

Flowers

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 17 Jul 1999

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Roy C. Lackey — 17 Jul 1999, 10:05

Some time ago I mentioned posting something about florigraphy in the Urth Cycle. What follows is not what I originally intended to write about--the message Wolfe intended to convey by the three flowers placed on the graves of Sev and his fellow "gods" at the very end of URTH. Instead, I will here concentrate on the subject as it pertains to Dorcas, which is more extensive. There are dozens of references to flowers in the five books, and much more could be written on the subject, but if it has been done I am not aware of it

Florigraphy is the language of flowers. While particular flowers have long been associated with particular human sentiments, e.g. roses with love, in recent centuries those simple associations evolved into a more complex "language", whereby fairly sophisticated messages could be exchanged solely with floral arrangements. The choice of flowers, the particular orientation of them, time and method of delivery, etc., all combined to convey a message, usually, but not necessarily, romantic in nature. Florigraphy reached the apex of its popularity during the Victorian era, and entire books were devoted to the subject.

I do not claim that Wolfe researched the subject that extensively, or know what sources he used, but that he has some knowledge of it is certain. Doubters have only to read a single paragraph in chapter 2, p. 51, of CALDE to satisfy themselves. Readers of Wolfe will have noted the mention of roses in nearly everything he has written, (his wife, of course, is named Rosemary) and the Urth cycle is no exception, but many other flowers are mentioned as well. As is the case for mythological authorities, any two given sources for the meaning(s) of particular flowers will not necessarily agree in all the particulars. Also, the meaning given to the same flower sometimes changed over the course of time, so that there cannot often be definitive answers. This makes the task of deciphering Wolfe's intentions all the harder, but that's typical. The problem is further complicated when he names a flower in a given context but neglects to mention the color of it. Any given flower, e.g. a daisy, may have a generic meaning, but another meaning if of a certain color, still another if it is a subvariety.

From her first appearance in the NEW SUN to her last, Dorcas is sending a series of signals with the flowers she puts in her hair. Most of these signals, whether sent consciously or unconsciously, have to do with Sev, but he, of course, is oblivious. I can only conclude that Wolfe intended the reader to decipher them for themselves.

1) When Dorcas, Agia, and Sev are being rowed across the Lake of Birds (I, XXIV) by Hildegryn, Dorcas plucks a blue water hyacinth from the surface of the lake--a place where flowers do not exist--and places it in her hair. The water hyacinth is most often associated with "constancy". The chapter title "The Flower of Dissolution" refers, of course, to the avorn he is there to pluck. The water hyacinth is mentioned in the first line of the chapter; the avorn in the last. The avorn represents the dissolution of death, obviously, and is presented in contrast to the water hyacinth. While Sev is speculating about where the hyacinth came from his thoughts turn religious, noting the contrast of life and death, light and dark, order and chaos, etc., concluding, to state it simply, that the negative halves of these pairs of opposites is

where God isn't.

I am aware of the use of the hyacinth in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" as a symbol of resurrection, which would fit perfectly in this context, and Wolfe well may have had this poem in mind when he wrote this scene, but in the sources on florigraphy that I have seen, resurrection is not the meaning assigned to the hyacinth. While the language of flowers and the symbolic use of flowers certainly overlap, they are not entirely congruent, and I make no pretense of being an authority on the subject.

2) On the day after the contest at the Sanguinary Field, after Sev's visit with Agia and Agilus in the latter's cell, Sev arranges for temporary quarters for the night for himself and Dorcas. The couple then goes for a walk. (I, XXX) "Dorcas had found a daisy for her hair; but as we walked about outside the walls ... it folded its petals in sleep, and she plucked instead one of those white, trumpet-shaped blossoms that are called moonflowers." They soon return to their room to make love for the first time. It is unclear from the text where Dorcas obtained the daisy (yes, it matters), and its color is not specified. The meaning of the generic daisy is "innocence"; the same for the white daisy. Since they were at a military compound, it seems safe to disregard the garden daisy. The wild, or single field daisy, however, means "I will think of it". Either of these two meanings could apply to Dorcas. She has a child-like innocence and is struggling to recall her past. The change of flowers is significant and has a clearer meaning.

The moonflower is the common name for a member of the twining or creeping plants, such as the morning glory, which are part of the family called ipomoea. The meaning given to ipomoea is "attachment; I attach myself to you". In context, the meaning is clear enough, both literally and figuratively.

