

Fiori dell'anima. La simbologia dei fiori nell'immaginario religioso
Flowers of the soul. The symbolism of flowers in the religious imagination
a cura di Marco Papasidero e Francesco Galofaro

Foreword

Flowers and Religions: semiotic and historical remarks

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Number 23 of Ocula is dedicated to the meanings of flowers and their relationship with sacred values. This issue is composed of three parts. The first, *Symbolic Flora in the Ancient world*, contains three papers related to symbols and meanings of flowers and plants in the Mesopotamian culture and in the Hebrew Bible. The second part is entitled *Christian Botanic symbols* and consists of three papers related to Christian symbolism, which is studied through different lenses (philosophical, historical and semiotic), focusing on different historical periods (Early Christianity, the Middle Ages and the 20th century). The third part, *Diachronic developments of floral imagination*, considers different approaches closely related to a semiotic, textual and literary analysis. The theme of litanies through the centuries of Christianity is treated in three of the five chapters included. The aim of this last group of papers is to underline the strong character of the diachronic development of flower symbolism.

As editors, many contributions came to us as a surprise. The semiotic problem of flowers is not merely the province of specialists. It is a shared object of analysis in a wide range of human sciences: literature, history, anthropology, religious studies. We have the impression that, whatever the field you choose to explore, sooner or later you will come across the symbology of flowers. As part of the NeMoSanctI ERC Research project (nemosancti.eu) we came upon the symbolic value of flowers on the occasion of the Fascination of Plants Day 2019, during one of our outreach activities. Starting from the ideas we collected from the participants, we decided to deepen the scientific problems related to the meaning of flowers. We thank the editorial staff of Ocula for the support they gave our project.¹

¹ NeMoSanctI is a research project carried out at the University of Turin. It studies how models of sanctity have changed since the Second Vatican Council. To this end, it applies a

1. Semiotic remarks

Flowers represent a problem for different reasons: first, from the scarce testimonies of the past, it is sometimes difficult to accurately identify the flora which was present in the environment of the *other* culture: this point is developed in Ugo Volli's and Massimo Leone's contributions; second, it is difficult to fully understand the values associated to flowers by the *other* culture; *diachronic* change multiplies the exegetical interpretations (see Volli's work), and implies research questions on its *logic* (see for example Francesco Galofaro's morphodynamic frame); finally, even from a *synchronic* point of view, the values associated to flowers in the *other* culture can be divergent, since the semantic space of every culture has a contradictory nature – see Umberto Eco (1976: 293). Thus, for example, flowers can be symbols of a transcendent, sacred dimension, – see Jenny Ponzio's paper – or, on the contrary, of the transience of earthly life – cf. Leone's paper. Thus, the *translation* between two cultures implies deviations and misrepresentations (Leone, Galofaro).

The semiotics of flowers is extremely complex. However, if we compare the contributions of the present number, a scheme seems to emerge. First, the value of flowers depends on their position in the system of the culture in question (Hjelmslev 1961). This system can be identified with the semiotics of the natural world (Greimas 1984) of the considered culture, in relation to its environment. Depending on the context, each feature of the flower can be relevant to *manifest* a meaning: chromatic components; eidetic components (verticality); foreground/background relations between the flower and the landscape; and, of course, perfume. In literary texts, flowers are used as a concrete element manifesting an abstract value – a metonymy of sorts (cf. Kubas' paper). This ambivalent association between a material, manifesting element and an abstract, manifested meaning allows flowers to take on opposed values: inasmuch as the spiritual side is considered, they can be involved in rituals and liturgy, but they can also be forbidden by radical reformers, because of their materiality. According to Leone, Ponzio, Marino, aspectual marks are also relevant, when flowers are used as signifiers:

- Inchoativity, whenever their presence comes as a surprise, e.g. as a spot of colour in the arid landscape;
- Durativity, with regard to the persistence of their perfume;
- Terminativity, when the ephemeral life of the flower is themed.

For these reasons, they constitute a poetic repertoire of ready-made elements and syntagmas, an imaginary which can be used in literature and in any other semiotic system to convey rhetorical effects (e.g. prosopopoeia). As they are inserted in narrative structures, these effects can further transform

pioneering methodology based on semiotic theory to a wide corpus of normative, judicial, and narrative texts. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314).

their value. These shifts of value entail functional changes which can be reconstructed by the researcher and can be useful to investigate the relationship between different cultures and different epochs.

