



# 'A GREEN THOUGHT IN A GREEN SHADE': Immaginario letterario e ambiente

*A cura di Roberta Ferrari e Laura Giovannelli*

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# 'A sort of philosophical back garden': Keats's useful plants

Simona Beccone

The relationship between Keats and the green realm is more complex than it appears at first sight. His references to plants are more than occasional pieces of botanical poetry, denotatively conveying his highly specialized expertise in plant taxonomy and the officinal use of herbs, nor can they always be interpreted as symptoms of Keats's allegiance to the conventions of Romantic organicism. On the contrary, they are part of a macrotextual semiotic strategy extending for the whole arch of the poetic production of this author and informing the more profound, structural levels of his poems. Moreover, the phenomenon structurally transposes Keats's ecological and ethical perspectives on the man-nature relationship, on poetry as a life-sustaining agent, on the poet's responsibility in coping with human suffering to preserve life and health.

Keywords: John Keats; medical botany; ecology; nature-text; biosemiotics.

## 1. Keats's 'Philosophical Back Garden'

In a letter to Rice, Keats fancied about having a 'sort of Philosophical Back Garden' (25 March 1818, in *Letters*, I.254)<sup>1</sup> where he could compose good poetry. The image metaphorically depicts the poet's creative imagination as a balanced combination of the more rational and controlled components of the psyche ('Philosophical' and its derivatives is a key Keatsian term for 'reason', 'intellect', 'conscious thought': cf., e.g., *Letters*, II.81 and

<sup>1</sup> The quotations from Keats's letters are taken from H.E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats: 1814-1821* (Cambridge, MA, H.U.P., 1958), 2 vols (indicated here as *Letters*, followed by volume and page numbers). The text of the poems comes from Miriam Allott (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London, Longman, 1995 [1970]), indicated here as *Poems*, followed by volume and page numbers.





*Lamia*, II.230-234) and the more irrational and spontaneous ones ('Garden' alludes to natural growth, 'Back' suggests the seat of the unconscious, figuratively lying behind the conscious, analogously to the 'back garden' behind the family house). As opposed to the 'front garden', the 'back garden' is also the part of the residential space which was destined, still in Keats's times, to the cultivation of the medicinal herbs and plants (see *OED*, entry for 'back-garden': 1.b.). Moreover, in Keats's description, the 'Philosophical Back Garden' is said to be placed behind a particular kind of house: 'a mental Cottage of feelings quiet and pleasant' (*Letters*, I.254).

In this metaphor, four interconnected features emerge both explicitly and by suggestion: a representation, in psychological terms, of a human-nature interaction; the beneficial effects arising from it ('feelings quiet and pleasant'); a rational attitude towards this relationship ('Philosophical'); a domestic space where useful plants grow ('Back Garden'). As this essay will try to show, Keats's 'Philosophical Back Garden' is a semiotically dense image presupposing a wider and coherent vision of nature, man, and health, in which the green realm plays a central role. This vision has been artistically modelled by Keats in his poems, and it can be detected, first of all, at the levels of lexicon and imagery, to which we will now turn.

## 2. The botanical lexicon in Keats's poetry

The extensive, rich and varied use of botanical terms is undoubtedly a distinctive feature of Keats's poetry. More than in any other British Romantic, the references to plants and, more broadly, to the vegetative realm are quantitatively and qualitatively significant.

First of all, even a quick glance at Becker's *Concordance*<sup>2</sup> reveals the high statistical relevance of these occurrences. The concordance shows 253 different entries for the botanical lexicon, for a total of 1.668 lexemes. Among these, 144 are specific (e.g., 'alder', 'cowslip', 'hemlock'), for a total of 579 lexemes; 109 are generic (e.g. 'flower', 'rose', 'stalk'), for a total of 1089 lexemes; 10 entries refer to literary, legendary, or mythological plants and natural substances (e.g. 'narcissus', 'myrrh', 'manna'), for a total

<sup>2</sup> Michael G. Becker *et al.*, *A Concordance to the Poems of John Keats* (Routledge, London and New York, 2016 [1981]).



of 48 lexemes; 7 entries, for a total of 77 lexemes, relate to what may be called 'green architectures', that is vegetable structures, often composed of climbing spontaneous plants, and which exert either the function of contextualising the characters' actions (e.g. the 'jasmine bower', 'all bestrewn/ With golden moss', vaulting over Endymion's sensual embrace with his beloved Cynthia in *Endymion*, l.670-71), or functioning as metaphors for the inner states of the speaker (e.g. the 'branched thoughts' and the 'wreathed trellis of a working brain', occurring in ll. 52 and 60 of the 'Ode to Psyche'; the 'vines', 'poppies' and 'twined flowers' occurring in ll. 4, 17 and 18 of 'To Autumn'). In his poetry, Keats mentions up to 131 different species of plants. His most mentioned and thus presumably favourite plant is the rose (44 occurrences).

Now, respectively, these data represent the 2,10% and 2,78% of the total number of Keats's words (12.000 entries for a total of 60.000 lexemes). This may appear quantitatively insignificant, but if these botanical occurrences are compared with other lexemic groups related to the domain of nature, such as the zoological terms (75 entries, 593 lexemes), things appear significantly different, as these latter are consistently less relevant than the botanic ones (entries: 0,62%; lexemes: 0,98%).

The importance of the green realm in Keats also becomes evident for the high distributive value retained by the botanical lexicon in his poetical writings. As a matter of fact, the references to plants extend over the whole arch of his literary career, from the first poetic productions (1815, 'Imitation of Spenser': 'rose-tree', 33), to the more mature works (e.g. the *Great Odes* of 1819: 62 entries for a total of 72 lexemes), until his last works (e.g. the 'new-budded flower', l. 54 of the 'Ode to Fanny', 1820).

Moreover, Keats's use of this lexicon is highly specialized and varied. First of all, he often prefers the specific, rather than the generic term, besides showing an in-depth knowledge of the fundamentals of plant taxonomy and systematics (*genera*, species, classes, *habitat*). If compared to the generic terms, the domain-specific words taken by Keats from the botanical lexicon are quantitatively more relevant, as they are greater in number (generic terms: 109 different entries; domain-specific terms: 144 different entries). Moreover, the specific terms are also qualitatively relevant, as they denote a wide variety of species and cultural fields. Keats has included in





his works almost every *genus* of the vegetable realm (trees and shrubs; toxic, poisonous, psychotropic plants; aromatic plants and spice; flowers; herbaceous plants; ferns; creepers; watery plants; plants used as food, such as fruits, vegetables, and cereals; mushrooms)<sup>3</sup>. Other botanical references are even hypercoded, since they are culturally biased, as in the case of the literary, legendary, and mythological plants.

Secondly, Keats often opts for more than one synonym for each plant reference. This occurs for instance in the case of his favourite flower, the rose, as he not only mentions the generic term ('rose': 32 occurrences), but he also specifies three different species of this flower: *Rosa canina* ('wild briar' in 'I stood Tip-toe...', 35); *Rosa rubiginosa* ('sweet briar' in 'I stood Tip-toe...', 135; 'eglantine' in *Endymion*, I.100, IV.697; *Isabella*, 188; 'Ode to a Nightingale', 46); *Rosa moschata* ('musk-rose' in 'To a Friend', 6; 'Epistle to My Brother George', 84; *Sleep and Poetry*, 5; *Endymion*, I.19; 'Ode to a Nightingale', 49; 'muskrose' in *Endymion*, IV.102).

