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An “Electric Telegraph” of the Heart’: A Community of Feeling in the Victorian Language of Flowers

JEMMA STEWART

ABSTRACT: The publishing craze of the language of flowers anthologies spanned the length of the nineteenth century. As a cultural fad and popular form allied to the gift annual and the gift book, the language of flowers anthologies were well-known and prolific. The floriography of the flower ‘vocabularies’ became diffused and disseminated throughout the cultural imagination, yet, the anthologies were initially marketed at a female, middle-class, ‘genteel’ readership, with the broad aim of advancing the romantic endeavours of the reader. In this article, I ask whether there was a community of meaning, authorship and readership of the language of flowers. Was a community of feeling established through the ‘gifting’ process inherent within this genre? Might the books have been meaningful to a wider range of relationships beyond the proposed remit of romantic entanglement? Looking to case studies of personalised inscriptions, together with the introductory and prefatory contents of the books, I will consider whether the language of flowers had a broader appeal than might be assumed, investigating just how far floral meanings became embedded in notions of feeling. Finally, I will speculate about how we might consider feeling through flowers now, in light of the many perceived foibles and failings of this nineteenth-century genre.

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS, FLORIOGRAPHY, GIFT BOOKS, INSCRIPTIONS, READERSHIP



THE LANGUAGE OF flowers was a publishing craze allied to the keepsake, the gift annual and the gift book. An import from France, Charlotte de Latour’s *Le Langage des Fleurs* (1819) was translated into English in 1834, and its adaptation and popularity spanned the length of the Victorian period, before waning in the early twentieth century.¹

¹ Anon., *The Language of Flowers* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1834)

<<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=x6NgAAAACAAJ&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false>> [accessed 21 February 2023].

Marketed specifically at women, the books were initially promoted as sentimental items for display, signifying social status and performative femininity, alongside their intended use as a means of managing love intrigues. As Beverly Seaton summarises, '[t]he language of flowers is best defined as a list of flower names and their associated meanings, most relating to the conduct of a love affair'.² Flowers were attributed human feelings and emotions in the vocabularies of these books, which often included suggested bouquets to communicate through the silent form of flora (Figs. 1 & 2). They were, in many ways, anthologies or florilegiums (a gathering of flowers) composed through intertextuality: botanical, folkloric, artistic and poetic.³ Editors and compilers frequently cited or stole each other's prose, formats and style, as more and more books flooded the market. As the genre evolved or, as some scholars such as Beverly Seaton and Brent Elliott argue, degenerated, over the course of the century, readerships shifted as well, their appeal moving away from the genteel lady towards the lower middle classes, encompassing teenagers and even younger children.⁴ These changes are apparent as cheaper language of flowers books eventually entered the market, which perhaps became increasingly available in tandem with the removal of taxes on paper.⁵ Additionally, the artistic inclusions in language of flowers books began to render not only women as flowers, but children as flowers.⁶ The language of flowers books likewise branched out into different formats as the century progressed, emerging as

² Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 68.

³ See entries for 'anthology, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press [accessed 22 February 2023].

⁴ Brent Elliott, *Occasional Papers from the RHS Lindley Library, Volume 10: The Victorian Language of Flowers* (London: The Royal Horticultural Society, 2013), p. 48 <<https://www.rhs.org.uk/about-us/pdfs/publications/lindley-library-occasional-papers/volume-ten.pdf>> [accessed 19 September 2023]. Seaton, p. 30, 84, 150–153.

⁵ Martin Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: The End of the 'Taxes on Knowledge' 1849–1869* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 8–9, 94–95, 168. You could, for example, purchase Robert Tyas's *Sentiment of Flowers* in 1838 for 6s; Silk 7s 6d; Morocco elegant 8s 6d; in 1876 you could buy the *Guide to the Language of Flowers with Coloured Illustrations* for 1s; in 1890 you could buy Nister's *Language of Flowers* for 2s, and in 1897 Maud Dean's *The Language of Flowers* for 6d.

⁶ For example, see Kate Greenaway, *Language of Flowers* (London: Routledge, 1884) <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160802>>; Anon., *The Language of Flowers* (London: Nister, c. 1890) <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160095>>.

'guidebooks' or 'birthday books', awarded as school prizes later in the century, confirming the trends of altered audiences over time.⁷

This article will raise and debate questions about the language of flowers and feeling, asking what kinds of feeling the genre may have inspired, the level of genuine expression it enabled, and how we, today, might feel about it, given the ways that it foregrounded an entanglement between the botanical and the human. Could (and did) the genre instil meaningful feelings of connection, between people, and between humans and the natural world? After assessing key arguments relating to the value or disposability of the language of flowers, particularly with regards to its 'real use' and as a means of negotiating feeling, the article will turn to case studies that examine inscriptions found within the gift books. Inscriptions, I will argue, provide evidence of alternative forms of feeling with flowers to those that we might expect or imagine, namely, the genre's imbrication in what Elizabeth A. Campbell calls a 'botanical code that not only equated women and flowers, but also linked the two to love, courtship, marriage, sex, and reproduction'.⁸ The case studies and appendices reveal that language of flowers books held appeal across classes, genders and professions; they were gifted to memorialise the end of life as much as the flourishing love affair; and they were important in consolidating family relationships and friendships as much as the budding romance. These assertions re-emphasise how widespread a cultural phenomenon this genre was, while opening up new ways to read and review its impact and legacy.

⁷ Changing formats include Anon., *Guide to the Language of Flowers* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1876); Maud Dean, *The Language of Flowers, Dean's Practical Guide Books* (London: Dean, 1897); Flora Klickmann, *The Language of Flowers. A Journal and Record for Birthdays* (London: Ward, Lock, [1899]). For an example of a prize book awarded in 1890, see the inscription in Anon., *Floral Poetry and The Language of Flowers* (London: Ward, 1877) <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160012>>.

⁸ Elizabeth A. Campbell, 'Don't Say it with Nightshades: Sentimental Botany and the Natural History of *Atropa Belladonna*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35 (2007), 607–615 (p. 608).



Fig. 1, 'The Vocabulary', in Anon., *The Artistic Language of Flowers* (London: Routledge, 1890), pp. 3-4. Author's own collection. A previous owner, whether or not this was Beatrice Gibson (see Appendix A2: Mothers and Daughters), has marked on this page 'Acacia, yellow' as 'secret love' and 'Anemone (Zephyr flower)' as 'Sickness. Expectation'. There are further markings throughout this book.

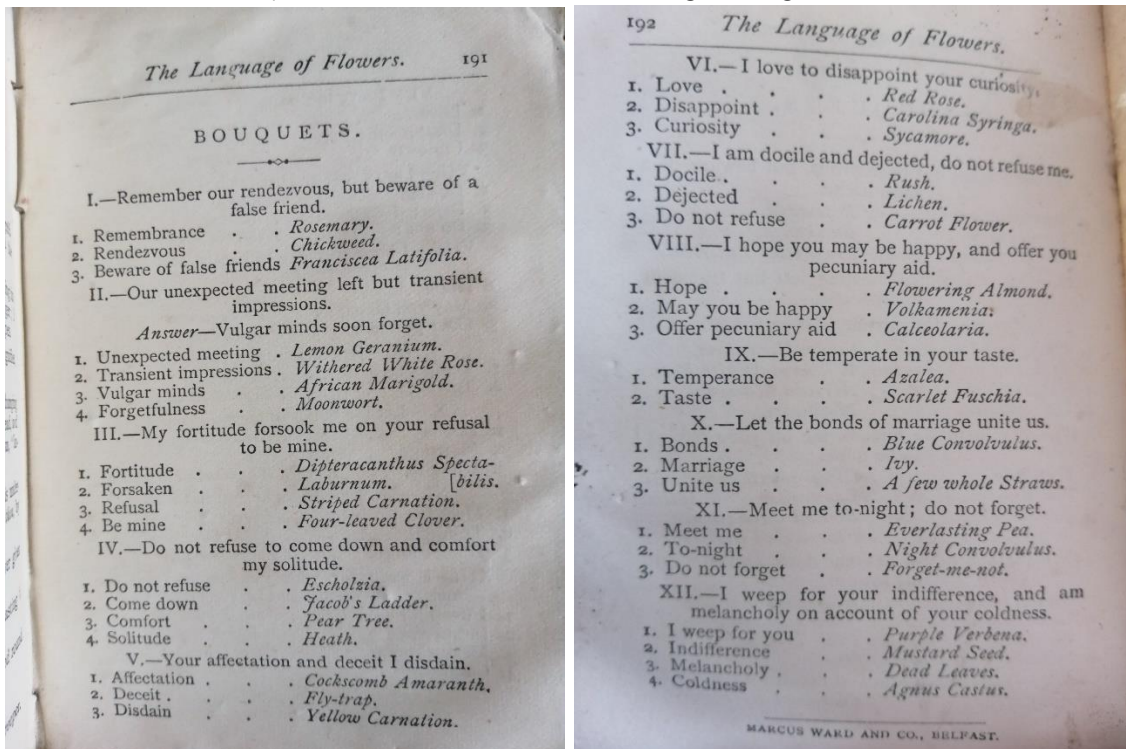


Fig. 2, 'Bouquets', in Anon., *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (London: Ward, 1883), pp. 191-192. Author's own collection. The idea of actually assembling some of these feels far-fetched.