3) After escaping from the antechamber Sev rejoined the thespian group. An interesting side note is that, when he found the group, Dr. Talos was striking the heads from flowers with his cane, just as he did the night, near the end of SHADOW, when Sev and Dorcas came upon his encampment, the same night that the eidolons Malrubius and Triskele appeared to him. Make of that what you will. At any rate, after a nap, Sev and Dorcas wandered away onto the grounds of the House Absolute to be alone and talk. (II, XXII) They passed through a grove of plum trees in bloom, and Dorcas put a twig of the white blossoms into her hair. Sev draws the distinction between the plum trees he and Jonas passed through on the way to the antechamber, which he judged to have been planted for ornamentation, and those he and Dorcas passed through, which he thought had been planted for the fruit. The distinction would be absolutely pointless but for the difference in the meaning attached to them. The wild plum tree means "independence", but the generic plum tree (presumably domesticated, cultivated for the fruit) means "keep your promise" or "genius".

Genius is not a term that can be associated with Sev, and probably not with Dorcas. If we are to assume that Dorcas is the author of the messages being sent via the flowers, then the interpretation of their meaning would not be the same as their interpretation if Wolfe is sending a signal to the reader. Sev has made no explicit promise to her that he must keep, although he will shortly break faith with her by ravishing Jolenta. She doesn't know that, though she must see the potential. Her tortured dreams and returning memories of her life before her death may be reawakening promises made to her husband and family.

Near the bench where they are sitting in a long-forgotten garden are a few beds of simple flowers and herbs--"rosemary, angelica, mint, basil, and rue", meaning, respectively, "remembrance", "inspiration", "virtue", "hatred (or "give me your good wishes")", and "disdain". [N1]

4) In Thrax, on the morning of the last day of her life with Sev, Dorcas cut her hair short and left their rooms after putting a white peony in her hair. (III, II) There are several meanings for the white peony: "anger", "bashfulness", "shame". Anger and shame are both indicated here. The book opens with Dorcas-- who fears and avoids water--recounting standing under a waterfall in the women's bath, trying to wash the stench of the prison tunnels out of her hair. She is angry with the women she heard talking about her, the paramour of a torturer, and the things they say about Sev. She is also angry with Sev, because she realizes what the women are saying is true. She feels shame for herself for putting up with it, for going to bed in a room atop those very tunnels. While listening to Dorcas air her feelings (III, I), Sev likens the yellow lights of the city below to a jonquil. The jonquil means "I desire a return of affection". Tough luck.

5) When Sev last sees Dorcas, it is in the ruins of lower Nessus. Traveling up the Gyll aboard the _Samru_, Sev spies "...a little boat, newly built, tied to an ancient pier." What follows is either an absolutely astonishing act of intuition or the one instance in the entire Urth Cycle when slow-witted Sev is smarter than the reader. He asks to be put ashore alongside the boat, and there reveals what else he saw from the deck of the ship; "...a wilted scarlet poppy left lying on the single seat." (IV, XXXII). By means inexplicable, he finds his way to the long-deserted shop where Dorcas had lived with her husband and child. "Perhaps it was no more than the perfume of the blossom she wore, because when I saw her she had an arum, freckled white and sweet as Dorcas herself had always been, thrust into her hair. No doubt she had brought it there for that purpose, and had taken out the wilted poppy and cast it down when she had tied up her boat." What purpose? As the text reads, it means the purpose of guiding him to her in the shop via the scent of the arum. Yet there is no way for her to know or even suspect that Sev is anywhere near Nessus. He enters the rear of the shop through "a narrow door hidden under ivy". The ivy vine means "matrimony, marriage". Inside, with her back to him, she is kneeling before a bier on which is the dead body of the old boatman, her former husband. Beside her is a basket "not small yet not large either".

There are several other things very wrong with this scene. When, where, and how did the boatman die? The shop is more than two full days and nights of travel by the _Samru_ from the Citadel. Did delicate little Dorcas--who is mortally afraid of water--not only buy a new boat, but also navigate it down the Gyll to her old home? I don't think so. Why was she there at all? How did the old man's body come to be on a bier on the second floor of the shop? Did little Dorcas put it there? I don't think so. Sev specifically states that the reason he didn't speak to her was that she had just arrived. She is quite a busy girl. He also says that her hair "...was the same--unchanged since I had seen her first in the Garden of Endless Sleep." Nonsense. She cut her hair so short in Thrax that "she almost seemed a boy". From the time Sev left Thrax until that moment, perhaps two or three months had passed. Hair doesn't grow that fast. And if there is a baby in that basket, then someone has been playing in the Corridors of Time.