Thirdly, Keats even uses a range of technical words (8 entries, 12 lexemes), taken from several disciplinary fields, but all of them related to the semantic field of plants and their practical uses: Chemistry, Botany and *Pharmacopoeia*. Interesting examples of this specific case are: 'distill' ('Imitation of Spenser', 5) and 'distilling' (*Endymion*, II.424, II.944); 'dose' (*The Cap and Bells*, 38.8; 'To Reynolds', 112); 'drug' ('Fill for me a...', 3); 'honied roses' (Sonnet II, 11)<sup>4</sup>; 'rose-water' (*The Cap and Bells*, 48.8)<sup>5</sup>; 'syrups' (*Lamia*, I.107; *The Eve of St. Agnes*, 267); 'tinct' (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, 267)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Taxonomically, mushrooms belong to the kingdom of *Fungi*, and constitute an independent group from that of plants and animals. However, I have included them in this lexical analysis as they are mentioned in all the botanical sources Keats knew and used. See paragraph 4 for further details concerning these sources.

<sup>4</sup> The honey of roses, or *Mel rosae*, was a scented officinal syrup (*OED* entry for 'honey', n.: I.1.c.), made from red rose buds, distilled water and clarified honey.

<sup>5</sup> The rose water, or *Aqua rosae*, is an infusion of distilled water, scented with the essence of roses. It is still used for cosmetic or medicinal purposes (*OED* entry for 'rose', n.: A.1.a).

<sup>6</sup> The lexeme alludes to the *tinctura officinalis*, that is, a solution resulting from the infusion with some substance and having medicinal purposes (*OED* entries for 'tincture', n.: 2.a., and for 'tinct', v.: 2.a.).



### 3. Critical survey on Keats's naturalistic imagery

Although this phenomenon has always attracted much critical attention over the last several decades, it nevertheless continues to resist a definitive explanation. The many critical studies which have been dedicated to it, although accurate and valid, have failed to give a solution to the problem as a whole. This is presumably due to the narrowness of their scope. On the one side, they focus on single plants<sup>7</sup>; on the other, they fail to provide detailed textual analyses of the poems<sup>8</sup>.

As a result, two interpretive trends dominate this field of studies. The 'conventionalist' explanation interprets Keats's botanical references as expressions of his allegiance to the canon of Romantic organicism, as they often convey, metaphorically, the movements of the speaker's psychodynamics<sup>9</sup>. The 'cultural' explanation interprets Keats's references to plants as enactments of his vast botanical knowledge, functional, therefore also subordinate, to the *décor*<sup>10</sup>. This is partly true, as Keats was an expert in botany and *pharmacopoeia*. In the years 1815-17 he received medical training as a surgeon-apothecary at Guy's Hospital, where he successfully studied Anatomy, Physiology, Chemistry, and, even more important, Medical Botany<sup>11</sup>. Besides, he was an experienced gardener, who used to buy ornamental

<sup>7</sup> Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (Oxford and New York, O.U.P., 1991); Gareth Evans, 'Poison Wine – John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy', *K-SR* 16 (2002), pp. 31-55; R.S. White, *John Keats: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Donald G. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* (Pittsburgh, PA, Pittsburgh U.P., 1984); Gareth Evans, 'John Keats, Poet and Herbalist', *Herbs* 23: 2 (1998), pp. 17-19; Gareth Evans, 'Poison Wine – John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy', pp. 31-55.

<sup>9</sup> Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 2012).

<sup>10</sup> John Barnard, 'The Busy Time: Keats's Duties at Guy's Hospital from Autumn 1816 to March 1817', *Romanticism* 13: 3 (2007), pp. 199-218; Mario L. D'Avanzo, *Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination* (Durham, Duke U.P., 1967), pp. 92-107; Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*; Gareth Evans, 'John Keats, Poet and Herbalist', pp. 17-19; Gareth Evans, 'Poison Wine – John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy', pp. 31-55; Donald G. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*; R.S. White, "'Like Esculapius of Old': Keats's Medical Training', *K-SR* 12 (1998), pp. 15-49.

<sup>11</sup> According to De Almeida, Keats was certainly enrolled in the Botany course; see *ibid.*, pp. 147-48. Other critics interpret Keats's botanical references as a result of his direct experience of the effects of psychotropic plants, for instance of the *Atropa belladonna*; see Gianpaolo Sasso, *Il segreto di Keats. Il fantasma della Belle Dame sans merci* (Bologna, Pendragon, 2006).





bulbs for his garden (see, e.g., a letter to Fanny Keats dated 12 April 1819, in *Letters*, II.51). Moreover, Keats extended this way of thinking outside the academic field: in his everyday life he was an enthusiastic taxonomist of the human psyche, one who had the habit of classifying people's characters 'with the calmness of a botanist', as he once declared in a letter to Sarah Jeffrey, dated 9 June 1819 (*Letters*, II.115). Thus, according to the critics mentioned above, he presumably used this knowledge in his poetry to visually strengthen the *imagery* with clear-cut descriptive detail, taken from his everyday experience.

#### 4. A different perspective on Keats's botanical references

Regrettably, these interpretive trends fail to explain the nature of the relationship between Keats and the vegetable realm, as their approach is too simplistic: the former minimizes the importance of these botanical references by limiting them to a mere literary convention, the Romantic one, while the latter reduces them to mere descriptive detail devoid of any structural function. Both features are undoubtedly present in Keats's poetry. However, they remain on the surface of a rather more complex and multifaceted problem: this paper presents the first results of a wider research on this subject.

My investigation has consisted in a systematic detection of all botanical terms used by Keats in his poetry, and in a contrastive analysis of the scientific and literary sources he knew, and used, at the time of the composition of the single poems. Two kinds of sources have been selected, adopting as a criterion the presence of the same plant references Keats mentions in his poetry.

##### 4.1. *Botanical sources*

Keats's botanical knowledge most probably comes from the books included in the *syllabus* of the course of lectures which were read at Guy's Hospital in the years 1815-17, that is, in the period of his medical training.

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However, this position is unconvincing, as there is no documentary evidence of that. What we know for certain is that he had an in-depth knowledge of these effects, due to his medical studies.



Thus it is possible that he could have had access, like his fellow students, to these works on medical botany, since the beginning of his poetic career. Chief among these sources are: J.E. Smith's *English Botany* (1790-1813); William Woodville's *Medical Botany* (1790-94); Robert J. Thornton's *A New Family Herbal* (1810) and *British Flora* (1812); William Salisbury, *The Botanist's Companion* (1816); Andrew Duncan's, *The London Pharmacopoeia* (1815); M.P. Orfila, *A General System of Toxicology* (1815)<sup>12</sup>. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) has often been quoted as a primary source for Keats's knowledge of herbal remedies<sup>13</sup>. In reality, as Goellnicht points out, this treatise was seen as obsolete in the medical circles of the time, until Woodville's *Medical Botany* and Orfila's *Toxicology*<sup>14</sup> gradually replaced it. It is rather plausible that Keats uses Burton more as a source of erudite quotations, including the botanical ones, than of scientific knowledge. In any case, he most probably began his reading of Burton in 1819, when he borrowed a copy of it from Charles Brown<sup>15</sup>, thus in the same period of the composition of the *Great Odes*.

