



Lady Lilith (1872), Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Delaware Art Museum

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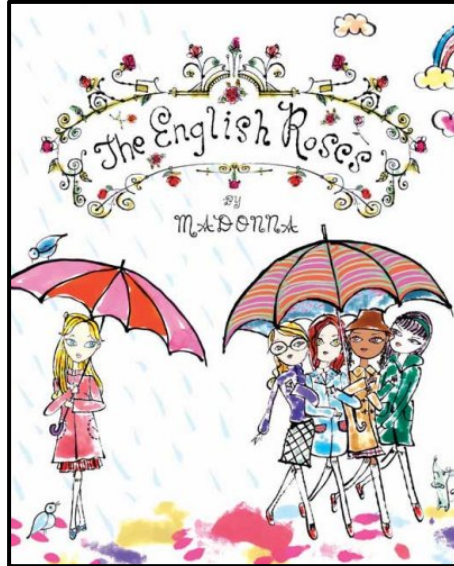
This essay seeks to draw on theories of representation so as to link the multi-signifying dimension of the garden with the language of flowers as conveying a social and moral code, acknowledged both in the Victorian age and today, and therefore ultimately aims to revisit the making of social identities. It begins by placing the English rose within the tradition of British national symbols and proceeds to highlight how floral symbolism was widely used in the arts, focusing on a selection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings in order to show how floral imagery both sustained and subverted stereotyped female roles. It goes on to argue that floral representations were used as a means for women to recognise their "natural" place in society. Finally, it rediscovers the Ruskinian "go to Nature" precept as having inspired both Victorian aestheticism and ordinary women who longed to turn their home into a paradise as well as a garden, where they could play the part not only of angel but also of queen. Thus, a neo-Victorian perspective is called upon to reinterpret this idealisation of social roles as inspiring the making of gender identities with a subversive potential for giving a voice to those who could not otherwise make themselves heard. It concludes that floral representations, both in the literal and the figurative sense, contribute to a better understanding of Victorian and contemporary British culture, therefore linking gender and identity questions with cultural history.

1. The rose as a national icon

To represent something means both to describe or depict it and to symbolise it. In order to explain meaning as the result of a signifying practice other than through the mimetic approach, as exemplified by Gertrude Stein's well-known line "A rose is a rose is a rose", the intentional and the constructionist approaches to representation² are used here to support the main argument of this essay. In fact, the English rose in its denotative meaning refers to a beautiful flower with an intense perfume and a profusion of petals. However, up to today, its symbolism not only as an icon of national union but as a metaphor for womanhood – pointing at both delicacy and strength, especially in a woman who has a

² Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 24-25.

natural beauty and a strong character – has been constantly used and intentionally (re)constructed in popular culture.³



In 1997, a grieving Elton John rewrote his 1970s tribute to Marilyn Monroe, "Candle in the Wind", as "Goodbye England's Rose" in memory of Diana, Princess of Wales. Fourteen years later, Diana's son William married another English rose, Kate Middleton – once dubbed "Waity Katie", but admired by the British people for her beautiful looks, healthy complexion and psychological resilience – who has recently given birth to Charlotte Elizabeth Diana, a baby whose name significantly links institutional history to family ties by paying homage to the little princess's grandfather Charles, Prince of Wales, her great-grandmother Elizabeth, Queen of England, and her late grandmother, the People's Princess.

The English rose is therefore part of a series of British national symbols. The British Isles, with England at their core, have a long tradition in building, or better saying, idealising, an identity as a privileged territory, a "blessed plot" to borrow Shakespeare's words in *Richard II*, an "other Eden, demi-paradise". Given that representation is ultimately "the production of meaning through language",⁴ not only verbal language but also visual language are involved in the processes of representation. One should not take for granted the aphorism that a picture is worth a thousand words, but visibility actually plays a crucial role in the passing of an effective message. Besides there existing an element of pleasure in

³ In 2003, when she was still married to the British director Guy Ritchie, the American singer and pop star Madonna gave the first of her series of children's books the title *The English Roses*, the sequel to which was published in 2006.

⁴ Hall, *Representation*, 16.

looking at images, attributing social and political meanings to them has often to do more with the perception of their value in a particular cultural context at a given time. It is not easy to say what gives an image social value, but the processes of reading images are often dependent on our own knowledge of the language systems, be they writing, speech or images.⁵

The Tudor Age, especially during the Elizabethan period, reinforced the representation of England as a garden where an English Rose ruled over all other flowers. The Virgin Queen, also known as Gloriana, was perhaps the monarch who best exploited her public image in countless portraits full of symbolic meaning. The iconography of royalty, such as crowns, sceptres and globes, was combined with representations of virginity and purity, such as pearls, moons and, naturally, roses, in order to express the Queen's personal purity and the righteousness of her government. In fact, she embodied *Rosa Electa*, as in William Rogers's engraving (c.1590), where she is portrayed flanked by the Tudor Rose on the left and eglantine, her device, on the right.⁶

As is commonly known, the Tudor Rose is the traditional floral emblem of England and is sometimes called the Union Rose as it stands for the union between the red rose of the House of Lancaster and the white rose of the House of York. Elizabeth was the last monarch of the Tudor dynasty and therefore the best personification of the English Rose. The *Pelican Portrait* (c.1575) of Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard is one of the most magnificent visual representations of the queen as a symbol of the Golden Age. The crowns on top of the Tudor rose and the fleur-de-lys above her shoulders stand for her dynastic claims to both England and France.⁷

⁵ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6, 12-13, 31.