How was the language of flowers used to convey, or even generate, feeling? This is a genre declared in one publication to be the “Electric Telegraph” of the heart’, a description fusing the natural and the human-made, the technological and the organic.⁹ It is easy to follow the logic of scholars like Susan Loy and Leora Siegel when they correlate the Victorian language of flowers and the social media or emojis of today.¹⁰ In social media promotion, in fact, the idea of a ‘community’ — a network, a means of establishing connection — is constantly foregrounded. Highlighting the construction of communities of feeling, relationships and connections was ingrained in the marketing for the nineteenth-century language of flowers publications. Advertisements for the books suggested, for example, that ‘with little difficulty a correspondence or conversation may be kept up simply by the exchange of nosegays’; and, in invoking Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s letters from Turkey as an inspiration behind floriography, that ‘you may send letters of passion, friendship, or even news, without ever inking your fingers’.¹¹ Editors and compilers frequently appealed to the apparent universality of the floral tongue (while often, and inversely, championing its national characteristics), the ease of communicating feelings through its symbolic rules, and the moral, religious, and sensitive qualities innate in those who love flowers; implicitly, those buying, displaying and reading the books.¹² The genre supposedly offered an easy, enchanting and ethically sound method of managing and communicating feeling. A moral entanglement between women and flowers was also

⁹ See ‘To the Reader’, in Anon., *The Language of Flowers; Containing the name of every flower to which a sentiment has been assigned* (London: Webb, Millington, 1858), pp. iii–xiv (p. xiii).

¹⁰ Leora Siegel, ‘Frances Sargent Osgood and the Language of Flowers: A 19th Century Literary Genre of Floriography and Floral Poetry’, Biodiversity Heritage Library blog, 19 November 2020

<<https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2020/11/frances-sargent-osgood-language-of-flowers.html>>

[accessed 6 February 2023]. Susan Loy, ‘Spread of Flower Symbolism: From the Victorian Language of Flowers to Modern Flower Emoji’, in *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*, ed. by Stanley D. Brunn and Roland Kehrein (Switzerland: Springer, 2020), pp. 4059–4082.

¹¹ Anon., ‘Flowers Have Their Language’, *Morning Post*, 12 May 1834, p. 7; Anon., ‘The Language of Flowers’, *Examiner*, 16 February 1834, p. 112.

¹² Anon., *The Language of Flowers: Including Floral Poetry* (London: Warne, c. 1878), p. 1

<<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160023>>. Anon., *The Language of Flowers* (1858), pp. iii–iv. Frederick Shoberl, *The Language of Flowers; with Illustrative Poetry, to which are now first added the Calendar of Flowers and the Dial of Flowers. Revised by the author of the “Forget Me Not”*, 3rd ed. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1835), p. 16.

stressed in these books, and inextricably connected to class, eventually being coopted as a means of facilitating cross-class interactions and relationships. As Anna M. Lawrence has argued, the genre was bound to a middle- and upper-class morality that prompted a rise in flower missions, in philanthropic work with flowers and the urban poor, which relied upon female-gendered associations with flowers to imbue these missions with credence.¹³

Despite this link with seemingly kind feeling or good intentions, as Lawrence shows, floral philanthropy absorbed more complex motivations with middle- and upper-class moral imperatives that sought to instruct and regulate — by implication, a less-than selfless move to use communication as a form of control. As an extension of hidden motivations and regulatory concerns, then, the commercial aspect of the language of flowers publications has lent itself to much criticism, especially with regard to the relevance of the genre to genuine expressions of feeling. Sonia Solicari argues that '[b]eautifully illustrated editions of the language of flowers, for example, meant that emotions were often reduced to visual signs that became so established as to leave little room for independent interpretation'.¹⁴ This massification and prescriptive emotional response system is linked by Solicari to the language of flowers books as commodities — perhaps suggesting that in the process of packaging feeling for consumers they lost any specificity and relevance to the individual. These arguments about control and prescription, crucially, undermine the genre's claims to convey sincere expressions of true feeling. In discussions of a more ephemeral yet allied genre, the valentine, Alice Crossley notes that, 'both public and private expressions of sentiment could also serve as a disguise, which highlighted the capacity of sentimentality to camouflage inauthenticity'.¹⁵ The authenticity of feeling is, therefore, further called into question by the materiality of the book.

¹³ Anna M. Lawrence, 'Morals and mignonette; or, the use of flowers in the moral regulation of the working classes in high Victorian London', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 70 (2020), 24–35 (p. 27).

¹⁴ Sonia Solicari, 'Selling Sentiment: The Commodification of Emotion in Victorian Visual Culture', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 4 (2007), 1–21 (p. 4).

¹⁵ Alice Crossley, 'Paper Love: Valentines in Victorian Culture', in *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects*, ed. by Helen Kingstone and Kate Lister (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 229–243 (p. 230). See also an explicit use of the language of flowers in valentines in the Museum of London collection:

<<https://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/search/#!/results?terms=language%20of%20flowers>> [accessed 21 February 2023].

Beverly Seaton and Sam George perceive the diminutive size of many language of flowers anthologies as typifying the decorative impetus of the 'gift book trade, selling for appearance alone', sized as 'dainty pocketbooks and miniatures designed for the delicate hand of a Victorian lady'.¹⁶ This idea is corroborated by contemporary reviews of the early language of flowers publications, which in fact emphasised the ornamental functions of the attractively bound books as being akin to 'a golden vase containing beauties' that should be on show and 'within the reach of every young lady of our acquaintance' as well as being suitable literature 'for a fair lady's boudoir'.¹⁷ The books were not only beautiful objects in themselves but indicated the 'beauty' of their reader, owner and fellow object: woman. In this respect, as portable items that functioned as an extension of the body, the language of flowers books could be thought of as practical tools or game pieces in the conduct of love intrigues, not solely books containing symbols, but symbols in themselves as 'talismans of gentility and femininity', as Seaton notes.¹⁸ When viewed as part of the gift book trade, the language of flowers anthologies might be perceived as a form of costume: valuable for aesthetics alone, displayed to signal wealth and respectability, to attract the opposite sex and to negotiate the marriage market. If flowers and feelings were commodified to sell the language of flowers books, the books were then used to effectively sell their owners: women. Thus, cynically and cyclically perhaps, the language of flowers merely perpetuated a patriarchal and capitalist exchange of women and nature, which reified gender and class stereotypes.

The commodification of sentiment and feeling is not the only criticism facing the language of flowers genre that might weaken its association with authentic, or even 'good', 'proper' or 'true' feeling. One important criticism concerns plant feeling in line

¹⁶ Seaton, pp. 93–99. Sam George, 'Conclusion: The Sequel: the Natural System and the language of flowers', in *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing 1760–1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 177.

¹⁷ Anon., 'Review of *The Language of Flowers*, Anon., Saunders and Otley, Conduit Street', *Metropolitan Magazine*, July 1834, p. 74. Paratextual material — a review from 16 January 1836 in the *Literary Gazette* prefaces the main content to signal who this book was for and its particular qualities, in Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora*, 2nd ed. (London: Tyas, 1841), 1st ed. 1836 <<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/281561#page/6/mode/1up>> [accessed 31 January 2022].