#### 4.2. Classical sources

Even if Keats knew Latin, and was also awarded, in his schooldays (presumably in 1810) of a silver medal for translating a large part of Virgil's *Aeneid*<sup>16</sup>, most of his knowledge of classical literature comes from English translations (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, translated by Sandys in 1626, was a major source) and mythological handbooks on classical literature and culture. Two of the latter, John Potter's *Antiquities of Greece* (1775) and John Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788), include references to the plants Keats mentions in his poetry; thus they have been selected for this study.

<sup>12</sup> As for the latter, the library of Guy's Hospital (Physical Society) acquired a translated copy of Orfila's *Toxicology* in 1815, thus again in concomitance with Keats's medical training. See Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*, p. 351, note 13.

<sup>13</sup> Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*, pp. 74-78 and Michael Holstein, 'Keats: The Poet-Healer and the Problem of Pain', *K-SJ* 36 (1987), pp. 32-49.

<sup>14</sup> See Donald G. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*, pp. 172-73.

<sup>15</sup> See Frank Owings, Jr., *The Keats Library: A Descriptive Catalogue* (London, Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, 1978), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Walter J. Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 1963), pp. 25-26.



If seen contrastively, these sources and the botanical references in Keats's poetry display two significant facts, so far neglected by critics. First of all, most of the botanical terms occurring in the poems refer to *useful plants*, that is, either officinal plants included in the *Materia Medica*, or plants which were commonly employed, in Keats's times, in a variety of everyday purposes (culinary, dyeing, ornamental). Secondly, Keats's useful plants are closely related to specific characters and enunciative voices, when they enact the actantial function of helping others by nursing them back to health, either by personifying specific officinal herbs and properties or by simply using plants as medicaments (either by direct use or by prescribing them as drugs).

The activation of the officinal properties of useful plants in Keats's writing is an expressive paradigm which reoccurs regularly and extensively in the artistic production of the author. As we will see, on the macrostructural plane of meaning this activation is metaphorically enacted by Keats as the recurrent image of drug administration, that is, as an action of giving a therapeutic agent, in this case the officinal properties of plants, to someone having the role of a patient, in order to nurse him (i.e. curing, healing). At the microtextual level of meaning, this administration takes two recurrent and interchangeable forms, depending on the subjects involved and the level of meaning in which the officinal properties become perceivable in the texts. The first form of administration takes place intradiegetically, at the actantial level, since it can be detected when a character cures another character, either by using single officinal plants or by recurring to more complex herbal remedies. The second kind of administration consists in the medical prescription of an officinal plant or herbal remedy. This action is performed either by the narrating voice or by the speaker. In both cases, this administration becomes perceivable at the level of voice and affects the extradiegetic level, in the text-reader axis, as both the narrator and the speaker address the reader when they give their officinal instructions. The main difference between the two is that in the case of the narrator the advice is given for the benefit of the characters, while in the case of the speaker the prescription is made to cure the reader. Let us see these cases in more detail.



### 5. Intradiegetic plane. One character cures another character

Interesting examples occur in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (264-70), in *Isabella* (413-16) and in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' (25-28). Reasons of space prevent me from discussing these passages in detail. I will thus concentrate on the latter, as it is the most interesting and controversial case in this group.

In 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' (25-28), a mysterious elfin Lady, the 'Belle Dame' of the title, administers the protagonists, the 'knight-at-arms' (1, 5), three natural substances: 'roots of relish sweet/And honey wild and manna dew' (25-26). Why does she act so and why does she use these natural substances? Many different interpretations have been given, but none definitive (Utley 1958; Williams 1966; Twitchell 1975; Devine 1989; Bennett 1990). In my opinion, she performs this action to cure him of the effects of a poisonous plant with whom he has just come into contact. When I cross-referenced these three syntagms ('roots of relish sweet', 'honey wild' and 'manna dew') with the texts of the *syllabus*, I found that they occur as the main ingredients of a *single* natural remedy.

In Thornton's *New Family Herbal* and in Duncan's *London Pharmacopoeia*, 'root' and 'honey' are mentioned among other ingredients in the recipe for an officinal remedy known as 'oxymel colchici', an expectorant which was used to cure the affections of the respiratory system and some dropsies, such as the *hydrothorax* (*Fam. Herb.*, 363; *Lon. Pharm.*, III. 626). According to Thornton, this remedy has to be prepared by using the root ('radix') of Meadow Saffron (*Colchicum autumnale*) and distilled vinegar (*Fam. Herb.*, 363). Since this preparation has an unpleasant taste, he recommends to sweeten it with honey (*Fam. Herb.*, 363; *Lon. Pharm.*, III.626), to make it 'sufficiently grateful' to the palate (*Fam. Herb.*, 363). In another passage of his treatise, Thornton mentions another oxymel, in this case prepared with the root of Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*: *Fam. Herb.*, 34-36), and useful to heal nervous disorders, such as 'epilepsies, proceeding from a debility of the nervous system' (*Fam. Herb.*, 35). In this case, also, the text recommends the use of a saccharine substance to sweeten the 'unpleasant flavour' of this preparation (*Fam. Herb.*, 36). In addition to the usual 'honey' (*Fam. Herb.*, 36), Thornton mentions another substance which was commonly added to sweeten remedies of this kind, and which even exerted 'good effects on epilepsies' (*Fam. Herb.*, 36): 'manna' (*Fam. Herb.*, 36). Again, a contrastive





analysis shows the presence, in both the poem and the botanical texts of the *syllabus*, of the same triad of lexemes ('root', 'honey', 'manna'), reoccurring in a similar context (medical botany, that is, the use of plants as medications). Thus it is possible that Keats had these oxymels in mind when he made the elfin Lady administer these substances to the knight.

As for 'manna dew', Keats probably remembered, quite neatly, a key passage of Woodville's *Medical Botany*, in which the author clearly distinguishes between the Biblical manna (Exodus 16:1-36; Numbers 11:1-9) and the juice which is obtained from the bark of the *Fraxinus hornus*, or Flowering ash (*Fam. Herb.*, 871-72), that is the botanical manna. In this passage, Woodville (*Med. Bot.*, IV.592) calls the first one as '*mel aërium*' and 'honey-dew', while the latter is indicated as the '*succus proprius* of the tree' (*Med. Bot.*, IV.592), which 'trasudes' from its bark after this latter has been cut into an oblong incision (*Med. Bot.*, IV.593). When Keats wrote 'manna dew', he could have had in mind Woodville's description of this natural substance, since the botanical manna gradually runs out from this wound as a liquid substance, and one transferred meaning of 'dew' is 'moisture...', especially that which appears in minute drops on any surface or exudes from any body' (*OED*, entry for 'dew', *n.*: 3.a.).

The intertextual connection between Woodville's *Medical Botany* and Keats's 'honey wild and manna dew' becomes even more clear when we compare this passage with the poem's *Draft* (*Letters*, II.96). In this latter, line 26 has 'honey dew', while in the last version the syntagm has been split into 'honey wild' and 'manna dew'. This suggests that Keats had initially in mind the Biblical context and then opted for the ambit of medical botany, since now 'dew' became part of the syntagm referring to the manna, as it occurred in Woodville, and 'honey' was no more the '*mel aërium*' of the Jews, but instead the more earthly (as well as officinal) 'honey wild' of line 26.

