparently inspired by Keats’s lines, takes a clearly romantic view of her. There Ruth is “Like the sweetheart of the sun, / Who many a glowing kiss had won,” and Hood’s farmer summons her: “Lay thy sheaf adown and come, / Share my harvest and my home.”29

28. It is possible that Keats was influenced by Poussin’s painting Summer, or Ruth and Boaz (Louvre), reproduced by Ian Jack in Keats and the Mirror of Art, pl. xl. Jack points out (p. 291 n16), that it can have been known to Keats “only in a print, such as that in vol. iv. of the Galerie du Musée de France, 1814 (no. 256).”

It is evident that in “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats no longer possesses that relatively simple enthusiasm, manifested in early works like “Sleep and Poetry,” that made it seem that the domain of the imagination could provide something like an antidote to the ills of the real world. His imaginative faculties can still conjure up powerful imagery to body forth the beauties of nature and the glory of humanistic achievements; but he now knows that it cannot provide a substitute for, or even a temporarily satisfactory retreat from, the pain of loving. In a sense, the excursion in “Ode to a Nightingale” records in brief the aesthetic and psychological journey that had led Keats to a more mature judgment regarding poetry and its relation to life.

At the outset of the Ode, as the poet first becomes aware of the thrilling song of the nightingale, the bird’s apparent happiness makes him desire to pass once again through the charmed casements opened up by his craft, and to soar on the wings of poetry (st. 1–2) into an ideal realm free from the painful realities and bitter frustrations of everyday life, a realm filled with glamorous images of the classical, medieval, and Renaissance eras. But even in the course of this magic journey, the real world intrudes (st. 3); the poet realizes that the nightingale has never known, and hence its song does not reflect, the “weariness, the fever, and the fret” endured by humanity, on an earth where even “youth grows pale” and dies, and where the mere act of thinking about life is enough to plunge one into “leaden-eyed desairs,” as beauty fades and love pines.

In spite of everything, the poet is determined to continue his flight (st. 4–5), but the visual element is missing. The excursion is “viewless”; nothing is visible because “here there is no light”; in fact Keats cannot see, though he can smell, the flowers at his feet. Again the muted pleasure is intruded upon (st. 6) by gloomy thoughts, this time about mortality: Keats recalls that he has often ruminated on “easeful Death” and remarks wistfully that the nightingale will pour forth its song long after he himself is dead.

In its primary metaphorical significance as the embodiment of the literary imagination, the nightingale is, unlike the poet, “immortal” (line 61). It has been pouring forth its soul ever since ancient times, imperial as well as Biblical, and it will continue to do so. But even as Keats is pro-
claiming the immortality of poetry, he questions the nature of its achieve-
ments. That it has often opened up "Charm'd magic casements" is unde-
niable; but what the magic now reveals to the poet gazing through those
casements is enigmatically described as "the foam / Of perilous seas, in
faery lands forlorn" (lines 69–70). Even these less than comforting visions
will not last: "fancy," that aptitude for imaginative invention, is a "de-
ceiving elf" (lines 73–74); and from the fact that the literal nightingale's
song fades as the bird moves on to "the next valley-glades" (line 78), the
reader recognizes the poet's awareness that his inspiration will likewise
cease. But this bleak conclusion is mitigated by the sub-text of "Ode to a
Nightingale." John Clare was right when he observed that the scenery in
Keats's poetry reflects "nature as she appeared to his fancies & not as he
would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes."30 The
details are more often symbolic than realistic. In this respect Keats is fol-
lowing in the footsteps of Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton. It is this tradition
that provides the clues to the sub-textual concerns of Keats in his Ode.

At the level of conscious thought, Keats develops the concept that the
idealized situations so often presented in poetry are far removed from the
grim realities of life, with its weariness, disappointments, illness, and death.
Yet the exemplars evoked, rather than delineated, in the excursion stanzas
(1–2, 4–5, 7) are images of love—young, passionate, and fulfilled. Even the
last of these images, that of the historical Ruth standing in tears amid the
alien corn, does not exemplify the extremes of despair and agony that
prevail in stanzas 3 and 6, since the reader knows (or is expected to know)
that Ruth, after much suffering, finally achieved her goal of remarriage,
and with a kind and generous man.

Thus stanzas 1–2 and 4–5 contain images evoking the carefree, ecstatic
fulfillment of love, a fulfillment not achieved by Keats. The poet offers
brief glimpses of a dryad in a grove, awaiting pursuit by a satyr; of amo-
rous Romans participating in the riotous celebrations honoring Flora; of
Bacchus in his pard-drawn chariot, enamored of Ariadne; of Renaissance
lovers going a-Maying to bring home boughs of hawthorn, or reclining
on lawns sprinkled with violets, or lingering in bowers of musk-roses and
eglantine; and then of the compassionate Israelite farmer, offering love and

30. The Prose of John Clare, ed. J. W. and Anne Tibble (New York: Barnes & Noble,
security to the disconsolate Ruth. Love, like beauty, has endured through the ages and will continue to endure, for mankind if not for the individual.

The existence of these ideas just below the surface of the primary level of communication in "Ode to a Nightingale" indicates that there is a dichotomy between what the poet has come to recognize as the grim truth about life and, on the other hand, man's eternal hope (however irrational) that fate will bring some measure of happiness in response to the need for love. The truth that he has arrived at intellectually and experientially, that man must reconcile himself first to the physical and spiritual pains of life (st. 3) and then to the ultimate oblivion of death (st. 6), evidently does not destroy every vestige of hope before he "become[s] a sod" (line 60). It is that hope which led Keats to compose the impassioned lines "To Fanny" some months after the writing of "Ode to a Nightingale." It is the same muted hope that shines through, however fitfully, in the subtext of the Ode.

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31 For an expression of that hope in 1817, see Endymion II.1013–17.