¹⁸ Seaton, p. 35.

with the 'vegetal turn' in ecocritical scholarship, which Gary Farnell describes as 'the direction of pro-plant-thinking in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries'.¹⁹ The personification and instrumental anthropomorphising within the language of flowers genre has been seen by Richard Mabey, for example, as ascribing 'plant species with a code of arbitrary "meanings" which had no connection whatever with the lives of the organisms themselves'.²⁰ This criticism hinges upon the inherent anthropocentrism of a genre where plants are made to serve the interests of human romance, exposing little concern for the real lives of plants (see an example of arboreal feminised plant imagery in Fig. 3). Michael Marder highlights this extrinsic imposition further when he writes: 'When a plant is converted into a symbol, its own language all but disappears under a shroud of meanings humans throw over it. It is no longer possible to discern the self-signification of vegetal life, because the symbolic plant does not refer to itself but turns into a token for something else entirely'.²¹ Moreover, the unstable, fluctuating and, to some, arbitrary vocabulary of the genre has been thought to expose the language of flowers as catering to mere shallow frivolousness. Take daffodils, for example: they can stand for 'self-love' and 'regret', but also 'regard', 'deceitful hope', or even 'chivalry' and 'folly'.²²

¹⁹ Gary Farnell, 'What do Plants Want?', in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 179–196 (pp. 187–188).

²⁰ Richard Mabey, *The Cabaret of Plants: Botany and the Imagination* (London: Profile Books, 2015), p. 7.

²¹ Michael Marder, 'To Hear Plants Speak', in *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, ed. by Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patricia Vieira (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), pp. 103–125 (p. 105).

²² 'Self-love', see Shoberl, *The Language of Flowers; with Illustrative Poetry*, pp. 55–58. 'Regret', see Arthur Freeling, *Flowers; Their Use and Beauty in Language and Sentiment*, pp. 97–98. 'Regard', see John Reid, *The Language of Flowers: being a lexicon of the sentiments assigned to flowers, plants, fruits, and roots* (Glasgow: Morrison, 1847), p. 14, 33. 'Deceitful Hope', see *The Poetry of Flowers; Containing Appropriate Illustrations of Flowers to which Sentiments have been Assigned* (London: Webb, Millington, 1859), p. 17. 'Chivalry', see Anon., *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (London: Nelson, 1864), p. 16. 'Folly', see The Young Ladies of Gumley House, *The Catholic Language of Flowers* (London: Burns and Lambert, 1861), pp. 32–33.

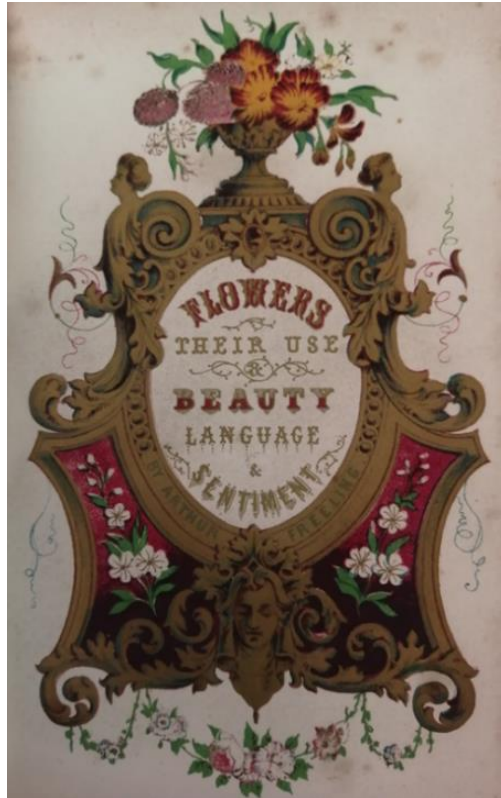


Fig. 3, Frontmatter, in Arthur Freeling, *Flowers; Their Use and Beauty in Language and Sentiment* (London: Darton, 1851). Author's own collection.

Another critical observation concerns the editing process inflicted upon this genre, which may have stifled the expression of feeling: in the translation process from French to English, the books were modified initially to align with British ideals of respectability and decorum. Seaton notes that 'it is interesting to discover the care that English and American editors took to purify the language for their audience'.²³ The romantic *raison d'être* of the language of flowers, outlining a covert method for men and women to communicate, prompted the Anglicisation process. Attention had to be paid to moral fibre by the editors in Britain. As Catherine Donzel points out, 'since moral virtue was gripping Britain, English books omitted everything that might shock: heliotrope henceforth symbolized "devotion" instead of "ecstasy, I love you", which was clearly unacceptable!'²⁴ In other criticisms, present-day ethical concerns continue: the

²³ Seaton, p. 127.

²⁴ On the modification of the meaning assigned to heliotrope, see Catherine Donzel, *The Book of Flowers*, trans. by Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 105; Anon., *The Language of Flowers* (1834), p. 114 and Shoberl, *The Language of Flowers; With Illustrative Poetry* (1835), p. 186.

influx of new additions to the floral vocabulary, and the collecting habits that imported these featured flowers have been viewed as symptomatic of covetous colonial practices. For example, Elliott views the inclusion of cattleyas in later language of flowers publications as indicative of the growing fashion for orchids, a fashion which had devastating environmental effects in consequence of colonial collecting agendas.²⁵ Meanwhile, the Orientalism evident in the combined appropriation of, and xenophobia towards, the language of flowers origin story of the Turkish *sélam*, is at times unarguably racist.²⁶ This nationalistic or xenophobic drive in many works was reflected in the flower vocabularies, with 'exotic' or foreign species often allocated derogatory and negative meanings. Nancy Strow Sheley explores this in relation to the American tradition, with the dahlia from Mexico meaning 'instability', China pink meaning 'aversion', and cyclamen (with origins in Greece and Turkey) meaning 'voluptuous', to name just a few examples.²⁷ Some of these criticisms can, I think, be contested, or at least tempered, if considered closely. In many publications, the 'real lives' of plants are absolutely essential to the construction of symbolic meaning, through their growing habits, with reference to the Linnaean classificatory system, and through the dial of flowers and descriptive anecdotal passages that encouraged knowledge of flora.²⁸

²⁵ See Elliott, p. 39, and Mabey, p. 300.

²⁶ For more on the Turkish origins of the genre, see Shoberl, 'Introduction', in *The Language of Flowers; with Illustrative Poetry* (1835), pp. 6–8. See also Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, 'Letter 41: Pera, Constantinople March 16, O. S. 1718', in *The Turkish Embassy Letters: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, ed. by Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O'Quinn (Ontario: Broadview, 2013), pp. 160–63. Note the xenophobia prevalent in John Reid, *The Language of Flowers* (1847), p. 4 <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.169362>>, and Orientalist tendencies in Henry Gardiner Adams, *Oriental Text Book and Language of Flowers* (London: Dean, c.1850), pp. 9–13 <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.158510>>.

²⁷ See Nancy Strow Sheley, 'The "Language of Flowers" as Coded Subtext: Conflicted Messages of Domesticity in Mary Wilkins Freeman's Short Fiction', *Working Papers on Design*, 2 (2007), p. 13 <https://www.herts.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/12323/WPD_vol2_strow.pdf> [accessed 17 June 2022].

²⁸ See, 'Thrift' in Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers*, pp. 266–67. Also Myrtle (pp. 27–28); Wallflower (p. 121); Acanthus (p. 29); Meadow Saffron (p. 126); Peruvian heliotrope (pp. 114–116); Holly (p. 163); Dandelion (pp. 101–2) in Anon., *The Language of Flowers* (1834). 'Linnaean Classes and Orders', in Arthur Freeling, *Flowers; Their Use and Beauty* (1851), pp. ix–xii. The 1857 edition is available online <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160084>>. 'The Dial of Flowers', in Laura Valentine, *The Language and Sentiment of Flowers; with Floral Records and Selected Poetry* (London: Warne, 1867), p. 49. 1st ed. 1866 <<https://doi.org/10.5962/t.175398>>.

Having said that, despite infiltrating many aspects of nineteenth-century life, from valentines, to fashion accessories, to needlework, fiction, monumental masonry, art and music, the question remains of the genre's relevance and applicability, both in the nineteenth century and beyond.²⁹

To what extent or degree did real people use the floral code? Was there any consistency in its use? Scholars speculate that this was seldom, if ever, the case: Jack Goody views the language of flowers as an invented tradition, Elliott as a parlour game.³⁰ Seaton sees it as a 'consumer phenomenon' with only 'tenuous ties to real lives'.³¹ There are occasional anecdotes of floriographic exchange between people that may be unearthed, but they tend to air on the side of comedy or even romantic failure.³² Equally, the longevity of the genre has been seen as inducing a very different feeling to the thrill of romance: namely, boredom. For example, one girl depicted in George Dunlop Leslie's *The Language of Flowers* (1885, Fig. 4) has been thought of as looking rather tired with the rules of floriography by this late point in the nineteenth century. In a summary of the painting, curatorial staff at Manchester Art Gallery point out that '[t]he second woman, in a dark dress, lounges across the arm of the sofa, studying a pair of scissors in her hand in a slightly bored fashion'.³³ While the language of flowers clearly proliferated as an aspect of material culture, we might ask whether the genre really held meaning for people as a conduit for expressing feeling and emotion, and if it did, whether, perhaps, it branched out from its apparent remit of romance.