Besides, 'honey wild', that is, honey produced by wild bees, was used in Keats's time to sweeten several officinal preparations, especially oxymels (*Lon. Phar.*, 626; *Fam. Herb.*, 497). Thus, when we read 'honey wild' in line 26 of the poem, we should imagine that the elfin Lady is presumably using raw honey as an ingredient to her herbal remedy.

As for 'relish sweet' (25), 'relish' occurs in the medical sources in a gustatory context and refers to the taste of officinal remedies containing sac-



charine substances, such as honey and manna (see, e.g., *Lon. Pharm.*, II.158). Thus it is probable that in the poem the lexeme alludes to the taste of the Lady's preparation ('sweet'), and that it has been employed by Keats to suggest an oxymel.

One last element corroborates the hypothesis that the Keatsian 'roots of relish sweet', 'honey wild' and 'manna dew' may be reminiscent of the principal components of a single oxymel, or officinal remedy. In line 35, the Knight falls asleep not only as a consequence of the verbal and musical incantations of the Lady ('a fairy's song', 24, "I love thee true", 28; 'And there she lulled me asleep', 32), but also, as an effect of the three natural substances she has administered to him in ll. 25-26. This becomes evident as one common ingredient of oxymels, the root of the *Valeriana officinalis*, is often reported as having mild sedative effects (see, e.g., *Fam. Herb.*, 35).

Now, if the Lady is administering the knight an officinal remedy, what kind of disease is she trying to cure? The answer to this question can be found *semeiotically*, that is, through the accurate detection of the symptoms of a disease which the male character manifests since the beginning of the poem (Stanzas I-III), as an effect of his encounter with the Lady.

These symptoms are: 1. Dehydration, as the adjective 'haggard' (6) denotatively indicates, and as the barren natural landscape, which contextualizes the main action in the first three stanzas, metaphorically suggests<sup>17</sup>; 2. Psychosomatic impairment, such as anguish ('anguish moist', 10); 3. Aphasia: he is in a state of *stupor* as he remains silent and still ('loitering', 2), instead of answering the questions of the speaker; 4. Paleness: as 'palely loitering' (2) explicitly indicates, and as suggested by logical implication in the image of the 'rose' (11) which in turn stands for the complexion of the knight's cheeks, and is now losing its colour ('fading', 12); 5. Fever ('fever dew', 10).

As can be found in Keats's medical sources, these symptoms are common in intoxications after the internal assumption of the berries of a specific wild plant: the *Atropa belladonna* (*Fam. Herb.*, 178; *Lon. Phar.*, II.196-

<sup>17</sup> The natural environment is dry and lifeless (the 'sedge has withered from the lake', 3), silent ('no birds sing', 4) and sick (the metaphorical 'lily', which is on the knight's brow and represents his pallor, exudes illness, as it is '[w]ith anguish moist and fever-dew', 9 and 10; a 'rose', which is on his cheeks and metaphorically stands for the colour of his complexion, is 'fading' and 'withereth', 11-12).





98; *Toxicol.*, 268-69). Thus it is plausible that the Lady is trying to cure him of this intoxication by administering a medicinal drink, or oxymel, and accompanying it with incantations, due to her fairy, thus also magical, nature. In other words, she appears to be a healer more than a sorcerer, since she is seemingly trying to cure the knight of his sickness, not to cause it.

### 6. Text-reader axis. Prescription of officinal plants or herbal remedies: speaker to reader; narrator to reader

An interesting example of the first case (speaker to reader) occurs in the 'Ode on Melancholy' (1-5), where the speaker makes a prescription as he advises the reader to use two officinal plants to cure melancholy ('morning rose', 15; 'globed peonies', 17). At the same time, he warns him against the use of a different class of herbal remedies, the poisonous and psychotropic ones ('Wolf's-bane', 'nightshade' and 'yew-berries', 2, 3 and 5)<sup>18</sup>, which he considers to be useless and, worse, noxious ('No, no', 1), although plants of this kind were still commonly used in Keats's time as remedies against melancholy (see, e.g., *Fam. Herb.*, 56 and 184)<sup>19</sup>. An example of the second case (narrator to reader) occurs in *Lamia*, II.221-29. Reasons of space prevent me from discussing both instances. Therefore, I will concentrate on the second one, as it has been so far neglected by critics.

In *Lamia*, the narrator's prescription occurs in concomitance with the tragic ending of the story: *Lamia*, the beautiful serpent-woman, magically takes the form of a beautiful maiden (I.145-70), to marry her beloved Lycius, who returns her feelings. During their wedding banquet, Apollonius, an old philosopher and Lycius's stern master, finally kills her by breaking

<sup>18</sup> The wolf's bane is the *Aconitum lycoctonum* (see, e.g., *Toxicol.*, 221). The term 'nightshade' is related in the sources to either the *Solanum nigrum* (*Med. Bot.*, 37; *Toxicol.*, 267), or the enchanters' nightshade ('*Circaea lutetiana*': *Bot. Comp.*, 10), or again the deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*: *Bot. Comp.*, 19). As for the 'yew berries', they correspond to the fruits of the *Taxus baccata* (*Bot. Comp.* IV.41) which, according to the sources, contain a 'stupefying narcotic poison' (*Toxicol.*, 8). In Keats's epoch, the psychotropic effects of these plants were widely known: the *Aconitum lycoctonum* causes 'vertigoes': *Toxicol.*, 221), the nightshade is a narcotic poison (*Solanum nigrum*: *Toxicol.*, 8; *Atropa belladonna*: *Lond. Pharm., Mat. Med.*, II.198), the Yew berries are poisonous (*Taxus baccata*: *Bot. Comp.*, 41; *Toxicol.*, 269).

<sup>19</sup> The use of narcotic poisons and opiates ('poppy', 'henbane', 'nightshade') to cure melancholy is also mentioned in Burton's *Anatomy*, Part II, Sect. 5, Sub.VI.



the illusion and unveiling her true form to his pupil (II.157-311). In the midst of these tragic events, the narrator prescribes a treatment to each of the three protagonists, to help them to deal with suffering. Firstly he advises Lamia to use the leaves of 'willow' (II.224), and of 'adder's tongue' (II.224), to cure her 'aching forehead' (II.223). To heal Lycius from his grief, he prescribes 'the thyrsus' (II.225), as it will induce in him a state of psychic sedation ('that his watching eyes may swim/Into forgetfulness', II.26-27). Before moving to Apollonius, let us examine these two first prescriptions.

The 'willow' (II.224) presumably corresponds to the *Salix alba*, or Common white willow, whose leaves and bark were commonly used, since antiquity, to relieve pain and fever (see, e.g., *Fam. Herb.*, 830), due to the high concentration of Salycic acid. On the other side, 'adder's tongue' (II.224) is the common name of the *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, a fern of the family of *Ophioglossaceae*, whose vulnerary properties had been long known since ancient times: Smith says that it is 'famous for curing wounds and ulcers' and that 'its powder is good for ruptures' (*Engl. Bot.*, II.108). Therefore, while the 'willow' is an excellent therapeutic choice for Lamia's 'aching forehead' (II.223), the 'adder's tongue' is selected by the narrator to cure the psychological side of her affliction, as in the case of this unfortunate maiden the wounds are not merely physical but most of all emotional. Thus, in both cases, not only does the narrator show an in-depth knowledge of medical botany, but also, he is seemingly acting holistically, as he is trying to cure both the body and the mind of his patient, by using, respectively, the official properties of the willow and the adder's tongue.

