

## The Flight of the Nightingale: From Romans to Romantics

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**This paper evaluates the resilience of the myth of Philomela and the symbol of the nightingale in poetic tradition from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to the early Romantic poetry of Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Poets have long depended upon natural life to demonstrate characteristics of human emotion and activity, for animal species remain similar generation by generation, but simultaneously act autonomously. The myth of Philomela’s metamorphosis into a nightingale draws upon the natural characteristics of the bird, and to reference it implies very specific connotations. By explicating the primary source poetry, I draw immediate connections between references to the myth while in order to highlight the prevailing variations in metonymic function. Using critical commentary of classical scholars of Ovid and poetic scholars of the Romantics, I utilize the shift of the nightingale from Ovid’s bird of repressed grief to the Romantic’s one of natural joy. With the shift, I seek to extrapolate two understandings from the nightingale’s mythological symbolism. Why use the nightingale as a symbol, and what can differences in the perception of the nightingale from the Romans to the Romantics tell us about their respective views of nature? Incorporating the conversation of gender differences and rape, I acknowledge the male dominance of the myth as well the symbolism of song and speech in conveying message, stemming from Philomela’s loss of her tongue. Bridging the gap between the Greek myth, the Roman story, and the Romantic reinterpretation, the common metaphor of the nightingale is a common ground for reading the natural perception of nature through poetry.**

### INTRODUCTION

According to ornithologist Robert Lutwack, birds are “like humans, yet different, seeming to be both in and beyond nature.”<sup>1</sup> Birds exist just out of mankind’s reach, possessing transcendent qualities in their graceful flight and mysterious song. As a result, shamans and mystics have turned to the feathered beast in search of communication with the gods for centuries. Writers too have turned to them to communicate with their readers. They evoke unique qualities and powerful symbolism that taps into a reader’s imagination. By developing knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of different species, writers can convey particular emotions through different types of birds. For my purposes, however, the never-ending song of the nightingale soars above the rest. To the modern eye and ear, the nightingale is none other than a small brown lark. Its song is nothing more than a whistle amongst the trees. To the ear of the ancients and poetic visionaries, however, the nightingale’s song holds almost two millenia worth of repressed emotion and melancholy.

This paper seeks analyzes the nightingale as a symbolic figure in poetic history and interprets its evolution over time from its origins with the Romans

to its poetic zenith with the Romantics. Although the myth begins much earlier with Greek literature, the gruesome myth of the nightingale that we recognize today takes hold in literature with Roman writer Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. With the passage of time and changing aesthetic values, the vision of the nightingale shifts, blossoming into a delicate and beautiful creature in the imagination of the nineteenth century Romantic poets. John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Nightingale” evidence a joyful tone that directly contrasts with the sorrow of the Greek and Roman myths. Despite its drastic symbolic transformation, the nightingale remains a critical trope in the literary tradition and its evolution reflects a cultural shift in perception and view of nature through time. Beginning with a study of the physiological connection of the nightingale to its symbolism provides context for the literature that surrounds it. Continuing from a discussion of Ovid contrasted with the approach of two Romantics bookends the nightingale’s symbolic progression and highlights the ever changing relationship between the poet, the subject, and poetic tropes. Analyzing the literary development nightingale’s symbolic role historically, we may literally fly through history on

<sup>1</sup> Lutwack, Leonard. *Birds in Literature*. Gainesville: University of Florida, 1994. Pg. ix

“the wings of poesy.”<sup>2</sup>

## HISTORY OF THE NIGHTINGALE

The nightingale is an enigmatic symbol that has been transformed from a tragic and remorseful figure into a poetic vision of beauty, but its symbolism evolves and grows through the progression from Ovid to the Romantics. The nightingale can be traced back to the Greek songs of Homer’s epic adventure *The Odyssey*. In the epic, Penelope asks Ulysses to interpret a dream for her, demonstrating the first written association of the nightingale’s song with sorrow<sup>3</sup>:

a god has given grief unmeasurable... Even as the daughter of Pandareus [later Pandion], the nightingale [later Philomela] that loves the green woods, sings, when the spring is new-set, her lovely song, sitting among the countless leaves of the tress; with ever various note she pours forth her far-heard voice, wailing for Itylus [later Itys], her son, whom she slew in ignorance, the son of King Zethus.<sup>4</sup>