²⁹ Some examples include Robert Canton, 'Language of Flowers' fan (1875), listed in *Antiques Trade Gazette* <<https://pocketmags.com/antiques-trade-gazette-magazine/2543/articles/1152471/the-language-of-flowers>> [accessed 21 February 2023]. F. H. Cowen, *The Language of Flowers; Le Langage Des Fleurs; Die Blumensprache: Suite de Ballet* (London: Metzler, 1880) <<https://archive.org/details/imslp-language-of-flowers-set-1-cowen-frederic-hymen>>. In fiction, some direct (although occasionally dismissive) mentions are found in William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1848) (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 45; Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 201; Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely, But Too Well* (London: Tinsley, 1868), p. 326; Edith Nesbit, *The Wonderful Garden* (London: Benn, 1947), p. 3, 5, 14, 17.

³⁰ Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 250–251. Elliott, p. 46.

³¹ Seaton, p. 110.

³² Donzel, p. 106. See Anon., 'A Peculiar Courtship', *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 30 May 1893, p. 4.

³³ George Dunlop Leslie, *The Language of Flowers* (1885), oil on canvas, Manchester Art Gallery <<https://manchesterartgallery.org/explore/title/?mag-object-237>> [accessed 7 March 2023].



Fig. 4, George Dunlop Leslie, *The Language of Flowers* (1885), oil on canvas, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester. Image courtesy of Manchester Art Gallery.

Was there a community of feeling, authors and readers of this genre? As already mentioned, the language of flowers is frequently criticised for a lack of cohesion — its supposedly unstable and arbitrary floral meanings might not particularly lend themselves to notions of community or common feeling. However, Molly Engelhardt views the genre as often being constructed by women, for women.³⁴ There was a liberating potential in negative feelings or ‘unfeeling’ evident across vocabularies, which invites freedom of expression for women. From ‘false riches’ in the sunflower, to ‘hatred’ in the basil, ‘decrease of love’ or ‘jealousy’ in the yellow rose, ‘deceit’ in the Venus fly trap, ‘inconstancy’ in the evening primrose, and ‘refusal’ in the striped carnation — the opportunity to reject and rebuff was at least offered. Other critics have shown how the language of flowers could be inherently restrictive and conservative. Annette Stott, for instance, considers the language of flowers as partly informing the late-nineteenth-century artistic reaction to the New Woman embedded in American floral-female

³⁴ Molly Engelhardt, ‘The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Knowledge Age’, *Victoriographies*, 3 (2013), 136–160 (p. 143). See also Leora Siegel, ‘Language of Flowers: 19th Century Literary Genre Offered Opportunities for Women Writers of Natural History’, Biodiversity Heritage Library Blog, 30 March 2019 <<https://blog.biodiversitylibrary.org/2019/03/language-of-flowers.html>> [accessed 17 November 2021].

paintings. For Stott, these paintings of women and flowers were reasserting the value of female ornamentation, passivity and sexual purity in the face of burgeoning societal change in gender roles.³⁵ Equally, a conservative leaning was evident in the British tradition of the language of flowers from its early developments, where a group of male editors and compilers had reconfigured the French books into more didactic works about female conduct, exemplifying what Katherine D. Harris has termed 'patriarchal femininity'. 'Patriarchal femininity', evident for Harris in the sister genre of the annuals, was 'predicated on defining woman and feminine as passive, uneducated, domestic, impotent or simple'.³⁶ Male editors of the language of flowers texts in Britain followed the moralising directive of Henry Phillips's *Floral Emblems* (1825, 1831).³⁷ These editors included Frederic Shoberl (the first translator of de Latour), Robert Tyas, James Glass Bertram, Arthur Freeling, John Reid, Thomas Miller and Henry Gardiner Adams, all of whom worked towards a national, and masculine, didactic inflection of the genre.³⁸ While Harris considers the annual as being in its textual production a 'female body, its male producers struggling to make it both proper and sexually alluring, its female authors and readers attempting to render it their own feminine ideal', I would suggest that in the British tradition of the language of flowers genre, the situation was even more constraining.³⁹ Women and flowers are continually conflated, while the male editor and compiler is positioned as a gardener, addressing 'The Maidens of Britain [...] Beautiful human flowers', cultivating ideas of appropriate femininity and censoring the

³⁵ Annette Stott, 'Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition', *American Art*, 6.2 (1992), 60–77 (p. 67, 72–73).

³⁶ Katherine D. Harris, 'Feminizing the Textual Body: Female Readers Consuming the Literary Annual', *The Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America*, 99 (2005), 573–622 (p. 592).

³⁷ Henry Phillips, *Floral Emblems* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1825)

<<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.26640>> and *Floral Emblems: or A Guide to the Language of Flowers, new edn* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1831) <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160797>>.

³⁸ See previous footnotes for Shoberl, Tyas, Freeling, Reid and Gardiner Adams.

James Glass Bertram, *The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems* (London, Edinburgh:

Nelson, 1846), pp. iv–v <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.158334>>. Thomas Miller, *The Poetical*

Language of Flowers; or, The Pilgrimage of Love (London: Bogue, 1847), pp. v–viii

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=KpVhAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 11 February 2020].

³⁹ Harris, p. 578.

contents of the books to instruct the 'fairest flowers of the British Isles'.⁴⁰ Throughout the process of introducing the language of flowers to British audiences, women and flowers were transformed into decorative and malleable objects to be shaped according to masculine taste, in the androcentric inscriptions made upon this genre by men. The books become representative of both garden and woman in the early British tradition, manipulated to serve men in the home and the marketplace. In light of this, women may reasonably have conceived many limitations of the language of flowers pertaining to their personal feelings or emotions. Moreover, if there was a sense of community established through these books, perhaps it existed predominantly within male editorial endeavours, with the overarching impetus to instruct and control.

While several criticisms of the language of flowers frequently still hold up, there are areas where their validity is disputable. Numerous floral meanings remained relatively stable, and often the variations that took place have been accounted for through positive ideas about editorial imaginative play. As Engelhardt argues, 'the quantity of floral dictionaries in circulation suggests an attempt by amateur botanists to resist the efforts of scientific botanists to know flowers by instead codifying them to extend the parameters of courtship and imaginative play'.⁴¹ There are instances of editors, both male and female, asserting their right to modify the vocabulary based on their tastes and motivations, and some include their own original poetry among the presence of more famous works and authors.⁴² Furthermore, Fabienne Moine writes that the flower poems, frequently framed in the language of flowers gift books as intertexts, enabled women writers to express emotion through verse, wherein 'poetical tools of femininity and gentility could also create pockets of resistance to conventional gendered discourse'.⁴³ Another area of contestation may be found through examination of the gift inscriptions regularly applied to these works, which suggest that this genre held more significance than may be supposed by critics today. Branching out

⁴⁰ Robert Tyas, 'Preface', in *The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora*, p. v. Henry Gardiner Adams, *Oriental Text-Book*, dedication.

⁴¹ Engelhardt, p. 156.

⁴² See 'Preface' in Anon., *The Garland of the Year, or, The Months: their Poetry and Flowers* (London: Ward, 1873) <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.160187>> and Anon., *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (London: Nelson, 1864).

⁴³ Fabienne Moine, 'Saying it with Flowers', in *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 51–98 (p. 53).

from the textual contents of the language of flowers books in this way, we may discover some hints of 'real use', a matter which plagues those interested in studying the language of flowers in culture as well as literature.

As an area of provenance research, deciphering and tracing inscriptions holds value beyond the study of libraries or the biographical details of 'distinguished people' in history. As David Pearson has shown, it is a move towards a consideration of 'the importance of books in society' and 'wider pictures of the patterns of book ownership'.⁴⁴ Personal inscriptions indicate how the language of flowers might have featured in relationships that went beyond the stated remit of romance to which it so conspicuously speaks. Cindy Dickinson, for example, considers gifting trends and the relationships behind the inscriptions of annuals and gift books in the American tradition. She shows how inscriptions could personalise these mass-produced books, reviewing some language of flowers books among other annuals, which reveal how the recipient's marginalia, annotations and inserted poetry became part of a process of identity formation. Dickinson writes that 'Inscriptions, whether written on the presentation page or elsewhere on the book's front leaves, helped to transfer literary annuals and gift books from the publishers' commercial marketplace to the world of sentiment'.⁴⁵ Additionally, her case study of Elizabeth Turner's marginalia in one language of flowers publication indicates how the text became 'a forum for defining and defending deeply held values and beliefs': essentially, I would suggest, it became an exercise in negotiating feelings about others.⁴⁶ The language of flowers books, unlike the annuals, did not contain a publisher's 'presentation page', as Dickinson describes it; the formal invitation for a gift inscription from giver to recipient. In this way, inscriptions in language of flowers texts become even more striking in the context of feeling, as the giver or owner chose to make a personal mark on the book without explicit invitation.