As for Lycius's cure, Keats presumably found the 'thyrsus' (225) in Potter's *Antiquities of Greece*, where this object is described as a '[w]and or staff of giant fennel (*Ferula communis*), covered with ivy vines and leaves' (*Ant. Gr.*, 359). In this same treatise, there is also an illustration showing a Dionysian feast with a Bacchanthe holding a thyrsus (628). Besides, in Thornton, we learn that the giant fennel, thus one of the plants which the *tyrsus* is composed of, is an emmenagogue, that is, it exerts psychologically stimulating effects (*Fam. Herb.*, 286). The other plant forming the *thyrsus*, the 'ivy' (*Hedera helix*), is instead a good cathartic. As Salisbury notes (*Bot. Comp.*, VIII.86) the leaves are good for curing 'ichorus sores', while the ancients used the berries as purgative, emetic, diaphoretic and alexiphar-





mic agents. Keats presumably noted the analogical connection between the officinal properties of both the giant fennel and the ivy (emmenagogue, cathartic), and the excitement of the Dionysian mood which is implied in Potter's description of the Baccanthe and her thyrsus. Neurophysiologically, in both cases a lessening of all tensions through the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system – that is the part of the autonomous nervous system which is responsible (among other functions) of excitement, as it accelerates heart rate and raises blood pressure – is induced. Thus the narrator's prescription against Lycius's sorrow is the result of an inventive condensation of these classical and botanical sources. Moreover, Keats also mentions another psychosomatic effect of the narrator's cure, which is also consistent with the officinal properties of the two plants, as well as of the Dionysian mode: 'forgetfulness' (II.27). In both cases, excitement (either produced phytotherapeutically or with the wine and dance of Dionysian festivals) lowers the level of consciousness, thus causing memory alterations, such as transitory forgetfulness: a proper remedy for Lycius's sorrow.

The narrator's expertise in the matter of medical botany also becomes evident in the prescription he makes for Apollonius: a dose of 'spear-grass' and 'spiteful thistle' (II.28). The compound 'spear-grass' is a rare case of Keatsian vagueness in the use of the botanical lexicon. The term may indicate, in English, different plants and species (*Triticum repens*, *Agrostis*, *Alopecurus agrestis*, *Poa pratensis* etc.: *OED*, n.: 2. and 3.a). In any case, the compound activates, in these lines, the PAIN paradigm, as it alludes to something which 'stings'.

An analogous suggestion can be detected in the relatively more precise 'spiteful thistle' (II.28). The syntagm alludes to the Holy thistle, or *Centaurea benedicta*, a plant having 'spined leaves with spinous teeth' (*Fam. Herb.*, 725). When we consider the officinal uses of this plant, a second paradigm, that of CATHARSIS, also becomes evident. Thornton says that the *Centaurea* is a good 'emetic', whose 'leaves have a penetrating bitter taste, not very strong or very durable', and that it was commonly used 'to provoke vomiting' (*Fam. Herb.*, 725). The narrator's prescription thus seemingly combines the literal meaning of the names of these plants ('spear', 'spiteful'), and the emetic virtues of the 'spiteful thistle'. The narrator's





attitude towards the unfortunate lovers and their tragic destiny is, as it occurs regularly in Keats, sympathetic, as he always sides with them (the same happens in *Endymion*, *Isabella*, and in *The Eve of St. Agnes*). Thus, this remedy functions as a stylistic device Keats uses to convey, expressively, the narrator's unfavourable attitude towards the *villain* Apollonius: strong condemnation and a consequent propensity to punish his character, by pharmacologically purging him from the fault of having caused the painful breaking up of the couple.

As we have seen, in both the administration and the prescription of herbs, the activation of the botanical code is explicit and made perceivable at the more manifest levels of the text (actantial in the first case, at the level of voice in the second). In both cases, we thus speak of a *direct administration* of the officinal properties of useful plants.

In other textual instances, on the contrary, the code of medical botany is implied by suggestion, and the levels of meaning involved are either the character's phenomenology or the topical space which contextualizes the main action. In this second case, to which we will now turn, the activation of the officinal properties of useful plants takes the form of an *indirect administration*.

## 7. Indirect administration

In Keats's poetry, the indirect administration of useful plants becomes regularly perceivable in two forms: 1. Personification; 2. Paradigmatic presentation of the officinal properties of herbs and plants through the naturalistic spatial signifier.

### 7.1. Personification

This feature follows three governing rules.

7.1.a.) First of all, given a specific officinal plant, either the common or the scientific name becomes the character's proper name. Examples abound all over Keats's poetry, some of them are conventional, others are more interesting for their originality.

The male characters are relatively more conventional, as they often come from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As it is well known, in Ovid's work





as well as in the myths which constitute Keats's source, personified wild plants abound. Keats merely takes up these figures and incorporates their stories in his works: for instance, Adonis (*Endymion*, II.479-919) embodies the scarlet *Adonis autumnalis* (*Bot. Comp.*, entry for 'Adonis corn'); Hyacinthus (*Endymion*, I.328 and IV.68) shares the scientific name of the homonymous ornamental flower; the 'serenely peeping' Narcissus, who inspires the Poet in 'I Stood Tip-toe...' 164 and 180, alludes by analogy to the *Narcissus poeticus*, or *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* (*Bot. Comp.*, 'Appendix', 202).

Among the female characters related to the ambit of botany, some are again conventional: Circe (*Endymion*, III.412-665) comes from Homer's *Odyssey*, and her name alludes to the *Circaea*, or Enchanter's nightshade (*Brit. Fl.*, 28; *Bot. Comp.*, 10); Syrinx ('I Stood Tip-toe...', 157; *Endymion*, I.243; IV.686) comes again from Ovid, and her name is a loan translation of the *Syringa vulgaris* (*Bot. Comp.*, 153). On the contrary, two female figures are relatively more complex and thus interesting: Endymion's sister, Peona and the elfin Lady in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'.

Peona (*Endymion* I.407-52, 489-539; IV.801-1003) presumably bears part of the scientific name of the *Paeonia officinalis* (Common peony: *Fam. Herb.*, 544). At the same time, her name is most probably a loan word from the mythological Paeon, the physician of the gods. In a major source for *Endymion*, Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, Keats most probably learned that Paeon was a 'celebrated physician who cured the wounds which the gods received during the Trojan war' (*Class. Dict.*, entry for 'Paeon'). The connection between Peona and the ambit of medical botany is even still detectable in Lemprière, when he adds that from Paeon 'physicians [were] sometimes called Paeonii, and *herbs serviceable in medicinal processes, Paeoniae herbae*' (*Class. Dict.*, entry for 'Paeon'; italics mine).

The elfin Lady in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is not only a figure Keats took from Alain Chartier's homonymous poem of 1424. As an expert in medical botany and one who had a working knowledge in Italian, he could not have overlooked the fact that 'Belle Dame' bears part of the scientific name of the *Atropa belladonna* (Deadly nightshade). In Italian, 'bella donna' means 'a handsome lady' and, as Keats could have read in Pulteney's history of this plant, in ancient times Italian women used this plant as a cosmetic,



often to make their pupils large and shiny, hence the name<sup>20</sup>. Thus, it is possible that the character's name is a loan word from the scientific name of the plant.