While the nightingale emerges as the symbol we know today in Roman literature and the story and characters rearrange, the pathos of *The Odyssey* remains constant across the centuries. Penelope, with her grief, casts sorrow upon the nightingale’s melodious call. In place of the word nightingale, Homer uses the word, *Aedon*, meaning “singer,” in Greek. Garrod points out that *Aedon* is very similar to the Greek word for “joyless,” “*a-hedon*,” hence the sorrowful nightingale.<sup>5</sup> Greek culture clearly resonated with the nightingale as a tragic figure that embodies lost hope and longing from its perch within the natural world.

Roman poetry expands Greek myths of the nightingale into a gruesome story of rape and revenge that would captivate generations of authors to come. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,<sup>6</sup> published in 8 A.D., collected the relevant Greek myths of *Aedon*, by this time known as Philomela, and developed the tragic myth of lost innocence and revenge. Years later, authors like

Chaucer, Gascoigne, Shakespeare, and the Romantics would build upon and reinterpret Ovid’s Philomela. Ovid marked a watershed moment in the nightingale’s violent and troubling history because he added narrative details to create a vision and story for Philomela that departs from his predecessors. Centuries later, the early nineteenth-century Romantics like Keats and Coleridge brought the symbolic figure of the nightingale back to life as a touchstone for their poetic vision. However, these poets replaced the sorrow of Ovid in favor of a cathartic song of joy. The transformation of the nightingale from Ovid to Keats and Coleridge is a window into the differences in the psyche of generations that have turned to nature to express their innermost thoughts and feelings.

One might argue, however, when analyzing the development of tropes that the inconsistency of the nightingale’s representation from the Romans to the Romantics may derive from a lack of ornithological knowledge or literary history on the part of the poets or authors that redirect the nightingale’s symbolism rather than conscious adaptation of the symbolism. Yet, the very nature of poetry allows for exaggeration for the sake of expression, and through history, we have seen such errors, intentional or unintentional, that altered the direction of the nightingale’s symbolism. Critics of Oscar Wilde’s short story, “The Nightingale and the Rose,” for example, mocked his inaccurate portrayal of the nightingale’s nesting place in the wrong type of tree. Yet he quipped back, “literary traditions never quite die as long as they serve some expressive purpose. The nightingale [in literature] still only sings at night.”<sup>7</sup> What he means is that although the nightingale in nature sings only in the morning, the nightingale of poetic imagination can sing at night and against unconventional or unexpected backdrops.<sup>8</sup> After all, somewhere between the Romans and the Romantics, the image of the nightingale singing upon a thorn becomes a symbol of sacrifice and martyrdom. Just as poetic interpretation is susceptible to inconsistency, so too are the prevailing tropes of poetry. This variation in symbolism by poets is critical to understanding the development of the nightingale’s imagery.

<sup>2</sup> Keats, John. "Ode to a Nightingale." *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.

<sup>3</sup> Garrod, H. W. "The Nightingale in Poetry." *The Profession of Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1924. Pg. 133

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, Charles. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Collier, 1969. Pg 280.

<sup>5</sup> Garrod, H. W. "The Nightingale in Poetry." Pg. 133

<sup>6</sup> Book VI

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, Jeffrey Cane. *Romantic Presences: Living Images from the Age of Wordsworth & Shelley*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1995. Pg. 171

<sup>8</sup> Daniel W Leger, Katherine E Brooks, & Judith E O'Brien. *Versatility from a single song: The case of the Nightingale Wren*. *The Auk*, 117(4), 1038-1042. Sciences Module, 2000 (Document ID: 63141194).