While the language of flowers relied on intertextuality in its very formation, inscriptions also often contained intertextual elements, including quotations from

⁴⁴ David Pearson, 'Introduction', in *Provenance Research in Book History: A Handbook* (London: British Library, 1994, 1998), pp. 1–11 (p. 2). See also 'Inscriptions, Mottoes & Other Manuscript Additions', pp. 12–53.

⁴⁵ Cindy Dickinson, 'Creating a World of Books, Friends, and Flowers: Gift Books and Inscriptions, 1825–60', *Winterthur Portfolio*, 31 (1996), 53–66 (p. 57).

⁴⁶ Dickinson, p. 65.

poems or fiction. The importance of intertextual practices in identity negotiation is analysed by Charles Gough in the previous issue of *Romance, Revolution and Reform*. Gough examines the 'unique intertextual fabric' created through poetic inclusions in John Addington Symonds's autobiographical *Memoirs* (1889 to his death in 1893) to construct a queer self, demonstrating the effective melding of forms and feelings to establish radical meaning.⁴⁷ Although applied to a different context here, the function of intertextuality in individual as well as more public or collective feeling is shown to be important, for example as a sympathetic response to grief in my second case study, and through a quotation that seems to have inspired or moved Elizabeth Lunnan, the inscriber, to see connections between the language of flowers, fiction and life (Appendix A, A2). Lunnan inscribed her book long before her marriage in her late twenties and the birth of seven children; she possessed and wrote in her language of flowers book at roughly fifteen years old. Her choice of quotation shows, to my mind, a teenage girl linking the language of flowers with its traditional notions of romantic love, in anticipation of one day marrying — in this sense, we see the language of flowers as conducive to daydreaming, to wishing, to identity formation through aspiration. This book, like my third case study, is another example of female inheritance, as Lunnan's daughter Edith eventually owned and made additional inscriptions in it. In terms of identification, inscriptions can indicate who owned these books, who gifted them to whom and sometimes they can hint at, or even make explicit, the motives behind the ownership or gift of the book. There are inevitable frustrations that have been encountered in pursuing this aspect of provenance research, which are enumerated effectively by Pearson: illegible handwriting, inscriptions defaced or washed out, a loss of detail through rebinding.⁴⁸ The background research conducted through genealogy resources is not consistently rewarding, especially when inscriptions are brief. However, the position of these floral anthologies as gift books can in many instances make tracing their ownership and exchange profitable, as a viable line of enquiry to establish individual interpretations of the genre and the expression of feelings that it inspired.

⁴⁷ Charles Gough, 'Re-reading the Radical in John Addington Symonds's *Memoirs*: Poetry, Intertextuality, and Queer Self-Construction', *Romance, Revolution, and Reform*, 5 (2023), 10–30 (pp. 14–15).

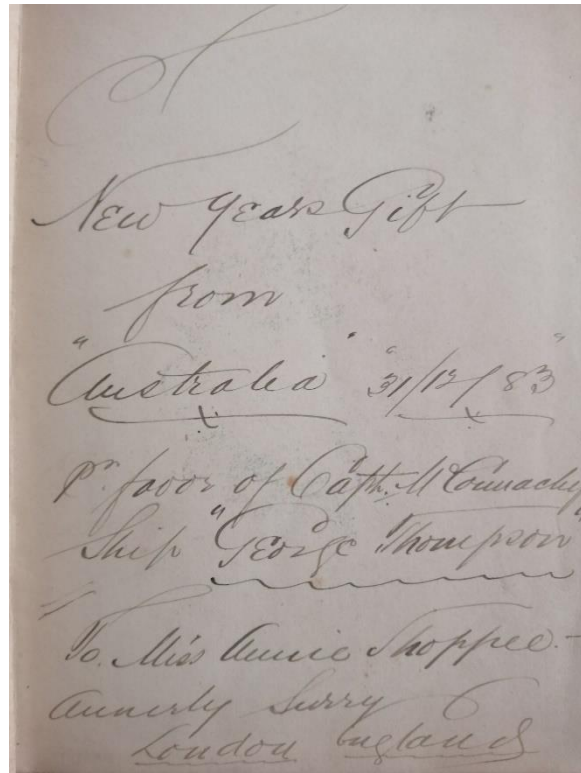
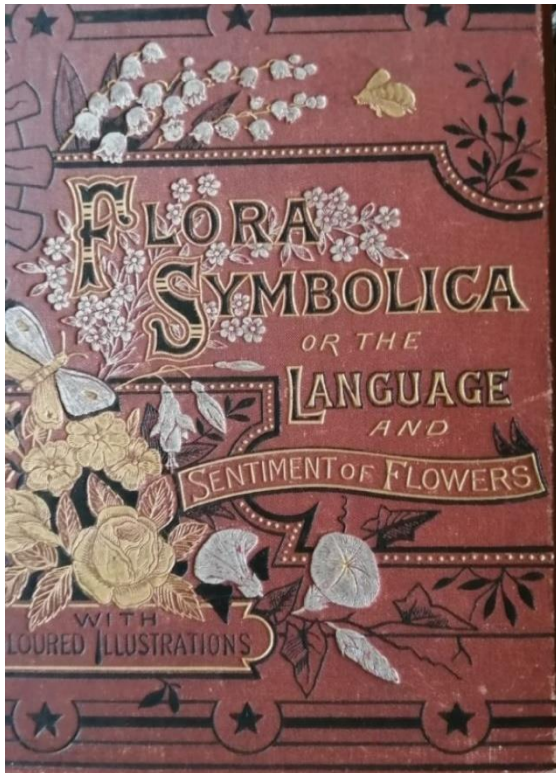
⁴⁸ See Pearson, pp. 3–9, and examples Beatrice Gibson, Azuliah Palmer and Elizabeth Lunnan in the Appendices.

Case Studies: Inscriptions

Where, then, is the evidence of heterosexual romantic connection so central to the themes of the language of flowers texts? It is tempting to read this impetus into two particular books within my own collection, which were gifted to women anonymously by 'a sincere friend' (see Appendix A4: Sincere Friends). Why the need for secrecy, unless these books were presented in the same vein as the anonymous valentine? Yet overall, my personal encounters with these anthologies reveal more instances of friendship or familial gifting between women (Appendix A2: Mothers and Daughters, A3: Female Friends). Sometimes they cross over: the inscription suggesting friendship from Mrs Hartley to Agnes May Drummond clearly becomes a sign of family inheritance, as the book was passed to a daughter, Vera May Stones (Appendix A3: Female Friends). There is also evidence of male ownership of these books, perhaps surprisingly, given the contexts already discussed (A1: Names, Mr E. A. Wait, Thomas Edward Morris and Michael Batten). Despite the impetus to write their names in the books, few dates or motivations are provided from these male inscribers. The conclusions drawn from my personal collection are often echoed in similar findings through two dedicated language of flowers collections that are publicly available to view online or in person: the digitised archive of The Biodiversity Heritage Library, and the collection housed at the Royal Horticultural Society's Lindley Library.⁴⁹ There can be seen in these collections also, gifting between female friends, female relatives and traces of male ownership in the nineteenth century. There is repeated evidence that language of flowers books were given as Christmas or New Year gifts, and occasionally detailed addresses as well as dates are provided. One publication in my own collection by John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica* (1869) contains an inscription that flags up important developments in the gifting and ownership of these books (Figs. 5 & 6).

⁴⁹ An online resource from the Royal Horticultural Society Lindley Library, <<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-language-of-flowers-royal-horticultural-society/DQXBY7DfLX9RIg?hl=en>> [accessed 20 September 2023]; Biodiversity Heritage Library Language of Flowers collection <<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/browse/collection/LanguageofFlowers>> [accessed 10 September 2023].

Case Study 1: John McConnachy and Annie Shoppee



Figs. 5 & 6, Cover and inscription in John Ingram, *Flora Symbolica; or, The Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (London: Warne, c. 1870s), 1st ed. 1869. Author's own collection. The inscription reads: 'New Year's Gift from Australia 31/12/83. Pr favor of Captain McConnachy, Ship George Thompson. To Miss Annie Shoppee, Annerly, Surrey, London, England'.