**7.1.b.)** The second governing rule is that the taxonomic characteristics and the *habitat* of the plant are structurally transposed in the character phenomenology. This occurs, for example, in the case of Narcissus ('I Stood Tip-toe...', 164-80), who is depicted in a secluded, shady place ('A little space, with boughs all woven round;/And in the midst of all, a clearer pool', 167-68), thus in the *habitat* which, according to the botanical sources (e.g. *Bot. Comp.*, 202, n. 33), is most favourable for the cultivation of the corresponding flower. Among the female characters, the case of Peona is significant: she is described as living with her brother Endymion in a forest at the 'sides of Latmos' (*Endymion*, l.63), that is, in a woody and mountainous region, thus in the same *habitat* of the *Paeonia officinalis* (*Med. Bot.*, 91).

Another interesting instance is again represented by the elfin Lady of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', who is found by the Knight in the 'meads' (13). As the first draft shows, Keats's first choice in this line was 'wilds' (*Letters* II.95). In both cases, the two lexemes describe quite accurately, even though synthetically, this plant's *habitat* (wild places: *Fam. Herb.*, 176) and meadows. As for the latter, we should take into account that Keats well knew the *habitat* of the *Atropa*. Salisbury, the author of *The Botanist's Companion* (1816), was also medical botany lecturer at Guy's in the years of Keats's studies (1815-16). Besides, he was well known for his practical botanical excursions at Chelsea and Battersea (De Almeida 1991, pp. 24 and 167), in which Keats most probably participated. The detailed account of Salisbury's botanical excursions appears in *The London Medical and Physical Journal*. In one of these accounts, the *Atropa belladonna* is recorded as having been observed by the group in Battersea Fields and Wandsworth Common on August 21st, 1816 (*Med. Phys. Journ.*, 35.259). At that time, these London areas were mostly occupied by waste places and meadows (Hobhouse 1971, 437). Thus

<sup>20</sup> Among the periodicals, the Guy's Physical Society Library hold by 1816, was the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*, p. 30). In one issue of this journal, Richard Pultney reports this information on the etymological origin and cultural uses of the *Atropa belladonna*: *Phil. Trans.*, 50. XII. (1758), p. 62.





it is probable that Keats had this *habitat* in his mind when he depicted the natural landscape of line 13.

The connection between the Lady and the plant's taxonomy becomes detectable phenomenologically, in the presentation of her physical appearance. The three descriptive details mentioned by Keats ('[h]er hair was long, her foot was light,/And her eyes were wild', 15-16) are consistent with the parts of a plant (leaves, roots and flowers/fruits, respectively) which the taxonomist usually takes into account for classification and, more precisely, with the morphological structure of the *Atropa belladonna*. If seen analogically, these parts correspond to the descriptive details of the Lady's body (leaves-hair, root-feet, flowers/berries-eyes) mentioned in these lines. The fact that the Lady has long hair, light feet and wild eyes match with the main taxonomical characteristics of the *Atropa belladonna*, as this plant has light-coloured roots (usually white), and long, ovate leaves (6-20 cm long). Her wild eyes (16, 31) are most probably a descriptive detail suggesting the plant's shiny black berries. Contrastive analysis with the botanical sources makes this connection with the semantic field of the eyes apparent for two reasons: the infusions of the *Atropa* were employed in the operations for the cataract, as it dilates the uvea (*Fam. Herb.*, 177; this is due to the atropine, a vasodilating alkaloid); the Italian etymology of the name, as we have seen, is also semantically related to the eyes.

In this connection, the adjective 'wild' (16, 31) may thus allude to the fact that the *Atropa belladonna* is a *wild* plant, that is, a plant 'growing in a state of nature; not cultivated' (*OED* 'wild', *adj.*: I., 2; *Lon. Phar.*, II.197) and the same applies, by extension, to the parts of the plant, thus also to its berries.

**7.1.c.)** The third governing rule of personifications is that the officinal properties of the plant become the narrative program of the character who personifies it. His or her sole presence in the scene exerts specific effects on both the context of situation in which the main action takes place and at the level of plot.

For instance, the curative properties of the *Paeonia* ('anodyne and corroborant': *Med. Bot.*, 544) become the positive effects Peona exerts on her brother Endymion: her sole presence in the space of action calms his ecstatic visions, which in turn could lead him to death if protracted. During his ecstatic raptures Endymion often appears 'wan, and pale, and with an



awed face', in a state of 'self-same fixed trance', with his senses 'swooned off' (I.398), 'dead-still as a marble man' (I.405). He slowly revives after the appearance of his sister, who patiently cures him ('Endymion was calmed to life again', I.465) and relieves his pain (I.407-65), thus exerting, in fact, the same officinal properties possessed by the *Paeonia*, according to the sources: invigorating and painkilling (*Med. Bot.*, 544).

An analogous but at the same time more complex case is that of the Lady in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', as she embodies at the same time both the healing powers of nature and the noxious properties of the *Atropa belladonna*.

The berries, or *eyes*, of the *Atropa*, as well as the other parts of the plant, such as the leaves, are functionally ambivalent, as they are both officinal (thus also curative) but at the same time poisonous (thus noxious). In the sources, the effects of the *Atropa* are said to be 'alternate', thus in fact uncontrollable and unpredictable (*Bot. Comp.*, 51-52), as when they are taken externally they are curative, while if they are taken internally, they are toxic, if not even deadly. So the authors advise to use the berries with 'greatest' (*Lon. Phar.*, *Materia Medica* II.198) and 'extreme' (*Fam. Herb.* 180) caution. This is consistent with the use of 'wild' as a predicative of the Lady's eyes, as in English one meaning of this adjective relates to the semantic field of something which cannot be restrained, predicted (*OED*: 'wild', adj., II.6.: 'uncontrolled').

Thus, in the poem, 'wild' may also point to the difficulty of managing the virtues and unavoidable side effects of this *merciless* plant, as it is both curative and noxious. In this connection, the chemical ambivalence of the *Atropa* is structurally transposed by Keats at the actantial level, in the form of the Lady's ambiguous behaviour. When she is supposedly taking the Knight into her 'thrall' (40), she also weeps and mourns ('[she] made sweet moan', 'she wept and sighed full sore', 20 and 30). Why does she act so? Presumably, as she is well aware of the effects she unwillingly exerts on humans. As a specimen of the *Atropa belladonna*, this is part of her essential and inescapable nature. If seen through the botanist's lens, thus the Lady is more similar to an unfortunate mistress who, like Lamia, cannot live with her human lover without causing him suffering and distress, than to an evil sorcerer. The pathetic effect conveyed in this poem is even deepened when she, as we





have seen, tries in vain to cure the Knight with a herbal remedy against the effects she has produced in him.