## FROM TREE-TOP SINGER TO TROPE

It is necessary to analyze the ornithology of the nightingale, because its symbolism derives from the unique characteristics of the songbird itself, whose figurative value is captured in its ability to express emotion through physical traits and song. What characteristics of the nightingale make it such a powerful representation of sorrow as opposed to other birds? Ancient Greeks were conscious of many different bird types. As seen through Aristophanes play, *The Birds*, the common viewer may have been able to distinguish about eighty different bird types by their masks and noises during the play. They no doubt recognized the idiosyncrasies of different species by plumage and song including the nightingale.<sup>9</sup> The nightingale, or *Microerculus philomela*, is known amongst experts for its versatility and length of song. As ornithologist Daniel Leger puts it, “what makes the song outstanding, is the large number of complex phrases (up to 24), and their neatness and dynamic power.” Despite its small size, the nightingale projects its variable song as though it speaks words just out of reach from human understanding. Its wide vocal range mirrors the range of emotion it has come to convey in literature, providing a powerful symbol for poets, who similarly seek to convey a large spectrum of feelings to their audiences. In addition, the nightingale can sing up to 70% percent of waking life versus other wrens who sing from 21 to 50 percent of the time.<sup>10</sup> When listening to the bird, ancients and even modern writers no doubt recognized the endurance of the nightingale’s voice. With such a prevailing song, it is as though the bird longs to be heard by mankind. A fitting symbol of sorrow, the nightingale’s versatile song mimics a mournful or wailing cry that is a necessary release for a surge of natural emotions.

## OID’S NIGHTINGALE MYTH: SONGS OF SORROW IN METAMORPHOSES

The symbolic origins of the nightingale’s powerful myth lie in the Roman tragedy of Philomela made known through Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. As Ovid tells it, the king of Athens, Pandion, offered his daughter, Procne, to Tereus as a reward for his military prowess. From the beginning, however, their marriage was threatened by the presence of the Furies with their funeral torches and the absence of Juno at their wedding. Procne longs for her sister Philomela to visit,

but Tereus falls in love with Philomela and resolves to rape her. He steals her to the forest and rapes her, and when she threatens to proclaim the story at the expense of her dignity, he cuts off her tongue and banishes her to a fortress. In her captivity, Philomela designs a quilt that tells her horrific story and sends it to her sister. Upon receiving it, Procne steals Philomela and plots revenge against her evil husband. To exact her revenge, Procne brutally murders her own son, Itys, and feeds him to his father. When Tereus calls for Itys, Philomela throws her slain son’s head at her rapist husband as a symbol of his own depravity. In a fury, Tereus charges at the sisters with a sword, but the gods intervene and transform each of the parties into a different bird. Tereus is transformed into a hoopoe. Procne is changed into a swallow. Philomela becomes a nightingale. A brutal story of revenge and sorrow, Ovid’s account of the myth channels the potent emotions into the transformation of each character.<sup>11</sup>

*Metamorphoses*, however, leaves the transformation ambiguous, relying upon previous interpretations of the myth to define whether Philomela becomes the nightingale or the swallow. “But you would have said those Athenians had taken flight with wings. There they are poised; one sister wings her way into the dark woods, the other rises to the roof—their breast still bears the signs of their atrocious crime, her feathers are stained with blood.”<sup>12</sup> Although there is no clear answer, Ovid uses subtle clues indicate Philomela is the one who is transformed into the nightingale. Many of Ovid’s predecessors portrayed Philomela as the swallow and Procne as the nightingale.<sup>13</sup> Although this interpretation fits with her loss of tongue, it draws much of the attention away from Philomela and towards Procne. To understand why Ovid’s connects Philomela and the nightingale, we must turn to Vergil’s *Aetna*.<sup>14</sup> In reality, Vergil was the first writer credited with switching Philomela from the muted swallow into the melancholy nightingale. He noted that Philomela’s name means “lover of song,” so it fits that she attains voice in her transformation for “[w]hile Philomela sings in the wood, her sister lives

<sup>11</sup> Ovid. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*. Trans. Allen Mendelbaum. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1995. Pg 195-204

<sup>12</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Pg. 195-204

<sup>13</sup> Brewer, Wilmon. *Ovid's Metamorphoses in European Culture*. Boston, MA: Cornhill, 1933. Pg. 52.

<sup>14</sup> *Aetna* is part Virgil’s *Sixth Eclogue* and the original is in not in English. See Brewer 53.