Upon noticing a gift inscription from 'Captain McConnachy' to 'Annie Shoppee' in a well-preserved copy of John Ingram's *Flora Symbolica* (Figs. 5 & 6), I anticipated finally discovering the use of the language of flowers genre in the conduct of a romance. After a friend aided in the identification of the George Thompson ship mentioned in the description, a librarian at the State Library of South Australia helped me to discover that this book was gifted by Captain John McConnachy, whom they described as 'a well-known sea-farer in Australian waters in the latter part of the 19th century'.⁵⁰ It transpires

⁵⁰ Email correspondence between author and librarian Chris Read, 1 March 2022.

See 'The "George Thompson" in an unidentified port [PRG 1373/33/1], photographs

<<https://collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/resource/PRG%201373/33/1>> and

<<https://www.catalog.slsa.sa.gov.au/record=b2204154~S1>> [accessed 7 March 2023]. Anon., *Wallaroo Times and Mining Journal*, 11 September 1880, p. 2; Anon., *South Australian Register*, 12 June 1874, p. 5.

November 1883, Passenger List, George Thompson, New South Wales, Australia, Unassisted Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1826–1922 Record. Certificate of Competency of Master, John McConnachy, 8 August

that the forty-six-year-old John McConnachy and his family were in London in 1883. His family included his second wife, Ellen, and two young daughters, Alice and Mary. In August of that year, McConnachy earned his master's certificate, before returning to Sydney with his wife and daughters on the George Thompson ship in November. The recipient of the book, Annie Shoppee, meanwhile, was a twenty-four-year-old governess living in Anerley, Surrey. How might John McConnachy and Annie Shoppee have met, and why did he send her a language of flowers gift book for New Year in 1883? Could Annie have looked after John McConnachy's daughters while the family was in England? Was this book a gift from employer to employee? Or is it suggestive of a covert romance? It seems that McConnachy led a colourful life. His first wife, Susan, son John and daughter Mary tragically died in a shipwreck, his second wife, Ellen, eventually divorced him on grounds of desertion, and his death is mysterious, occurring after receiving £500 from a deceased estate.⁵¹ Whatever the reason behind this gift — gratitude or romance — the reach of the language of flowers can be seen to extend to cross-continental exchanges, a means of conveying feeling between people from very different professions and walks of life. A marked shift in gifting and ownership patterns can be traced within this copy of Ingram's *Flora Symbolica*, and this particular publication is a good example of how the genre had been opened up or was in the process of reaching wider audiences beyond the genteel lady. While undoubtedly a beautiful and decorative book complete with printed colour illustrations, which cost 7s 6d in 1869, its contents as well as our knowledge of the profession of the recipient suggest expanding readerships.⁵² Although Elliott highlights several misattributions and incorrect transcriptions of flower names and meanings in this work, Ingram's wide-

1883, Certificate number 85947, UK and Ireland, Masters and Mates Certificates, 1850–1927. Annie Shoppee, Occupation: Governess, Address: 1 Ventnor Vs, County: Surrey, 1881 England Census, Class: RG11; Piece: 825; Folio: 27; p. 49; GSU roll: 1341195. I wish to thank Chris Read and David Gillott for help with identifying and researching McConnachy.

⁵¹ Anon., 'Marriages: McCONNACHY — WELLS', *South Australian Register*, 29 June 1872, p. 4. Anon., 'A Sad Incident', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 20 September 1876, p. 3.

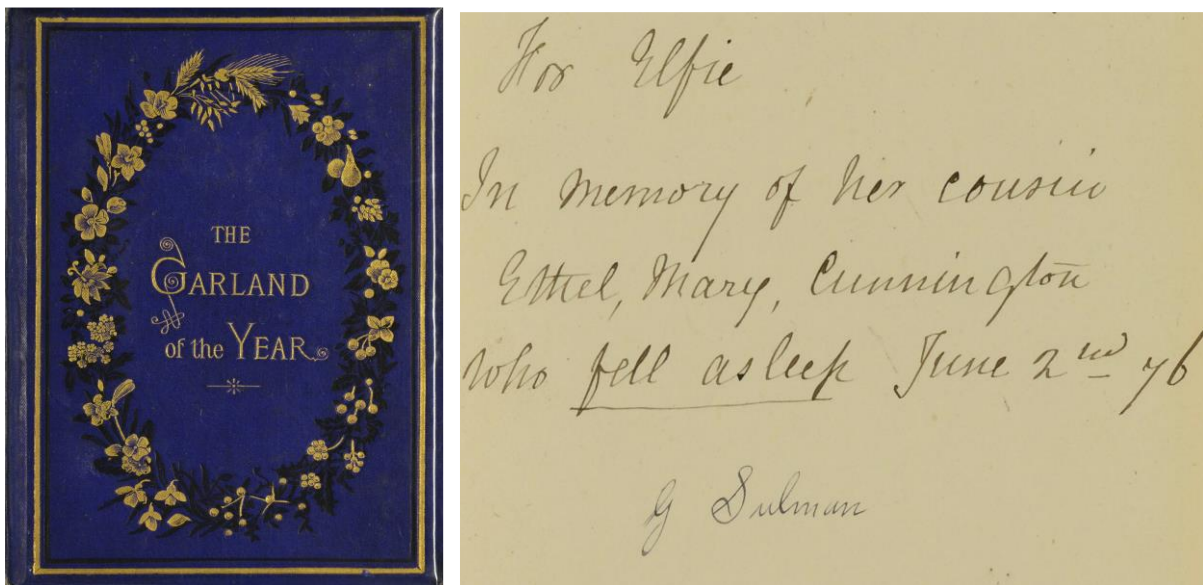
'M'CONNACHY V M'CONNACHY', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 1896, p. 4. My library contact suggested that 'I could not find a death notice for him, either in South Australia, New South Wales or Western Australia. He may have left Australia after receiving 500 pounds from a deceased estate'.

Anon., 'Deceased Persons' Estates', *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 1 March 1912, p. 5.

⁵² 'Advertisements and Notices', *Examiner and London Review*, 11 December 1869, p. 798.

ranging references may be read as purposefully more inclusive. For example, he dedicates his book to working-class poet Eliza Cook, and includes several verse quotations from her poetry throughout the text, while aspiring to a holistic compilation that brings together 'the productions of my many predecessors'.⁵³ Moreover, as the language of flowers spoke to human life experience, to 'everybody' as Ingram would have it, in appreciation of the beauty of nature, of the phases of growth and maturity, it inevitably also spoke to transience and death.⁵⁴

Case Study 2: Ethel Mary Cunnington



Figs. 7 & 8, Book cover and dedication in Robert Chambers and Frederick Edward Hulme, *The Garland of the Year, or, The Months: Their Poetry and Flowers: with twelve chromographs of flowers, one for each month* (London: Ward, 1873). Image from the Biodiversity Heritage Library. Contributed by Cornell University Library.

One inscription within a language of flowers book reveals that the publications may not only have been gifted as demonstrations of romantic affection but also as tokens of memorial for the departed (Fig. 8). The language of flowers could be employed to serve

⁵³ Elliott, pp. 40–41. See Ingram's dedication, Preface p. v, and on Cook's verse p. 10, 12, 39, 57, 86, 105, 106, 124, 190, 229, 232, 241, 312, 324, 329, 343. I am indebted to Shani Cadwallender for alerting me to Eliza Cook's work and history, see BAVS 2022 programme, "In debt to the forest trees": The Humble Anthropocentrism of Eliza Cook's Arboreal Poetry' <<https://bavs2022.com/bavs-programme/>> [accessed 14 July 2023].