2. History and religions

Some contributions of this special issue are related to the history of religions. Flowers and plants are important elements of many religious traditions, also because they play a crucial role in cosmogonies and myths of origin. From the analysis of the case studies considered, a radical opposition and a constant oscillation between a concrete and a metaphoric/symbolic use of plants emerges. There are many symbolic values given to the plants in our examples, as in the case of regality – represented by the palm and other trees – and the Mesopotamian sovereigns' need to propitiate the divine sphere (cf. Verderame's and Bertolini's papers), but also in the Christian context, with the metaphoric representation of God and His abundance in the desert landscapes described by pilgrims in the *Loca Sancta*, represented by the oasis, the garden and water (cf. Sabbatini's paper), or in the image of the lily of the field included in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Mt. 6,28; Lc. 12,27). At the same time, plants and flowers have also a very concrete dimension and different purposes. Especially in the Ancient world, plants are used for ritual purifications, to wash statues and temples (cf. also the ritual practices in Hinduism, such as the *pūja*, although not considered in our cases); cedar and tamarisk wood are important as decorative elements inside palaces and buildings in general; the date, the fruit of the palm, is a significant food in the Mesopotamian economy and nutrition. It is important to remark that also the concrete use of flowers, trees and plants is deeply connected with religion, thanks to tales which recount how the gods decided to give them to humanity or teach people how to cultivate them. In the Christian context (cf. Lingua's paper) there is an interesting transition between the concrete and metaphoric dimension: flowers, used in the pagan culture for many purposes, in Early Christianity lose their concrete use and acquire metaphoric meanings, linked, for example, to the aforementioned evangelical image of the lily, symbol of God's care. This case demonstrates how a religion, like Christianity, takes and transforms social and ritual habits (the Roman use of flowers and plants) in order to avoid the risk of practicing a superstitious use of flowers or idolizing them. One of the concrete expressions of the materiality of flowers in Early Christianity is the habit of putting them on altars and tombs – a practice often condemned by the Church Fathers because of its relation with the pagan one.

Another important element that characterises the role of flowers in religions is the presence of miracle accounts, in which the concrete dimension of plants is full of supernatural references. Miracles put in communication two different dimensions: visible and invisible. In the papers there are many examples, such as the miraculous growth of the palm, cultivated by a crow in the Mesopotamian tradition, or the capacity of some plants to heal people, as in the case of the balm in the Late Medieval pilgrims' diaries, in which there is

also the curative dimension of nature and its fruits. The last case also displays the interesting perspective of the transformational power of miracle: God is able to transform desert areas into oases with water, drawing a sacred geography composed of places blessed by Him.

Many of the considered tales reveal an etiologic dimension, with the aim of explaining the origin of places and plants on the basis of supernatural events, as in the aforementioned tale of the crow or in the supposed origins of some plants, such as the balm, which, according to an apocryphal tradition, grew in the spring made to flow by the Baby Jesus during the escape to Egypt.

The whole issue highlights the contraposition between two different schemes of thought about the absence/presence of flowers. If some traditions take them into great consideration, also in a concrete dimension – e.g. Mesopotamian and Roman –, others use them less in rituals and more in a symbolic horizon, as in the case of the Hebrew context and Early Christianity, in order to eradicate or avoid pagan habits and idolatry.

3. Symbolic Flora in the Ancient world

Verderame's paper analyses the role and function of plants in some ancient Mesopotamian literary works. The palm and its fruit, the date, is the most important one, because of its role in economy and nutrition. At the same time, plants, in addition to specific utilities, have many religious meanings, motivated on the basis of legendary tales. Verderame takes into consideration especially the Sumerian *Inanna and Šukaletuda* and the Babylonian *Palm and Tamarisk*. The first is related to a myth in which there is the description of the cultivation of the palm tree by a crow; the second is a tenson in which each of the two trees declaims its own virtues. As Verderame highlights, each tale creates a link between the concrete role of plants in economy and society, and their "divine" origin: the way in which these plants have to be planted came from the gods. One of the most interesting aspects of his contribution is the diffusion of the representation of the palm – a type of regal sign –, which appears not only in literature but also as a decoration in temples and on walls. The main original aspect of the paper is the attention given to the symbolic representation of plants in ancient Mesopotamia, especially related to the palm but also to the tamarisk, the poplar – and its cool shade –, and the *eren* tree, normally interpreted as the cedar.