<sup>9</sup> Lutwack, *Birds in Literature*. Pg. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Leger. *Versatility from a Single Song*. Pg. 2

under roofs, and Tereus frequents the lonely fields.”<sup>15</sup> We know that Ovid frequently referenced the works of Vergil, but Ovid’s account of the myth prevailed, primarily because of his numerous narrative additions.<sup>16</sup>

Ovid’s version of the nightingale not only provides a captivating plot, but also introduces several contradictions that comment directly on larger social themes of gender imbalances. Ovid presents a more complete picture of the Philomela’s nightingale, expressing dueling connotations of sorrow and grief as well as revenge and sadism. By separating the myth into two parts, before and after the rape, one may see the multi-faceted symbolism of the nightingale as well as the social implications of Ovid’s story. Before the rape, the nightingale represents Philomela silenced in her despair and signals the “unassuaged grief” and sorrow of the bird’s song.<sup>17</sup> In the mourning of the nightingale, Ovid comments on themes of male dominance and lack of female voice. After the rape, however, Ovid transforms the nightingale’s song, which takes on a more menacing tone that reflects Philomela’s frustration and desire for vengeance. Ovid discusses the consequences of female empowerment and the symbolic renewal of voice through violence.<sup>18</sup>

Firmly establishing the male-domination in the first half of the myth, Ovid focuses on the power of Tereus, setting up a contrast between his assumed power and Philomela’s innocence and vulnerability. Tereus, as a figurehead in Thrace, feels entitled, even ordained, to quench his sexual desires at the expense of Philomela. Ovid describes the first encounter between Tereus and Philomela for “[t]hat sight was quite enough; the flame of love had taken Tereus... the vice inflaming him is both his own and that dark fire which burns in Thracian souls.” Tereus’ lust extends beyond himself; it is made by Ovid to be a commonality of Thracians. Nothing will stand in his way when he proclaims that he will “ravish her, and then defend his rape by waging unrelenting war. There’s nothing [I] would not dare do.”<sup>19</sup> Tereus becomes a detestable character in contrast to the innocent Philomela. Ovid

simultaneously demonizes Tereus while building pity for Philomela. Philomela is depicted as a lost daughter through elaborate scenes where she kisses her father goodbye while he tearfully watches her departure.<sup>20</sup> In creating this archetypal opposition between evil and innocence, Ovid builds pathos for the coming emotional expression of sorrow in Philomela’s fateful cry.

Through rape and loss of voice, Ovid immortalizes Philomela as the symbol of female abuse behind the mournful wail of the nightingale. Seemingly evocative of her fateful transformation, in the midst of the rape, “like one who mourns, she [Philomela] beats her arms and then, with outstretched arms, she cries ‘What have you done, barbarian!’” The image of Philomela flapping her outstretched arms like wings with her hate-filled cry serves as an image of her sorrow that prevails throughout literature. She mimics the bird in her actions just as the bird is thought to mimic her. Likened to the repetitive call of the nightingale wren, her cry never appears to end.<sup>21</sup>

Centuries later, authors interpret Philomela’s symbolic invocation of the nightingale as a representation of female despair in the face of marginalization through male aggression. In Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*, for example, the nightingale sings with its chest against a thorn: “Come, Philomel[a]; that sing’st of ravishment... and whiles against a thorn thou bear’st thy part, to keep they sharp woes waking.”<sup>22</sup> The image of the nightingale has curiously become associated with the image of singing upon a thorn. Curiously, because the origin is unknown. Several classical authors, even Ovid, allude to blood upon Philomela’s chest, but not until Chaucer does the thorn emerge. Of the thorn, Carter hypothesizes, “the masochistic nightingale also continuously re-enacts her rape using the phallic thorn to penetrate and mutilate herself.”<sup>23</sup> The self-imposed pain of the nightingale corroborates the sorrowful image of never ending grief. Setting herself up as a virgin martyr, Philomela “sees the sword [of Tereus], and death is her dear hope. But it’s her tongue he seizes with a pincer.”<sup>24</sup> With this act of losing her tongue the fate of Philomela’s violent retali-

<sup>15</sup> Brewer. *Ovid's Metamorphoses in European Culture*. Pg. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Chandler, Albert R. "The Nightingale in Greek and Latin Poetry." *The Classical Journal* 30.2 (1934): 78-84

<sup>17</sup> Garrod, H. W. "The Nightingale in Poetry." Pg. 132.

<sup>18</sup> Many scholars recognize gender commentary in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. For more information see Carter, Brewer, Garrod, and Robinson

<sup>19</sup>Ovid. *Metamorphoses* Pg. 195.

<sup>20</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Pg. 195.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel W Leger, *Versatility from a single song*. Pg 2.