⁶ I used various easily accessible websites in order to facilitate the viewing of the visual representations referred to in this essay, together with conventional bibliographical sources. For the image of Rogers's engraving of Elizabeth I, see <http://read.images.worldlibrary.net/articles/File:William_Rogers_Elizabeth_I_Rosa_Electa.jpg>. The eglantine, also called the rose briar, signified pleasure and pain as one, evoking the biblical reference "I wound to heal". Its romantic and literary associations with Shakespeare and Elizabethan times were widely used in the Victorian age. See Kate Greenaway, *Language of Flowers* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 16, and Mandy Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 47.

⁷ The pelican symbolises Christ's sacrifice, and here represents the Queen's love for her subjects and reinforces her role as mother to her people.

See <<http://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/making-art-in-tudor-britain/the-phoenix-and-the-pelican-two-portraits-of-elizabeth-i-c.1575.php>>.

As a matter of fact, images of a Golden Age, linked to utopianism, were frequently associated with the reigns of particular monarchs. More significantly, the end of the Wars of the Roses had seemed to open the path to a utopia of peace under the Tudors, and the early modern era witnessed the birth of the text itself, published in 1516. In this regard, as stressed by Gregory Claeys, "*Utopia* was clearly indebted to a humanist tradition of advising Christian princes as to their moral responsibilities".⁸ In Holbein's famous portrait of Sir Thomas More as Lord Chancellor (1527), he is depicted wearing the Collar of Esses with the Tudor Rose badge of Henry VIII.⁹

Self-identities and royal representations have an obvious political and institutional dimension that put forward the depiction and interpretation of an era's cultural codes. A woman sovereign like Elizabeth I constructed her role by combining her Virgin Queen and Tudor Rose images with a traditionally masculine performance of political efficacy, whereas Victoria, the head of the most powerful country in the world which ruled over an empire on which the sun never set, adopted the behaviour of the middle classes and exemplified the domestic feminine ideal of private retirement. At the time of her coronation, she was frequently imaged as an innocent and delicate rose, and in fact this Royal Rose of England is depicted holding a rose in the popular 1842 painting by the German artist Franz Xaver Winterhalter.¹⁰ A very different perception of Victoria is nevertheless conveyed in the sensual portrait she offered to Albert on his 24th birthday and which was made known to the public only in the 1970s.¹¹

2. Pre-Raphaelitism and the language of flowers

In the Victorian age, the language of flowers conveyed an acknowledged social and moral code, and floral symbolism was not only widely used in the arts but was one of the most popular trends in Victorian culture. Compendiums such as John Henry Ingram's *Floral Symbolica* (1869) combined a cultural history of traditions and rituals with a floral lexicon

⁸ Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 67.

⁹ See <<http://www.hans-holbein.org/Sir-Thomas-More-1527.html>>.

¹⁰ See <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/gallery/victoria.html>> and Margaret Homans, *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837-1876* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), xxxii-xxxiv, 11-12.

¹¹ See <<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/406010/queen-victoria-1819-1901>> and <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/queen-elizabeth-II/8931869/Secrets-of-Queens-greatest-treasures-to-be-revealed-in-major-new-BBC-series-The-Art-of-Monarchy.html>>.

that listed flowers and their meanings. Drawing on the French model – first published in Charlotte La Tour's *Le Langage des Fleurs* in 1819 – the floral lexicon "became the foundation of 'florigraphy,' flower writing that encoded messages through the colours, positions, and combinations of blooms", as Debra Mancoff points out.¹²

Mid-nineteenth-century Britain was marked by mass industrialisation and a profound change in the relationship between mankind and nature. Unlike sceptics like John Ruskin and other sages, most people seemed to believe that urban growth, pollution, the social problems of the modern city and the destruction of the natural environment were not too heavy a price to pay for national progress, prosperity and economic development. In general, love of nature and horror at its destruction were considered to be rooted in the Romantic movement, along with nostalgia for the past, a sense of a lost spirituality and beauty, which combined Romantic rebelliousness with medieval revivalism. Romanticism, Tim Barringer emphasises, "valued individual feelings and identities more highly than rationality and the following of rules, and placed the artist as an outsider and a rebel, alienated from society".¹³

All over Europe, 1848 was the year of revolution and, as Franny Moyle puts it, "the pupal wriggings of a modern world were beginning to crack the cocoon of old social and political structures".¹⁴ In Britain, the birth of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) coincided with the last political upheavals of the 1840s under the Chartist banner, but the young artists that embodied the movement had in mind a revolution in the arts.