The generic meaning of a poppy, or of a red poppy, is "consolation", but that of a scarlet poppy is "fantastic extravagance". I don't know if Sev can tell the difference between red and scarlet. If taken literally, fantastic extravagance may refer to the expense of the "newly built" boat, a boat she will have little more use for. The arum has two meanings, "ardor" and "ferocity and deceit".[N2] I think the first of those meanings can be dismissed, given her circumstances. The spotted arum means both "ardor" and "great warmth". As for "ferocity and deceit", that depends on exactly what has been going on. There are lingering questions about exactly how she came to be in the Lake of Birds, but more and more of her memories had been coming back even before she left Sev. She may have remembered

how she got there, which may relate to the old boatman's timely demise. Recall that in the same conversation that Sev and Dorcas had in the gardens of the House Absolute that I mentioned above, Dorcas objected to Dr. Talos having labeled Sev as Death, that he wasn't really like that. Sev called it a metaphor, and Dorcas said it was a bad metaphor. In the last paragraph of that chapter Sev wrote: "...it occurred to me to wonder whether Dr. Talos's calling Dorcas "Innocence" had not been a metaphor of the same kind."

Determining what Wolfe intended in this enigmatic scene remains difficult, even with the added gloss of the flower language.

The meanings given to the flowers that I have related here have been largely gleaned from various internet sites devoted to the subject, so anyone interested has access to the same resources. If anyone here has more knowledge of the subject than I, speak up.

[N1] "...twined lupine, purple loosestrife, and white meadow rue." are the wildflowers that deck the bowers of Sev and his fellow gods. Lupine (very Wolfean) means "voraciousness; inspiration; dejection". Loosestrife (*lysimachia vulgaris*) means "pretension". *Lysimachia* is Greek for "ending strife". Purple loosestrife (*lythrum salicaria*) derives its color from *lythrum*, a word from the Greek "*lythron*", meaning "blood". I don't know if the qualifiers "white" and "meadow" charge the meaning of white meadow rue (*thalictrum aquilegiifolium 'album'*) with any meaning beyond the typical meaning for rue of "disdain".

[N2] Dragonwort is another name for the common arum, as is wake-robin and snakeweed. Dragonwort means "horror" (as does mandrake) in the language of flowers. It is mentioned in the OED that those who carry the leaves and roots of the dragonwort are protected against vipers and serpents. In chapter XXVII of *CLAW* Dorcas likened the stream that she, Sev, and Jolenta camped beside to a big snake. Given her fear of water, she may have carried the arum in the boat with her down the Gyoll to ameliorate her fear of the river.

Roy

Tony Ellis — 19 Jul 1999, 09:56 · follows Roy C. Lackey

What a fascinating article, Roy!

I hadn't even finished it when I started thinking of the "sprawling angel's trumpets" which are the very last words of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. They work on various levels, of course, including a symbolic link to the silver trumpet vine of the opening paragraphs, but now I'm curious as to what (if any) meaning they have in florigraphy.

What do your sources say, Roy?

Alice Turner — 20 Jul 1999, 07:32 · follows Tony Ellis

From: "Tony Ellis" <tony.ellis at futurenet.co.uk>

What a fascinating article, Roy!

I hadn't even finished it when I started thinking of the "sprawling angel's trumpets" which are the very last words of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. They work on various levels, of course, including a symbolic link to the silver trumpet vine of the opening paragraphs, but now I'm curious as to what (if any) meaning they have in florigraphy.

From Wyman's Gardening Encyclopedia:

Angel's Trumpet = Brugmansia

The leaves and seeds of this Peruvian plant are poisonous. Sometimes grown as an ornamental for its large, white, solitary, trumpet-shaped flowers, 10" long. These have a musky odor, open at night, and have 5 twisted segments in the corolla. The large grayish-green leaves are 8" long, thick, velvety and are borne in pairs; one is a third shorter than the other.

-alga

Alice Turner — 21 Jul 1999, 23:27 · follows Alice Turner

Apologies if this and the next one get repeated. I sent them both yesterday, but, as Ranjit has cause to know, my newish ISP seems temperamentally allergic to the urth list, and they seem never to have arrived.

Roy has been so inspirational! Looking at his essay, I began to wonder if this little herb garden on the House Absolute grounds might be the relic of a Shakespeare garden, though of course no one would recognize it as such. (The non-gardeners among you should know that Shakespeare gardens are a great favorite with literate sentimental gardeners--I would have one if I had more room and more sun.) Most of you probably think of Ophelia, or perhaps of Titania's bower---and "Love's Labour's Lost" has a very pretty garden song--but actually the great Shakespearean garden scene is Act IV Scene 4 of "The Winter's Tale," when we first meet Perdita, the young princess who has been brought up, all unknowing, as a shepherd's daughter. Perdita ("lost girl") has rosemary, rue and mint in her garden, together with daisies and many other flowers. But no angelica and no basil. Hmm, I thought, let's have a look at these plants.