⁵⁴ Ingram, p. 5.

memory and memorial, another aspect of life where profound feeling would be expected, and people frequently turned to rituals of grief to manage their emotions.⁵⁵ The dedication in the book reads, 'For Elsie, In memory of her cousin Ethel Mary Cunnington who fell asleep, June 2nd 76 — G. Sulman'. The deceased referred to could well be eighteen-year-old Ethel Mary Cunnington who died 2 June 1876 and is buried in Braintree Cemetery, Essex. Ethel's monument epitaph reads, 'In the 18th year of her age. Fast in Thy paradise where no flower can wither'.⁵⁶ The final sentence is a quotation from George Herbert's seventeenth-century devotional poem, 'The Flower' (1633), and epitomises the ways that the language of flowers, with its emphasis on anthologising and intertextuality, could inspire the expression of private feeling through public modes. As I have argued elsewhere, this inscription suggests that floriography helped

the bereaved to find a mode of expression that was derived from strong emotion yet was not overwhelmed by it. As a sentimental genre, the language of flowers perhaps contributed to a vocabulary for mourning that would negate much of the horror of death.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Janine Marriott, 'Secrets and symbols — the grave language of the Victorian cemetery', *Arnos Vale* blog <<https://arnosvale.org.uk/secrets-and-symbols-the-grave-language-of-the-victorian-cemetery/>> [accessed 22/01/2022]. See also the repeated use of symbolic flowers on nineteenth-century memorial cards in the Laura Seddon collection, including lilies, snowdrops, passionflowers, ivy, bindweed, lily of the valley and forget-me-not <<https://www.mmu.ac.uk/special-collections-museum/collections/laura-seddon-collection>> [accessed 14 July 2023].

⁵⁶ England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915, vol 4a, p. 239. Anon., 'Deaths', in *Essex Standard*, 9 June 1876, p. 8. The entry reads, 'Cunnington, June 2nd at Braintree, Ethel Mary, aged 18, eldest child of Augustus and Mary Cunnington'. Gravestone inscription, Cross on triple plinth. // Top plinth, east side: AUGUSTUS CUNNINGTON / born / August 20th 1824 / Middle plinth: died July 5th 1902 / Ps. 20.7 / ETHEL MARY CUNNINGTON / daughter of the above / died June 2nd 1876 / Bottom plinth: in the 18th year of her age / 'Fast in Thy paradise where no flower can wither' <<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/228028327/augustus-cunnington>> [accessed 20 September 2023].

⁵⁷ Jemma Stewart, 'Life is a Flower: Memory and Memorial in the Language of Flowers', *Grave Matters* blog, ed. by Claire Cock-Starkey, 31 January 2022 <<https://gravemattersgroup.co.uk/2022/01/31/life-is-a-flower-memory-and-memorial-in-the-language-of-flowers/>> [accessed 10 February 2023].

This complements David McAllister's notion of an 'aesthetic of death' that relied on sentiment to erase horror and promote positive feelings of comfort.⁵⁸ The consolatory inscription found in this language of flowers book is therefore not out of place: a dialogue to engage with notions of transience and mortality is established within language of flowers anthologies from the early iterations onwards. A typical example of this idea may be seen in an anthology from James Glass Bertram:

"He cometh forth as a flower and is cut down," is the expressive and universally intelligent language of Scripture; and no less does it early prefigure hope than frailty. We strew them over the shroud of departed love, and plant them to bloom brightly above the grave, that they may speak in Spring of a brighter season of hope, and in Summer of that heavenly clime that knows only of an eternal summer and a cloudless sky, and in all seasons, of love, and purity, and peace.⁵⁹

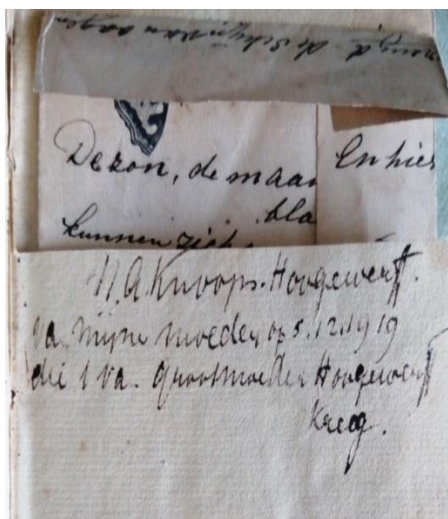
As a means of coping and coming to terms with intense feelings of loss, the language of flowers therefore spoke to this very significant theme of grief. Another example, *Flower Emblems, or, The Seasons of Life* (1871), contains sections of prose and verse concerning mourning and consolation upon the death of a child.⁶⁰ And it is through family feelings that the final case study functions.

⁵⁸ David McAllister, *Imagining the Dead in British Literature and Culture, 1790–1848* (London: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 154–55, 166, 181.

⁵⁹ James Glass Bertram, *The Language of Flowers: An Alphabet of Floral Emblems*, p. v.

⁶⁰ 'March. The Almond Blossom — Fading Childhood', in Anon., *Flower Emblems, or, The Seasons of Life* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1871), pp. 16–21 <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.169414>>.

Case Study 3: Nancy Knoops-Hoogewerff



Figs. 9 & 10, Charlotte de Latour, *Le Langage des Fleurs*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Audot, 1834). 1st ed. 1819. Author's own collection.

For Christmas 2020, at the end of the first Covid year, my mother bought me a second edition of Charlotte de Latour's *Le Langage des Fleurs* (Figs. 9 & 10). This was particularly meaningful to me, as earlier that year I had anticipated resigning from my PhD programme and selling off the language of flowers books that I had started to gather, due in large part to the financial and emotional stresses that many people suffered during the pandemic. The gift of this book was reinvigorating in so many ways. I began collecting language of flowers books in 2019, just prior to the start of a part-time PhD. The books I had accrued were for actual use, for reference rather than display: they formed a personal archive. The idea was to establish a mini library of my own that went beyond the digital, or the institutional collection, to really get a sense of these books as material objects, to try to see and feel through them as they may have originally been perceived. They are not in consistently pristine, or even good, condition: faded, torn, water damaged, scribbled upon, they show traces of past handling and ownership, occasionally bookmarked or containing newspaper cuttings of floriography tidbits. The encouraging gift from my mother not only salvaged this collection but suggested female solidarity, resilience and optimism for the future. Frequently credited as the book that began the language of flowers craze, upon noticing the inscriptions in this copy, tracing the ownership of this publication felt significant. It appears that this book had also previously been a gift. A poem from 'St Nic' or Sinterklass and gift note pasted into

the book tell a story. The note and the poem are in Dutch (Fig. 9).⁶¹ The inscription reads: 'N. A. Knoop-Hoogewerff, from my mother on 5.12.1919 who got it from grandmother Hoogewerff'. Evidently, the book had originally belonged to Nancy's paternal grandmother, 'grandmother Hoogewerff', it passed to Anna and finally to her daughter Nancy.⁶² The poem, presumably composed by Anna for Nancy, emphasises that the flower album is a means of accessing the beauty of nature despite the winter season. It considers the importance of inheritance with the promise of renewal and reuse, both through the passage of the book from person to person and the seasonal transitions of nature. As such, it acts as a symbol of hope to 'triumph over pain and sorrow' and fill the 'heart with joy and with peace'. The flower book demonstrates a longstanding female prerogative, an inherited form suggesting a love of nature, rejuvenation and connection. It considers the lifecycle of plants and flowers in tandem with a human reaction to the seasons: it promotes a level of attention to flowers and a kind of mutual feeling advocated by critics like Catriona Sandilands.⁶³ While it does not undo or erase what Sandilands has reviewed as a historical biopolitics of plants subject to anthropocentrism and instrumental utility, this attention acknowledges a range of perception in plant/person kinship that has occurred historically. The traditional sphere of romance in the language of flowers is here displaced to represent a transgenerational female appreciation of nature and literature, with a message of light in the darkness at its core. My own recent experience of the gifting process then seemed to echo the historic provenance of this book, with the overarching aim of encouraging feelings of hope and interconnection, facilitated through feminine bonds. In other ways too, sharing these books has promoted personal thinking through the language of

⁶¹ Many thanks to Mara Arts for completing the translation and to Jeanne Stroucken for investigating the family history in this case. See Appendix B.

⁶² Family listed in Delft population register 1876–1892 and Delft Civil Registry of 21 June 1906, <https://zoeken.stadsarchiefdelft.nl/detail.php?nav_id=13-2&id=32242396&index=9> and <https://zoeken.stadsarchiefdelft.nl/detail.php?nav_id=10-2&id=36103181&index=12> [accessed 20 September 2023].

⁶³ Catriona Sandilands, 'Plants', in *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 156–69 (p. 157). See also Sandilands, 'Botanical Colonialism and Biocultural Histories', *Green Dreamer*, episode 362 <<https://greendreamer.com/podcast/catriona-sandilands-queer-ecologies>> [accessed 17 July 2023].

flowers genre as a hopeful experience that can inspire environmental awareness today, including an interest in gardening, caring for and identifying plants; but also through revisiting forms of representation within the genre's artistic inclusions.⁶⁴ As such, the genre becomes something more than a decorative status symbol and tool to conduct a love affair. It also gestures towards the value that the language of flowers might still hold for us in current times.