In our special issue, there is another paper related to the flora in Sumerian literature. Bertolini takes into consideration a *corpus* of texts, which consider specifically the presence of flowers and plants in religious love works. Her analysis shows that there are many recurrent plants: flowers in general, the apple tree (and its fruit), the palm, the *mes* – a tree not identified yet –, the poplar, the aforementioned *erin*, the *naġa* plant. The whole complex of plants and flowers is very often related to the divine couple Inanna and Dumuzid, for example in the description of the sacred thalamus. There are many directives of meaning, some of them related to the link between the sovereign and the divine origin of his power. Very interesting is the preeminence, in the metaphors

of trees, of male figures, also because of a very deep relation between arboreal metaphors and regality. In a more general perspective, from the point of view of the use of metaphors, when they refer to male subjects, they are related to strength, energy, invincibility of the sovereign; when they refer to women – above all Inanna –, they are related to sweetness, sensuality, desirability. At the same time, the plants are often considered in a concrete way, for example in the case of the ritual purifications made by the *naġa* plant, used for this purpose on the body of Inanna, but also on the statues of deities and in the temples.

According to Ugo Volli the appreciation of flowers is correlated to a specific culture and its environment. Another factor impacting on it can be the condemnation of aesthetic pleasure in relation to religious and political radicalization. Volli considers the Biblical lexicon about flowers, which is comparatively poor. The principal value related to flowers in the Bible is their perfume. The Jewish names of flowers are difficult to translate since they possibly referred to kinds of flowers, not to specific ones. As Volli points out, the value attributed by culture to flowers does not reside in their referent, but in their semantic value: beauty, grace, and pleasure related to perfume, colour, and shape. The Jewish mystic tradition takes possession of the rare occurrences of flowers in the Bible, interpreting them in a symbolic and theological way.

4. Christian Botanic Symbols

According to Goody (1993), flowers acquired a positive meaning in Christianity especially during the Middle Ages. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible, flowers do not have a very important role in cult and rituals. At the same time, Early Christianity condemned the devotional use of flowers, because of their role in the pagan culture, in which they were part of private and public rituals (garlands on statues, offerings for the deceased, crowns for poets etc.). Lingua's paper well underlines the idea of a change of paradigm, with an evolution in the consideration of flowers. According to him, it is possible to find some positive references to flowers in Christianity also in the early period. Along with the more common condemnation of the use of flowers (e.g. in Tertullian's *De corona*), there are other cases in which they are considered an expression and manifestation of God, on the basis of Psalm 104 – and its commentaries – and the Gospel tales related to the lily of the field. Lingua's reflection is based on the contraposition of different thought paradigms present in Early Christianity and related to the absence/presence of flowers. In this context, the removal of flowers has to be interpreted as the removal of all the meanings related to the pre-Christian culture.

Ilaria Sabbatini underlines the way in which the pilgrims between the 13th and 15th centuries describe flowers and plants, mixing naturalistic and religious aspects. In their descriptions the opposition desert/oasis is very important: the first represents drought and the absence of humanity, while the second represents not only abundance, but also the order and the presence of humanity (*civitas*). The key element in the transformation of a desert area

into an oasis is water, which characterises many pilgrims' descriptions, deeply related to the Biblical imaginary of sources and rivers, often an expression of a supernatural abundance. Two are the plants more often described: the balm and the banana. The first grew in the oasis of Matarea and is considered miraculous because of its capacity to heal people – also thanks to the oil that it exudes –, as well as because it cannot be transplanted. Moreover, its smell is of extraordinary beauty. The miraculous power of the oil is testified also by the ampoules used to enshrine it and to give it to pilgrims. The second plant is the banana, described referring to similar plants in the West, but above all on the basis of the sign of the cross that appears when it is cut. Sabbatini's analysis shows that the real interest of pilgrims is not only the natural dimension of plants and flowers but the possibility of linking them to a wide supernatural dimension, connected to the Bible on the basis of the visit to the *Loca Sancta*. Miracles are part of the pilgrimage experience and plants are an expression of a specific horizon of religious meanings. Nature, in this case, is transformed by the miraculous presence of God, also thanks to a supposed historical connection with Christ.

