SEMANTIC AND ETYMOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE LEXICON OF PLANT NAMES IN ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS OF THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

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Annotation: Flowers had powerful meanings in the Victorian Era and were often given as a way to express emotions. However, meanings and traditions change throughout time and culture. Today the flowers of the Victorian Era do not have the same meanings they once did. In Victorian culture, flowers were the language of love. Learning the special symbolism of flowers became a popular pastime during the 1800s when each flower was assigned a particular meaning. Feelings that could not be proclaimed publicly could be expressed through flowers. Conservatories were built to house exotic plants while floral designs dominated interior decoration.

Key words: Victorians, language of flowers, folkloric collections, bluebells, peonies, rosemary, tulips, wallflowers,aloe,pomegranate,rohodendron, while violet, purple violet, white violet, apple, apple blossom, rose, yellow carnation, bush, brass, copper, gold-gilt metal, silver, porcelain, glass, enamel, pearl, ivory, bone, straw, flower associations, symbolic flowers,lexicons ,geography,customs, region, plant kingdom

Nearly all Victorian homes would own at least one of the guidebooks dedicated to the ‘language of flowers.’ The authors of these guidebooks used visual and verbal analogies, religious and literary sources, folkloric connections, and botanical attributes to derive the various associations for the flowers. For example, *bluebells* stood for “kindness,” *peonies* meant “bashfulness,” *rosemary* was for “remembrance,” *tulips* represented “passion,” and *wallflowers* stood for “faithfulness in adversity.” However, plants could also have negative meanings such as *aloe,* which meant “bitterness,” *pomegranate*, which meant “conceit,” or the *rhododendron*, which meant “danger.” Flowers also varied based on their colors. A *white violet* meant “innocence” while a *purple violet* would symbolize that the giver’s “thoughts were occupied with love” about the recipient. Sending and receiving flowers was a way to show like or dislike toward suitors. If given a *rose* to declare “devotion” or an *apple blossom* to show “preference” from a suitor, one might return with a *yellow carnation* to express “disdain” if it was an undesirable suitor or straw to show a request of “union.” *Myrtle* was used to symbolize good luck and love in a marriage. In 1858 Queen Victoria’s

daughter, also named Victoria, carried a sprig of myrtle take from a bush planted from a cutting given to the Queen by her mother-in-law. This began a tradition of royal brides including myrtle in their bouquets. Most recently, Prince William's bride Kate Middleton included sprigs of myrtle from Victoria's original plant in her own wedding bouquet. In addition, it was fashionable to display the bouquets of meaningful flowers in what are known as 'Posy Holders.' These bouquet holders often had rings or pins attached to them so they could be proudly worn and displayed by their owners. Bouquet holders were made out of brass, copper, gold-gilt metal, silver, porcelain, glass, enamel, pearl, ivory, bone and straw and often had intricate engravings and patterning.

The tradition of associating flowers with sentiments is ancient and universal, and the types of sentiments that flowers symbolize are similar from region to region. Individual flower associations, however, are not universal; there is not one lexicon of agreed upon meanings even within a single culture. In the past, symbolic flowers and their lexicons have been tied to the geography and customs of a region as well as to a deep connection with the plant kingdom. As humans lose this deep connection with nature and as the Internet replaces regional geography, flower associations are changing; they are losing their connection with the plant kingdom while retaining some of the geographic and seasonal associations of the past. This study looks at the origins of symbolic flower languages; how through a cross-cultural migration of ideas and lore from Chinese, Middle Eastern and ancient Greek and Roman cultures, the idea of a language of flowers or floriography spread to France, England, and North America; how the genre of language of flower books evolved; and how the flowers derived their meanings. It considers recent trends in flower symbolism, continued use of the Victorian language of flowers, and emergence of symbolic flower emoji on electronic devices.

It is, in truth, no creature of modem art, but the free-born child of unsophisticated nature. "*Lovely as the rose*," "*Fair as the lily*," or "*Modest as the violet*," are phrases that seem to come naturally into use, without thought that in this emblematic employment lies the germ of true poetry and the symbolic language of Flora; and though to these will be found added, in the present volume, many wherein the object seems less suggestive of the sense, and where the idea sought to be conveyed is more complex and difficult intelligently to symbolize, yet in this is only presented the floral tongue passing through the same progressive stages that have characterized the annals of every spoken language. In the Victorian period flowers "took on great significance in the domestic, social, and intellectual lives of the people".

The Victorians' love of flowers, their use of floral symbolism, and the Victorian language of flowers have been explored often, although the popularity of this line of research has sadly fallen by the wayside in recent decades. In the 1970s and early 1980s, critics studied nineteenth-century floriography in an effort to understand

Victorian culture. *In The Meaning of Flowers: A Garland of Plant Lore and Symbolism from Popular Custom and Literature* (1977), Claire Powell alphabetizes, orders, and scrutinizes the Victorian language of flowers. She offers specific explanations for the symbolic use of particular flowers based on the flower-lore with which the Victorians culturally engaged in hopes to gain insight into Victorian culture. Similarly, in *The Victorians and their Flowers* (1983), Nicolette Scourse broadly surveys the Victorians' preoccupation with flowers and considers its cultural implications. Scourse studies the Victorians' need to grow, collect, and name plants. She observes how the Victorians' love of flowers led to a profusion of botanical illustrations and texts. Scourse argues that there was indeed a language of flowers: "*each flower had a meaning*" and was carefully chosen and given as a means of "secret communication," forming a type of "cult" following of flowers. Beverly Seaton's groundbreaking article "*Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification*" (1989) expands the investigation of floral symbolism to include semiotics. Seaton's article is overly ambitious, as she attempts to trace the sign function of flowers through their personification from classical times to the end of the nineteenth century in Western literature. Through her wide-ranging study of floral sign function, however, Seaton discovers two distinct elements of flower personification that can be linked to human identity: the biological, associated with the body and/or the heart, and the social, associated with the soul and/or head. In other words, Seaton claims that floral personifications are executed with a biological basis, meaning "that flowers are seen to represent persons in their relations to nature, their sexual roles, [and] in the place of mankind in the cosmos", or with a social basis, indicating "that flowers are seen to represent persons in their ranks in society, in their interaction with others, in their characters as different from one another, in their religious orientations". The conclusion of Seaton's historical survey of floral personification is that classical writers related flowers to persons almost exclusively through biology, while medieval writers were concerned with flowers in relation to society, and Renaissance writers achieved a balance between the two modes of expression. She suggests that writers in the eighteenth-century took a social approach to floral symbolism, and concludes her argument by stating "nineteenth-century concerns pulled it back towards the biological range". Seaton offers *"A Combined Vocabulary*" built from her study of specific nineteenth century texts from different countries. This taxonomy of nineteenth-century floral symbolism shows a variety of uses and meanings of floral symbols across different countries, demonstrating that floral symbolism is both a cultural and artistic construct. In the Victorian era, floral symbolism operates in such a transparent and evident manner that it can be correlated and catalogued in tables and diagrams, strongly suggesting that Victorian floral symbols are indeed acting as a specific and intentional means of communication.

References:

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