The connection with medical botany also explains why the Knight kisses the Lady's wild eyes in ll. 31-32 ('I shut her wild wild eyes/With kisses four'): this is an imaginative description of the intake, by the character, of the berries-eyes of the *Atropa*. Since this assumption is made internally, as the reference to the kisses, thus to the mouth, suggests, the result is an almost fatal intoxication. This is consistent with the descriptions of the effects exerted by the berries in those who, in the past, took them internally (*Fam. Herbal.*, 177-78). Thornton even specifies that 'three or four berries' are not sufficient to kill, but also that if more are swallowed, then intoxication occurs (*Fam. Herb.*, 177-78). Thus, the Knight's 'kisses four', and his subsequent distressing sleep full of nightmares (33-42) may suggest that he has swallowed up to the maximum quantity beyond which the *Atropa belladonna* becomes firstly soporific, then hallucinogenic (*Fam. Herb.*, 177-78). In the same passage, Thornton also reports several anecdotes related to historical cases of intoxications after the ingestion of the berries: all of them involve soldiers ('Roman soldiers ... under the command of Anthony', 'Scots', 'Danes'), and even a Shakespearian general ('Banquo', from *Macbeth*). Keats thus may have taken these descriptions as a source for the characters which, in turn, populate the horrific dream of ll. 37-42. The almost dead and pale 'kings', 'princes' (37), and 'warriors' (38) have thus been caught in the Lady's 'thrall' (40), since they have eaten her berries-eyes. As we have seen, the reference to botany also explains what ails the knight, as the symptoms of the intoxication after the *Atropa*, reported in the sources, are consistent with the psychosomatic impairment he manifests since the beginning of this poem.

## 7.2. *Lexical clusters*

In other instances (*Endymion* I.861-888, I.552-671, *Isabella* 297-304, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci') the useful or officinal plants composing the natural landscape which, in turn, contextualizes the main action, serve as vehicles to convey key information on either a) the development of the plot or b) the character phenomenology. In this case, specific lexical clusters related to the semantic field of botany transmit this information paradigmatically,



so that the reader has to decode it by detecting the properties of the single plants and then combining them into a coherent semiotic core. This information is destined to be decoded by the (informed) reader while at the same time it is precluded to the characters. These latter remain unaware, as they are unable to interpret the natural landscape through the lens of medical botany, as the reader does, or hopefully should do!

7.2.a.) *Information concerning the plot.* Significant examples occur in *Endymion* (I.881-83) and *Isabella* (297-304). Lack of space prevents me from discussing both passages in full: in what follows, I will thus analyse the first one.

In a key passage of the poem, Endymion tells his sister Peona about his boyhood (*Endymion*, I.861-88). Among his recollections, he describes of one of his favourite pastimes: a game consisting in making toy ships by using different materials found in the woods: 'ships/Of moulted feathers, touchwood, alder chips,/With leaves stuck in them' (*Endymion*, I.881-83).

Apart from the 'moulted feathers', which belong to the animal realm, we find three botanical references in this description: 'touchwood', 'alder chips' (I.881) and 'leaves' (I.883). The first lexeme, 'touchwood', alludes to a mushroom, the *Boletus ignarius*, or Agaric (*Med. Bot.*, 159-60; *Mat. Med.*, 207-208). In the image of the poem, it has been presumably used by the child as the hull of the ship, due to its particular shell-like shape. On the other side, 'alder' refers to a tree, the *Prinos verticillatus*, also known as Black Alder or Winter Berry (*Mat. Med.*, 350-51). In the image of the poem, the alder, presumably its bark, has been split into thin strips, the 'chips' referred to in I.882. In the toy-ship, the Alder chips may correspond to the masts of the vessel, while the 'leaves' (I.883) struck in them can easily pretend to be the sails.

In my opinion, the child's play which is referred to in this passage of the poem is the vehicle for a composite metaphor for the components of the creative psyche which is taking its first, tentative steps in the child's mind and which will reach its full accomplishment, later, at the end of the poem (IV. 977-1003).

As it is widely known, the Keatsian Endymion, the Moon lover, is a metaphor for the Romantic poet in search of a stable grasp of his imaginative insight. His Wordsworthian wanderings 'in uncertain ways' (*Endymion*,





II.48), on the earth (Book I), in the subterranean regions (Book II), beneath the sea (Book III), and in the air (Book IV), is a metaphor for the noetic and gnostic path of self-individuation he has to pursue in depth to finally reach his goal<sup>21</sup>. The description of the toy ship is part of a longer monologue in which Endymion tells Peona of his long-lasting love for the moon goddess Cynthia, in which he recollects the most significant episodes of his past (*Endymion*, I.466-989). The supernatural maiden embodies, in the form of a coy and beautiful mistress, the tos and fros of Endymion's creative insight, as well as the wavelike course of the poet's mind, he in turn allegorically embodies<sup>22</sup>.

The image of the toy ship should be read as part of this macrotextual metaphor on the development of the creative psyche. Through this pastime, Endymion, now a child, is unknowingly simulating his future fate of imaginative and poetic accomplishment, similarly as it occurs with children, who experience real, adult life in the simulation of play and through the psychological projections allowed by toys. This is corroborated by the fact that the image of the ship is a favourite Keatsian metaphor for the creative psyche. In a well-known letter to Benjamin Bailey, two of the three creative functions of the poet's mind ('fancy', 'invention', and 'imagination') are equalled by Keats to the parts of a ship pointing northwards, in the direction of the Polar Star: 'A long poem is a test of invention which I take to be the Polar star of poetry, as fancy is the sails, and imagination the rudder' (*Letters* I.169-70). Keats wrote this letter on 8 October 1817, when he was finishing the composition of *Endymion* (c. 28 November 1817; see *Poems*, 116). The 'long poem' he refers to in the letter is *Endymion*. Thus it is plausible that the image of the ship, mentioned in this letter to describe, metaphorically, the different functions of the creative psyche, is the same Keats uses in his poem as a diegetic clue, in order to cataphorically anticipate the character's future: his erotic and aesthetic quest, his union with Cynthia.

<sup>21</sup> See Christoph Loreck, *Endymion and the 'Labyrinthian Path to Eminence in Art'* (Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> See, among others, Stuart M. Sperry, 'The Allegory of "Endymion"', *Studies in Romanticism* 2: 1 (1962), pp. 38-53.





Additional evidence for this is in the fact that the 'feathers', which stand for the sails of the ship ('fancy' in the letter to Bailey), may constitute an anticipatory allusion to the aerial means of the journey Endymion is about to undertake and which will lead the protagonist to his goal. As it is well known, in Book IV he will fly on a 'jet-black' (IV.343) horse with 'blue wings' (IV.344) to finally meet Cynthia (IV.362-1003).

As we have seen, the naturalistic detail forms here a lexical cluster composed by Keats to convey key information on the future development of the plot. This information is destined to be decoded by a highly informed reader, while the character is at the moment unaware of what all this could mean to him: Endymion will understand the meaning of all these events much later, at the very end of the poem, in IV. 977-1003, when he finally reaches a stable grasp with his beloved vision, Cynthia.

**7.2.b.) Information concerning the characters.** In other instances, lexical clusters related to medical botany function as clues suggesting, through expressive use of the spatial signifier, key information on the real ontological situation of the main characters. Examples abound throughout the whole production of this author, as almost every plant reference in Keats is, at the phenomenological level of meaning, a botanical correlative of the characters' psyche.