Different cultures link smell to different values: Fontanille (2004), quoting Annik Le Guerér (1998), finds evidence of a link between smell and matter, while in Christian contexts the relation is between smell and spirit.² Jenny Ponzio finds the remote origin of the association between sanctity, flowers, and perfume in the Bible (Sirach). The same association can be found in other cultures (ancient Egypt, China). The codification of sanctity, which can be considered a form of mediation between the material and the spiritual world, often implies the attribution of spiritual values to floral perfumes.

In Peircian terms, the *osmogenesis* of the body of the saint, interpreted by psychoanalysis as a symptom of a psychiatric disease, is an *index*. Like the halo, osmogenesis shows a temporal aspect (persistence) which can be related to memory – Ponzio quotes Floch on the aftertaste, which creates continuity. From a topological point of view, the halo is a peripheral, permeable space surrounding the saint and communicating sanctity to receivers.

5. Diachronic developments of floral imaginary

In Massimo Leone's paper, flowers are enframed as part of the semiotics of the natural world, as terminals of meaning-relations that the semiotician reconstructs and studies. According to Leone's plastic analysis, in the Bible the occurrences of the word "flower" are related to a chromatic explosion which does not last (inchoative, not durative aspectualization). Flowers can consequently be opposed to the durativity of the divine word. Through the development of Christian liturgy, this theme is linked to the classical metaphor of deciduous flowers, and this way it is further elaborated during the Middle

² This is consistent with the opinion of Scaramelli (1904), a treatise on spiritual direction, according to which smell is the least problematic sense from the point of view of temptation.

Ages, often in reference to the female body. “Flower” is a figure, thus its value depends on the cultural system to which it belongs; it is imperfectly translated into different cultures, and further elaborated in narrative structures.

Francesco Galofaro searches for a logic of diachronic functional change in the migration of floral figures from the Biblical poems (Song of Songs, Sirach) to Medieval litanies, through the mediation of the Gospel, of Early patristic literature, poetry ... In particular, Galofaro is interested in functional change, and finds a morphodynamic model which explains the latter as the development of a germ which can be found in the former. In his conclusion Galofaro introduces the notion of misfolding, which happens when two discursive configurations featured by similar expressive forms and different functional values come into contact and merge.

According to Magdalena Maria Kubas, in the litany, the flower is concrete, while the epithet with which it is accompanied is abstract. The colors of flowers allow the construction of chromatic climaxes with symbolic values; in the Medieval lauda of the Bolognese brotherhood of the Servants of the Virgin, flowers are used to communicate scents. Flowers and appositions constitute a poetical model also in reference to the expression plan, since they are a repertoire of fixed formulas helping the poet forge the verse from a metrical point of view.

Gabriele Marino reminds us that the flower is capable of playing the role of mediator between earth and heaven because of its animacy and plastic qualities:

chtonic dimension / flower = horizontal / vertical = absence / presence of perfume

For this reason, after a first condemnation by the early Church, they were soon incorporated in the liturgy. This happens not only in the practices (flowers as a form of expression) but also in Medieval commentaries to the *Song of songs* (flowers as a form of content, providing a figure for sacred values). For similar reasons, personification is associated to flowers too. The Marian litany to flowers is an example of how these semiotic devices are still present and in operation in our culture.

An analysis of flowers’ religious meanings is interesting also if applied to texts that do not reveal explicit references to religious language, but are related to a religious sensibility. In Lappin’s paper, two poems are considered: the first written by Howard Nemerov, entitled *Flower Arrangements*, 1975, and the second by Medbh McGuckian, entitled *The Flower Master*, 1979. The two compositions are very different but characterised by the use of flowers and specific meanings related to a religious horizon, even if stripped of precise confessional elements. In Lappin’s analysis, the poems reveal two different approaches to flowers: the first considers them a passive element, expression of the caducity of life and a metaphor of human experience. The second, to the contrary, is a description of a flower composition based on the Japanese *ikebana* technique, in which flowers are active elements that represent the feminine capacity to create. Two are the meaning directives of the poems in

Lappin's perspective: the material decadence of flowers, expression of a deeper reflection on death and life (the poet defines himself as an agnostic Jew); flowers and their composition as an expression of a gender issue, with control – or care, says Lappin – over the woman's "creative" process in general. The religious horizon is expressed without a religious language, but it is implied in both poems.

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