Near the bench where they are sitting in a long-forgotten garden
are a few beds of simple flowers and herbs--"rosemary, angelica, mint,
basil, and rue", meaning, respectively, "remembrance", "inspiration",
"virtue", "hatred (or "give me your good wishes")", and "disdain". [N1]

Angelica (also dwarf gentian) is an aromatic herb, white, greenish or purple, a good fish flavoring, not unlike celery. This could be savory, a rather vague term that applies to several species of plants. Or it could be marjoram. Or even fennel. Perdita has them all in her garden. All are far more familiar to the cook (that's me) than angelica. It used to be candied, apparently, several centuries ago--it certainly goes back to Shakespeare's time.

Basil: This is a toughie. By name it goes back to the 15th c. (OED), well before Shakespeare. Why wouldn't he mention it? Well, it was somewhat loosely used for some forms of thyme, and vice versa. That could be it.

(I realize I am opening myself to attack by Borski. but it's too interesting not to pursue.)

Okay, I leave you with this. At the beginning of the act, 15-year-old Perdita, whom we have just met, surrounded by shepherdesses and Autolycus (king of thieves, yes, you Xenites, the very one), greet not only Prince Florizel but a lord of the court at the occasion of the spring sheep-shearing:

PERDITA:

You're welcome, sir.

Give me those flowers there, Dorcas. Reverend sirs,
For you there's rosemary and rue; these keep

Seeming and savour all the winter long.
Grace and remembrance be to you both,
And welcome to our shearing!

Roses to all of you (that's from me, not Perdita),

-alga

Matthew Malthouse — 22 Jul 1999, 11:13 · follows Alice Turner

Alice Turner wrote:

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OED:

basil1. Herb. Forms: 5 (basilicon), basile, 6

basyle, -yll, bazil, bassel, 6,7 basill, 6, basil.

[a. OF. basile, ad. L. basilisca, f. basiliscus basilisk: the Gr. name of the plant was <beta><alpha><sigma><iota><lambda><iota><kappa><nu> royal, whence the botanical specific name basilicum, perhaps because the herb was used in some royal unguent, bath, or medicine (Prior). In Lat. this seems to have been confused with basiliscus, on the supposition that it was an antidote to the basilisk<sq>s venom: in OF., basile, basilicoq, basilique, and in mod.F., basilic are applied both to the serpent and the plant.]

Now if basil were an antidote to the basilisk's venom anyone care to nominate a basilisk in Urth?

Matthew

William H. Ansley — 22 Jul 1999, 21:45 · follows Matthew Malthouse

Roy,

I, too, was very impressed with your essay on the language of flowers and its application in the analysis of The Book of the New Sun. And I thank you for your appreciation of my efforts in writing the Oz/Eyeflash posts.

I also think you summarized the problems with the scene where Severian

finds Dorcus in ruined Nessus well. In part, you wrote:

5) When Sev last sees Dorcas, it is in the ruins of lower Nessus.

Traveling up the Gyoll aboard the Samru, Sev spies "...a little boat, newly built, tied to an ancient pier." What follows is either an absolutely astonishing act of intuition or the one instance in the entire Urth Cycle when slow-witted Sev is smarter than the reader. He asks to be put ashore alongside the boat, and there reveals what else he saw from the deck of the ship; "...a wilted scarlet poppy left lying on the single seat." (IV, XXXII). By means inexplicable, he finds his way to the long-deserted shop where Dorcas had lived with her husband and child.

"Perhaps it was no more than the perfume of the blossom she wore, because when I saw her she had an arum, freckled white and sweet as Dorcas herself had always been, thrust into her hair. No doubt she had brought it there for that purpose, and had taken out the wilted poppy and cast it down when

she had tied up her boat." What purpose? As the text reads, it means the purpose of guiding him to her in the shop via the scent of the arum. Yet there is no way for her to know or even suspect that Sev is anywhere near Nessus.

I do have an alternative to offer to your interpretation of the passage you quote about the poppy and the arum. I think it is also valid and removes at least one of the mysteries you raise (that is, how she knew that Severian was near enough to follow the scent of the arum). I don't mean to start another iron man debate; I just offer my observation as an illustration of how Wolfe's prose, rich in ambiguity, can be often be interpreted in different ways.

As I read the passage, the "purpose" Severian alludes to is merely that she brought the arum to put it in her hair as an ornament, because she knew or suspected that the poppy was wilting.

William Ansley