A well-known instance occurs in 'La Belle Same Sans Merci', Stanzas I-III, where the botanical references ('sedge', 3; 'lily', 9; 'rose', 11) are too generic to be clearly identified<sup>23</sup>. However, and as we have seen, they still convey, metaphorically, the psychosomatic disorder of the 'knight-at-arms' (1, 5) resulting from his coming into contact with the dangerous Lady. The sedge and the rose vaguely suggest the death-like appearance of the man, as they are both almost lifeless ('has withered from the lake', 3; 'a fading rose/Fast withered too', 11-12). On the other hand, the 'lily' (9) is presumably an intertextual reference to 'The Mermaid of Galloway' (1810), a painting by William Hilton on a similar subject (the story of a beautiful evil enchantress and her male victim), Keats saw at Sir John Leicester's gallery 'a few days' before 15 April 1819, the day in which he began the composition of the

<sup>23</sup>. The term 'sedge' indicates, in English, several different species of lacustrine plants, such as the cyperaceous genera *Carex* and *Cladium*, the Sweet Flag (*Acorus*) and the Wild Iris (*Iris pseudacorus*): cf. *OED*, entry for 'sedge', n.: 1.





poem (*Letters*, II.83; *Poems*, 503). The painting shows the male protagonist lying dead with a white water-lily on his brow. Thus it is possible that Keats took this naturalistic detail from the image and used it in a similar context, to deepen the paradigm of disease and the phenomenological ambiguity of the Lady. The 'rose' is a literary commonplace for physical beauty and good complexion. The fact that it is now 'fading' and 'fast withered' indicates that the knight has lost his vigour and has grown pale.

Of course, these features are conventional: naturalistic detail is, within the Romantic lyric, the typical objective correlative of the inner emotional states of either the characters or the speaker. However, and as in case 2.a. (Information concerning the plot), here too this key information is addressed to the reader. At the same time, it is not immediately available to the characters, as they remain unaware of their current existential condition.

## 8. Conclusions

As we have seen, the relationship between Keats and the green realm is more complex than it appears at first sight. His references to plants are more than occasional pieces of botanical poetry, denotatively conveying his highly specialized expertise in plant taxonomy, nor can they be always interpreted as symptoms of Keats's allegiance to the conventions of Romantic organicism. On the contrary, they are part of a macrotextual semiotic strategy extending for the whole arch of his poetic production and informing the deeper levels of his poems.

This phenomenon becomes detectable through the analysis of a specific cultural code, that of medical botany, which in turn is responsible for the emergence of a key paradigmatic meaning, that of useful plants. This paradigm is multifaceted, as it takes different forms, and is also structurally constitutive, since it grants cohesion and coherence to the whole *corpus*.

Moreover, this paradigm has to be understood in a broader sense, as a device used by Keats to systematically disclose his ecological and ethical concerns. The ecological perspective becomes evident as his useful plants, notwithstanding their different forms of representation, share the crucial feature of artistically modelling the relationship between man and the natural environment as an interaction which is in turn based on two among the most fundamental features of ecology (if not even of *deep ecology ante*



*litteram*): *complementarity*<sup>24</sup> and *interrelatedness*<sup>25</sup>. Complementarity emerges as the paradigm involves a patient-healer life-sustaining relationship, that is, an actantial relationship in which two or more different things improve or emphasize each other's qualities to preserve life and health. Interrelatedness emerges as the paradigm also involves a continual biosemiotic and intraspecific interchange, that is, an exchange of information between man and the environment, concerning key life-sustaining values, such as the specialized knowledge of the officinal properties of the plants and the imperative necessity of restoring health when life is under menace. Keats's useful plants are thus *learned*, as they embody this knowledge, and *active*, as they constantly work for life and health.

The ethical perspective springs out from the ecological one. It consists in the fact that Keats's useful plants model the relationship between man and the green realm in both its actual and idealized form, that is, they structurally transpose the human-nature interaction as it actually *is*, and as it *should* be. They suggest the actual state of this interaction, as they textually display the effects exerted, on the human body and mind, by these useful plants. They allude to the idealized form of this interaction, as they also depict this relationship as a constant tension towards mutual help, health restoration and life preservation. In this sense, the paradigm can thus be seen as a 'nature-text'<sup>26</sup>, that is, as an example of nature writing resulting from the complex of meaning relations which arises from the interactions between literature and the natural environment, and propounding a coherent vision of these same interactions, under an ecological and ethical standpoint.

As a doctor and a lover of plants, Keats was a proto-ecologist, deeply concerned with these fundamental values, and he remained so for his whole life. On the one side, he was glad of not having given away his 'medical Books' as,

<sup>24</sup> Murray Bookchin, 'Looking for Common Ground', in Steven B. Chase (ed.), *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman* (Cambridge, MA, South End Press, 1991), p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York, Knopf, 1971); Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Layton, Ut., Gibbs M. Smith, 1985), p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> Timo Maran, 'Towards an Integrated Methodology of Ecosemiotics: The Concept of Nature-text', *Sign Systems Studies* 35: 1-2 (2007), pp. 280-81; Timo Maran, 'Biosemiotic Criticism: Modelling the Environment in Literature', *Green Letters* 18: 3 (2014), pp. 301-302.





according to him, 'every department of knowledge' (including the scientific one) is functional to poetic creativity (*Letters*, I.277). On the other, he persistently felt an unfathomable sense of responsibility towards affliction, distress, suffering, as well as the spur to nurse others, thus to promote, maintain or restore psychological and physical health. As a matter of fact, the problem of pain and healing is a primary concern in both the poems (e.g. in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', as we have seen) and the letters (e.g. his philosophical reflections on life as a 'Vale of Soul-making': *Letters*, II.102).

Keats's concern is at the same time medical and ecological, as his healing responsibility involves the constant relation with the natural environment, out of which comes plant lore. Moreover, it touches on another key issue, namely the responsibility of poets and poetry in coping with human suffering and promoting wellbeing. As is well known, Keats's healing mission retained a great significance for the whole arch of his creative activity and poetic reflections, as in this author's worldview the healer-doctor is, first of all, a poet<sup>27</sup>. Verse, which is structured organically ('if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all' is one of Keats's axioms of artistic creation: *Letters*, I.239), is his primary instrument, as it has the power of exerting great beneficial effects on both the human psyche and soul: poetry, claimed the author in 1816, thus since the beginning of his career, has to be always 'a friend/To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man' (*Sleep and Poetry*, 247-47). Keats's verse is analogous to his useful plants: both *learned* and *active*, as it embodies the laws of a growing plant and it constantly works to promote life and health.

Conventional botanical poetry has thus turned into officinal verse. In other words, it has become a potent healing agent in which nature and the human psyche (in both its conscious, rationalistic aspects as well as its more unconscious, imaginative components) harmonize holistically to preserve and convey the fundamental laws of health, to foreground the possible future developments of man's existence (as happens with Endymion's toy ship) and to sustain life as a whole. In other words, Keats's poetry has turned into a real 'Philosophical Back Garden'.

<sup>27</sup>. Michael E. Holstein, 'Keats: The Poet-Healer and the Problem of Pain', *K-SJ* 36 (1987), pp. 32-49.



Fig. 1. *Atropa belladonna*'s leaves and flowers. Photograph courtesy of Franco Beccone (17/05/2015).



Fig. 2. *Atropa belladonna*'s berries. Photograph courtesy of Riccardo Moggia (19/06/2018).





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