Conclusion: refiguring floriography and feeling

To conclude, it becomes necessary to ask, how does the language of flowers make us react now: what are our prevailing feelings towards the genre? The genre has been considered rife with contradictions, a timebound fad with many readily critiqued ideas that justified, to an extent, its rejection as incoherent and obsolete. Do we laugh at it? Romanticise it? Roll our eyes and discard it? Does it disgust or enchant? Did the genre potentially inspire protective or benevolent feelings towards the environment, or was it merely a means of making nature bend to human will and whim? The language of flowers was in many respects adaptable and applicable to various aspects of human life and experience. However, it remains questionable whether the opposite can also be said; that the language of flowers encouraged its readers to establish closer relationships with the natural world, or even authentic connections with other humans. Revisiting the genre today may make us question whether it is non-recoverable in its anthropocentric, confusing and instrumental representations of nature and women, and its potential to simplify or override personal feeling for sheer marketability. But as this study has suggested, there are different ways of engaging with the language of flowers that might acknowledge its failings alongside its potential to promote alternative forms of feeling.

If there was a community of feeling established through the language of flowers, it was cultivated through human representation of sentimentalised flowers, with human feeling as the primary emphasis. The genre's circulation and popularity was enabled by a commodity culture that has been perceived as marketising feeling and emotion, and the didactic male editorial impetus, particularly in Britain, suggests a level of control or

⁶⁴ Jemma Stewart and Jess Saxby, with Abdessamad El Montassir, Guy Ronen, Noara Quintana, Samir Laghouati Rashwan and Vasundhara Mathur, 'Second Flowerings', *CHASE Climate Justice Zine* <<https://chaseclimatejustice.network/portfolio/second-flowerings/>> [accessed 10 February 2023].

prescriptive imposition upon feelings. However, feelings and emotions were exhibited and shared through the gifting of works in this genre, and through leaving personal markings in the books, as we have seen throughout the case studies of inscriptions. People clearly used the language of flowers to strengthen or establish connections, to negotiate or communicate feelings. It is possible that these connections regularly fell outside of the sphere of romance, occurring most often between women and hinging on feelings of friendship, familial love, even grief and mourning. This adaptability of a romantic genre to speak to a range of feeling was possible because the language of flowers was compiled through an intertextual palimpsest of previous language of flowers instructions from editors across countries, from art to the addition of poetry, botanical information, vocabulary modifications and format alterations. Rather than necessarily signalling a collapse of integrity, the genre's opening up to wider audiences across the nineteenth century also arguably enabled further forms of feeling to find expression. In turn, the books themselves became important intertexts within the nineteenth century and beyond. As such, the language of flowers remains an aspect of material culture worthy of study, generative of new perspectives on feeling with flowers.



BIOGRAPHY: Jemma is a CHASE-funded PhD student at Birkbeck, University of London, supervised by Dr Ana Parejo Vadillo. She is working on a thesis that explores the language of flowers, or floriography, and nineteenth century Gothic fictions by women writers. She has articles featured in the journals *Gothic Studies* and *Gothic Nature*, and has recently been awarded Birkbeck's 'Margaret Elise Harkness Fellowship Prize' for her doctoral work on women writers in the nineteenth century.

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Appendix A: Inscriptions from the author's personal collection.A1: Names

'J (or L) Mault from (illegible)' — *The Language of Flowers* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1834).

'Theodora E McCausland, 1843' — Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers, or, Language of Flora* (London: Tyas, 1841). 1st edn 1836.

'Emma Julia Welsh, April 1854' — Arthur Freeling, *Flowers; Their Use and Beauty in Language and Sentiment* (London: Darton, 1851).

'Joanne James, Age 15' — Anon., *The Language of Flowers; containing the name of every flower to which a sentiment has been assigned* (London: Webb, Millington, 1858).

'W. H. Marston, 1890' — Thomas Miller, *The Poetical Language of Flowers, or, The Pilgrimage of Love* (London: Griffin, c. 1872). 1st edn 1847.

'Phyllis Bailey [struck through], D Bailey, Weston, Norwich' — Laura Valentine, *The Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (London: Warne, undated). 1st edn 1867.

'Emily Cartwright, April 20th 1873' — Anon., *Flower Emblems, or, The Seasons of Life* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1871).

'Mr E. A. Wait' — Mrs L. Burke, *The Coloured Language of Flowers* (London: Routledge, 1886).

'Thomas Edward Morris, Vennington, Westbury, Salop' — Anon., *The Language and Sentiment of Flowers and the Classical Floral Legends* (London: Warne, undated). This text is close to Laura Valentine's, mentioned in this article.

'Michael Batten' — Flora Klickmann, *The Language of Flowers: A Journal and Record for Birthdays* (London: Ward, Lock, c. 1899).

A2: Mothers and Daughters

'Beatrice Gibson, from Mother, May 1892' — Anon., *The Artistic Language of Flowers* (London: Routledge, 1890). This book has been defaced, traces of hand-written floriography notes can be discerned on the torn inner leaves and marginalia in other sections.

Left inner leaf: 'E. O. Nowell from dear Mother'.

On opposite page: 'Miss Elizabeth Lunnan. 1846.

"We analyse a flower, and what find we?

A fairy workshop and its implements.

But where the worker? What and who is he?"

Illegible.

E. O. N. from mama.'

The inscription from Lunnan suffers from water damage. The quotation she uses is taken from Mrs Harriet Oliver Downing, *Remembrances of a Monthly Nurse* (London: Clarke, 1863), p. 83. As the advertisement to the publication mentions, the tales originally appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in the year 1836 and concluded in the old monthly. The scene of the quotation is one of a wedding in the story 'Sir George Knatchbull'. Found in Robert Tyas, *The Hand-Book of the Language and Sentiment of Flowers; Containing the Name of Every Flower to Which a Sentiment has been Assigned* (London: Tyas, 1843).

I believe that the inscribers of this book were Elizabeth Lunnan (1831–1886) and her daughter Edith Ormondy Nowell (1865–1947). Born in Wales and eventually based in Yorkshire, Elizabeth Lunnan married a physician and surgeon, James Nowell (1829–1893) in 1859, and they had seven children — Helen (1860–), Jane (1861–), Tom (1863–), Edith, Henry (Harry) (1866–), Ethel (1869–), and Hugh (1871–1940). Nowell certified Elizabeth's death from locomotor ataxia, at the age of fifty-six.

Sources include the 1871 census (Woodlesford, Hunslet, Whitkirk, Household schedule number 194, Piece 4516, Folio 115, p. 33), and the 1881 census (Cloverfield Villa, Hunslet, Piece 4493, Folio 105, p.31) for England. Certified copy of Lunnan's death certificate 'FE 296171', 27 December 1886, certified by James Nowell M. R. C. S, widower of deceased, Arthur Batty registrar.

A3: Female Friends

'With Mrs Davison's kind love to her young friend Elizabeth Pace, June 11th 1847' — Anon., *Emblems and Poetry of Flowers* (London: Nelson, 1845).

'From Mrs Hartley, to Agnes M Drummond, with all best wishes, Xmas 1901' and a follow-up inscription 'From Mrs Hartley to Agnes May Drummond with best wishes, year 1899. Given to Vera May Stones who is her little girl, year 1922' — Mrs. L. Burke, *The Miniature Language of Flowers* (London: Routledge, 1865). This book is scribbled upon in crayon and text struck out at points.

A4: Sincere Friends

'Azuliah Palmer, presented by a sincear frend, [illegible code] June 1867' — Anon., *The Language & Poetry of Flowers* (London: Nelson, 1864).

'Miss Elizabeth Michaels, From A Sincere Friend, June 5th 1855' — Anon., *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (London: Smith, undated).

Appendix B: Gift Inscription and Poem. Translations by Mara Arts.

Dedication: 'N.A. Knoops-Hoogewerff from my mother on 5.12.1919 who got it from grandmother Hoogewerff'

The sun, the moon, especially the flowers
 Can celebrate your friendship
 And in addition all that is clear
 That is beautiful and clean in this life
 This was given to you, o Nancy
 That which will be your share on earth
 The joy of all these beauties
 Always [about] the world's possibilities
 Will throw out lovely appearance
 This is the secret of your beaming essence
 The joy of the shine of eyes and the warm heart
 And there you will be able to read in the book of life
 And here there [is] triumph over pain and sorrow
 Now flowers are sleeping outside
 I send you this small book
 Already [I] delighted many a sun with it
 Take it with you at night in your warm small corner
 And it fills your heart with joy and with peace
 St Nic