<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare, William, and J. W. Lever. *The Rape of Lucrece*; . Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971. Pg. 59

<sup>23</sup> Carter, Sarah. “Rape, Revenge, and Verse: Philomela.” Pg. 19

<sup>24</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses* Pg. 196

ation is set into motion. For “the tongue itself falls to the ground; there, on the blood-red soil, it murmurs; as a serpent’s severed tail.”<sup>25</sup> The object of voice, the tongue, now writhes with the poison of a snake, seeking to kill. Like the act of severing the tongue, Philomela reenacts the violence of the rape through a vengeful act that is designed to punish the male aggressor. Having lost her voice, however, Philomela must act through Procne who assist her in seeking revenge upon Tereus.

The voiceless Philomela who represents the silenced voices of women in ancient society provides both social commentary and a useful trope for repressed authors.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, Philomela views herself as complicit in the rape regardless of her own victimization. When speaking to Procne after her rescue, “Philomela will not lift her eyes; she sees herself as an adulteress.”<sup>27</sup> Philomela’s presumed guilt indicates that women viewed themselves as an accessory to the baser needs of men. Removing her tongue, Tereus steals her ability to communicate and her ability to accuse her attacker and thereby avenge the crime. Scholar Sarah Carter notes “female loquacity was also linked to unchaste behavior, deception, and the devil, and, as usually a woman’s only form of attack, shrewding, scolding, or cursing.”<sup>28</sup> That is, women’s only means of defense is vocal, and in removing her means of communication, he traps her pain within her soul. Thus, Ovid shines light on the gender implications of the act of rape and the supreme act of revenge. From the moment he cuts off her tongue, Tereus begins a self-fulfilling prophecy by incentivizing Philomela to give voice to her anguish through violence.

By shifting the tone after Philomela’s loss of voice, Ovid marks a change in the symbolic view from the nightingale. Many critics of Ovid problematize the extent to which Philomela participates in the violent revenge against Tereus.<sup>29</sup> The tone of her cry loses its innocence once the guilt of Itys’ murder is on her chest. In collaborating with Procne, who spearheads the plan for revenge, Philomela regains her voice through action. Like the fire of lust within Tereus,

the fire of hatred burns within Procne as “she flames ... [she is] ready now to kill in any way, however criminal.” Ovid dramatizes the sisters’ anger and the appalling horror behind the sisters’ murder, describing their brutality of hacking the innocent child limb from limb despite his desperate pleas.<sup>30</sup> The graphic details of the butchery of Itys dehumanize the sisters. Many writers, including Chaucer, Sir Francis Drake, and Coleridge, struggle with the moral implications of retaliation in their poetry by seeking to eliminate any negative connotations with the nightingale.<sup>31</sup> Sarah Carter recognizes, “It is clear that Tereus’ actions require revenge, but the text seems unable to present active vengeful females as such virtuous even before the murder of Itys. The articulation of female in this tale is one of desirable, praised passivity or fury-like cruelty.”<sup>32</sup> By committing this “distasteful” act, the sisters undergo an emotional and narrative transformation that is a harbinger of their later physical metamorphosis. Thus, the nightingale’s song can also be one of triumphant revenge. I would argue that Ovid offers a counter-feminist reading of the actions of the women. When women are spurred to act, they overreact. As such, Ovid both vilifies and praises Tereus just as he praises then vilifies the sisters. Scholar Lutwack observed that Ovid first gives a favorable impression of Tereus as a pious war hero. With the switch from the villainy of Tereus to the villainy of the sisters, Ovid seems to comment on the subjugation of women but also the consequences of their entitlement to equalizing with men. He provides a balanced commentary on the aggression and anger of human nature regardless of gender. Yet, the followers of Ovid seem predisposed towards the sorrowful nightingale, more often ignoring her brutal retaliation.

In Ovid, the nightingale may be interpreted as a symbol of repression, sorrow, or grief or a sign of revenge, fury, or taunting. From *Metamorphoses*, it is difficult to tell whether Ovid blames Philomela because of the inconsistency of translations. Some translators view “that *her* [Procne] chest still bears the signs of their atrocious crime,” while other say “*their*

<sup>25</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses* Pg. 196

<sup>26</sup> Carter, Sarah. “Rape, Revenge, and Verse: Philomela.” Pg. 21

<sup>27</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Pg. 201

<sup>28</sup> Carter, Sarah. “Rape, Revenge, and Verse: Philomela.” Pg. 22

<sup>29</sup> Carter, Garrod, and Lutwack recognize the duality of Philomela’s image

<sup>30</sup> Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Pg. 202

<sup>31</sup> Brewer, Wilmon. *Ovid's Metamorphoses in European Culture*. Pg. 57

<sup>32</sup> Carter, Sarah. “Rape, Revenge, and Verse: Philomela.” Pg. 43

chests still bear the signs.”<sup>33</sup> The literary interpretation of the nightingale after Ovid, however, seems to take advantage of this ambiguity in interpretation. After studying multiple authors’ nightingale references, a majority tend to favor the image of the wronged nightingale more than the vengeful nightingale. There seems to be an uncertainty or reluctance among authors to recognize the nightingale’s violent past. Though the legacy of Ovid’s nightingale cannot fully escape her menacing and malicious retaliation, but her song still bears the pain of her rape. As writers continue to invoke Philomela, her song still bleeds with sorrow, but she begins to join with the suffering of the author. I would argue that authors can relate more to the sorrowful nightingale that personifies grief and loss more than the blinding fury of a woman seeking revenge. Rather than being a third party symbol, the nightingale comes to bear the weight of the author’s pain, particularly during the Romantic era of the early nineteenth-century.

### THE ROMANTIC NIGHTINGALE: A JOYFUL SONG

Leaping forward nearly two thousand years to the Romantics, the nightingale takes on the enigmatic role of both a symbol of sorrow and joy. The perplexing shift may be explained by the fads of the literary period with the Romantics desiring to learn about human nature through the study of nature. They emerged in the eighteenth century into the nineteenth as a counterculture to the logic and reason of the Enlightenment era. Artists, musicians, and poets emphasized intuition, beauty, and spirit in the creation of all works. Through their creations, they felt they could attain a higher understanding and connection, especially through nature. As their name suggests, the Romantics romanticized the simplistic beauty behind natural landscapes and the beings within.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, Romantic poets Keats and Coleridge turn to the nightingale for answers. Both allude to Philomela and her song, but they redevelop the symbolism behind it. As will become clear, the nightingale loses Ovid’s violent and sexual connotations in the male-dominated literary movement. Rather, the image refocuses upon the loss and regaining of voice and the universality of nature

<sup>33</sup> Hence the aforementioned reference of the thorn to Ovid among other classical authors. Garrod, H. W. "The Nightingale in Poetry." Pg. 139.

<sup>34</sup> "Romanticism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012.

as a literary metaphor. Keats’ poem “Ode to a Nightingale” was written after his diagnosis with tuberculosis and explores his personal development as a poet through this affliction.<sup>35</sup> He idolizes the nightingale’s effortless song and longs for such ease in his own poetic lyrics. Coleridge’s “The Nightingale,” however, evades a single symbolic interpretation of the nightingale. Instead, he criticizes the longstanding association of the bird with sorrow by saying “A melancholy bird? Oh! Idle thought,/In nature there is nothing melancholy.”<sup>36</sup> In his opinion, the nightingale should be appreciated as an integral part of nature. Both poets allude to the classical symbolism of Philomela but no longer feel the need to pity her suffering.

Since the Romantics depart from the ancient interpretation of the nightingale, it might be hard to believe Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* influenced their entreaties of the bird. Brewer recognizes “Ovid was part of the Romantic and Victorian literary consciousness, but a small and conveniently detachable part. Coleridge and Keats were drawn to him and yet in different ways and with different success tried to establish their distance from his world.”<sup>37</sup> The two authors frequently studied Ovid, as Keats read his works in Latin, but their poems lie further from the Roman myth and closer to their own intuition-based literary movement.<sup>38</sup> The nightingale’s song becomes the author’s song, an empathetic symbol to turn to in times of need. The bird no longer suffers, but rather it “soothes the breast of the sufferer.”<sup>39</sup> Through Keats and Coleridge’s poems, we see the Romantic rebirth for the literary love of nature and placing the nightingale back in its natural habitat, while simultaneously providing their own perceptions of nature.

Noting how he truly “feels nature,” John Keats experiences a poetic connection with the nightingale in the midst of his own emotional turmoil. In “Ode to a Nightingale,” he relies upon his senses other than sight to connect with the nightingale. He cannot see the bird of his envy, but rather he hears it and imagines

<sup>35</sup> Referenced by Garrod but corroborated by Encyclopedia: "John Keats." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Coleridge, Samuel T. "The Nightingale." The Literature Network.

<sup>37</sup> Brewer, Wilmon. *Ovid's Metamorphoses in European Culture*. Pg. 54

<sup>38</sup> Garrod, H. W. "The Nightingale in Poetry". Pg. 144.

<sup>39</sup> Robinson. *Romantic Presences*. Pg. 165.

it. Sitting beneath the tree outside of his home, he says, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet...Darling, I listen.”<sup>40</sup> The nightingale’s song pours over him from the darkness, and as he listens he falls into a state of stupor as “[his] heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.”<sup>41</sup> In these lines, Keats anguishes. He longs for something that he cannot have. He wants the “full-throated ease” of the nightingale and the ability to write poetry as easily as the nightingale can sing.<sup>42</sup> He aches to drink himself into a state euphoria where he can taste the waters of Hippocrene.<sup>43</sup> Hippocrene is a fountain of the Muses that is said to offer poetic inspiration.

Yet, there is an obvious transformation in the nightingale’s symbolism as a result of his jealousy. He sets up a contradiction between the legacy of Ovid’s nightingale and his own desires because he longs for the nightingale’s happiness. Therein lays a contradiction, as Keats frequently read Ovid in Latin. He knew well of Philomela’s tragic story, but he hears a song of happiness that directly contrasts Ovid’s tragic myth. Rather than denying her sorrow, he assumes she must be happy because she does not experience the poet’s pain. As a widely anthropocentric literary movement, the Romantics focused upon themselves. Keats wants what he does not have, a fluidity and ease of expressing thoughts. The nightingale has always clearly established her message throughout history, and he is jealous that her emotions have survived so strongly throughout the centuries.

Although it seems as though Keats recognizes, yet denies, the sorrow that afforded Philomela such an elegant song, he incorporates it into his inabilities, portraying his struggles as physically distressing. Keats begrudges his pain for “Here men sit and hear each other groan ... where but to think is to be full of sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs.”<sup>44</sup> He implies that as men long for inspiration to write, they merely sit statically, growing old in their pursuit. He plays upon the word “groan” to mean both their audible suffering and their inevitable aging into “grown” men. Keats extends beyond the pain of unfruitful thought, however, mentioning the despair of vision, as their eyes grow heavy. Keats notes a distinct difference in his own poetic vision and the nightingale’s song. His

view of the natural scene is impeded by the dark edge of the forest, but he imagines the open view of the nightingale. The nightingale can see the expanse of the tree canopies spilling over into the open sky with the moon beaming down upon the landscape. Keats is envious of this symbolic difference in vision demonstrated through the nightingale’s smooth call. Thus, Keats suffers, no longer the personified Philomela in the nightingale.

Keats final stanza implies, however, that the nightingale’s song provides a cathartic experience that, in reality, acts as a source of poetic inspiration. As the nightingale’s song fades away, he cries, “Forlorn! the very word is like a bell to toll me back from thee to my sole self! Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?”<sup>45</sup> Although Keats laments his inability to express his emotions with the ease of the nightingale, as he wakes from his slumber under the influence of the nightingale, he finds himself having written an ode of almost equal poetic power as the nightingale’s song. The ode encapsulates the frustration behind writing a compelling poem, his fears of mortality, and the connection between poesy and immortality. His experience with the nightingale is cathartic, as though the legacy of Philomela’s suffering eased his own pains. Keats distances the literal connection of the raped girl to the bird and blurs the general pathos of the song with his own sorrow. Keats has effectively deconstructed the symbolism of the nightingale, repurposing her as a useful trope to express his own anguish.

By contrast, Coleridge departs altogether from the poetic connection of the nightingale to Philomela’s emotional despair. While Keats recognizes the nightingale’s heavy emotional burden, Coleridge embodies the true Romantic ideal of loving the purity of nature. In “The Nightingale,” Coleridge too sits amongst nature, but he is able to see his surroundings. Keats’ lack of vision symbolized his impaired poetic vision, a symbolic cutting off of the tongue of inspiration, whereas Coleridge’s lively tone masks any feelings of despair. In fact, as stated before, Coleridge despises the poetic connection with the writer’s emotion and symbols of nature. He proclaims “in Nature there is nothing melancholy. But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced ... made all gentle sounds tell back the tale of his own sorrow.”<sup>46</sup> Coleridge recognizes the legacy of the nightingale throughout

<sup>40</sup> Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale”. 41, 51

<sup>41</sup> Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale”. 1-2

<sup>42</sup> Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale”. 10

<sup>43</sup> Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale”. 16

<sup>44</sup> Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale”. 24, 26-27

<sup>45</sup> Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale”. 71-72, 79-80

<sup>46</sup> Coleridge. “The Nightingale”. 15-16, 19-20

time, and he questions how one extrapolated the song of sorrow from such a unique birdcall. In their desire for expression, poets often seek for a personification of their mood, and Coleridge advocates a separation of human emotion and nature.

Fitting of the Romantics, nature is a setting of repose and self-fulfillment rather than a setting for the wailing song of birds in pain. Amongst nature, he is with his family and young son to whom he seeks to make nature his “play-mate” and that “with the night, he may associate joy.”<sup>47</sup> Emotions surrounding nature passed on from generation to generation, and he wants his son to associate nature with positive images. His ardent support of disconnecting folklore from nature indicates, I argue, a final shift in the nightingale’s symbolism. From Coleridge, we receive the merry nightingale, detached from the pain we have seen for over two millennia.<sup>48</sup>

### THE NIGHTINGALE TAKES FLIGHT: A SHIFT IN POETIC TONE

Why has the nightingale undergone upheavals and transformations through the centuries? I would argue that the image changed out of convenience. As Wilde stated, poets are always searching for the perfect trope to convey their particular emotions.<sup>49</sup> With such a widely used symbol, each author is bound to alter the connotations of the nightingale slightly with each usage. Moreover, one cannot expect that the authors will all have read Philomela. While we know the Romantics read Ovid, what about Chaucer? Although the origins of the thorn with the nightingale are unknown, many scholars date its origins to him.<sup>50</sup> Though Chaucer may have been familiar with Ovid, from him, the symbolism of the thorn splintered even further, developing a new branch of nightingale symbolism. By the time Oscar Wilde receives the image in “The Nightingale and the Rose,” the bird had become a lover, being the “only bird that retains the old romantic spirit, while ‘the student and the girl are, like

most of us, unworthy of love.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, the nightingale shifts from a victim to a sacrificial lover. Over time, symbols shift. To claim that the nightingale has represented an image of sorrow throughout time would be misleading. In the *Metamorphoses* alone, the nightingale’s song is ambiguous and divided into competing gender driven symbols.

Using the nightingale as a case study of the historical development of poetry, shows that both the poet and the time period shape literature. This paper has studied the legacy of the songbird of generations, the nightingale throughout poetry. By analyzing her symbolic imagery and function as a poetic device, the key themes extrapolated shed light upon the writers of that time. Ovid sought to add complexity to gender differences and the sexual role of men and women. He also enjoyed a gruesome story that both captivated and appalled his readers. The Romantics, however, held their own values. They looked to nature and the nightingale as a means of learning about themselves, be it their experience with poetry or cultivating a general appreciation for the natural world. From the Romans to the Romantics, the nightingale continues to sing its unique song however one may hear it.

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<sup>47</sup> Coleridge. “The Nightingale”. 81, 90

<sup>48</sup> Robinson. *Romantic Presences*. Pg. 165.

<sup>49</sup> Wilde: “literary traditions never quite die as long as they serve some expressive purpose.”

<sup>50</sup> Brewer and Garrod

<sup>51</sup> Lutwack. *Birds in Literature*. Pg 19: In the story, the nightingale sacrifices itself for a young boy that needs a red rose for his lover. It sings upon a thorn and its blood dyes the white rose red. The nightingale dies, and the boy gives the girl his red rose, but she doesn’t think it matches with her dress so he throws it away and deems love stupid. (Wilde, Oscar. "The Nightingale and the Rose." *Literature Collection*.)



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