Pre-Raphaelitism thus sought to transmit a message of artistic renewal by reviving aesthetic simplicity. Seriousness, sincerity and, above all, 'truth to nature' were Ruskinian precepts practised by the Pre-Raphaelites even before meeting the critic in person. In fact, Ruskin's attack at the level of theory made the PRB rebellion possible at the level of practice, as has been argued.¹⁵

¹² Debra N. Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich and London: Prestel, 2003), 7.

¹³ Tim Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: The Everyman Art Library, 1998), 21.

¹⁴ Franny Moyle, *Desperate Romantics: The Private Lives of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: John Murray, 2009), 4. The book inspired the 2009 six-part BBC series *Desperate Romantics*, which is available on DVD. All episodes begin with the following statement: "In the mid-19th century, a group of young men challenged the art establishment of the day. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were inspired by the real world about them, yet took imaginative licence in their art. This story, based on their lives and loves, follows in that inventive spirit", which, it can be added, underlines the PRB's rebellious ethos.

¹⁵ Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 60.

The Pre-Raphaelites were searching for the beauty that was being displaced by the mass production of the 1800s, and therefore one of their most characteristic features was that their paintings were filled with flowers. In fact, owing to the large amount of flower symbolism present in Pre-Raphaelite art, it is difficult to find paintings with no flowers at all. Only a couple of the most significant examples were selected for this essay in order to address the question of flower imagery and symbolism.

Ophelia (1851), by Millais, is perhaps one of the most well-known case studies and its symbolism could be recognised by both the Victorian public and our contemporary one.¹⁶ According to the language of flowers, the red poppy, which stands out in the painting, represents sleep and death. Every plant is rendered with absolute fidelity to botanic detail and, together with the forget-me-nots, the depiction of the willow, the nettle, the fritillary, the violets and the daisies expresses mourning, pain, sorrow, modesty¹⁷ and innocence in order to underline the work's tragic message. Millais intended to reflect on "the fragile nature of innocence when forced to venture unprotected into a heartless world", as Debra Mancoff asserts,¹⁸ and it can be added that Ophelia's dead body contrasts strikingly with the vividness of the nature surrounding her. The whole scene testifies to the combination of realism and symbolism that characterised the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

As a result of its unrivalled beauty, the rose reigned as the queen of flowers in the Victorian garden. In fact, as a floral emblem, the rose took on many meanings according to the variety and the colour.¹⁹ For the sake of the argument presented in this essay, two Pre-Raphaelite paintings can be used to illustrate how English roses intertwined with Victorian aestheticism and social identities.

Rossetti's *The Beloved* (1865) and *La Ghirlandata* (1871) can be singled out in order to demonstrate how roses helped to enhance the power of love and of female beauty. As a matter of fact, as Timothy Hilton remarks, "the aestheticism of Pre-Raphaelitism, its concern with art and the idea of art, is generally subsumed in the image of the beloved".²⁰ Attended by her bridesmaids, the beloved bride unveils her face and reveals her beauty. Inspired by

¹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all the Pre-Raphaelite paintings referred to in this essay can be seen online at <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/artists.html>> and <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/prb/www.html>>.

¹⁷ As a symbol for modesty and humility, the violet could be presented as a love token and it, not the rose, was traditionally the flower of Valentine's Day. See Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary*, 152.

¹⁸ Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 18.

¹⁹ See Greenaway, *Language of Flowers*, 36-37.

²⁰ Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 209.

the Song of Solomon, the picture's exoticism is accentuated by the readings of the floral symbolism, especially by the golden bucket of full-blown pink and yellow roses – a symbol of love and grace – held up by a black-skinned boy, the only one ever painted by Rossetti.²¹ Closely connected with the language of flowers, *La Ghirlandata* takes its name from the garland of roses and honeysuckle that crowns the head of the harp and that was associated with affectionate devotion. At that time, as now, it was understood that Rossetti equated devotion with passion, using pink roses at the fullest extent of their bloom to express physical beauty and sexual attraction.²²

For the Victorians, roses were not only symbolic of sensual beauty but of death as well. Danger could be lurking behind a flower's charm; in fact several flowers were found to contain the dark forces of Nature, and the scented beautiful rose could draw an admirer into picking it in spite of risking the treacherous thorns tearing his own skin. With these arguments in mind, other paintings may call our attention. For instance, in *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, painted in 1888 by Alma-Tadema, what looks like a shower of petals at a banquet offered by the Roman emperor Elagabalus actually foresees the death of his guests.²³ Burne-Jones, for his part, was fascinated by the Legend of the Briar Rose, a French variant on the tale of Sleeping Beauty and a symbol of sacrifice for love, which he depicted in *The Rose Bower* (1884).²⁴

Dante Gabriel Rossetti has been referred to as the "connecting link" between Pre-Raphaelitism and the Aesthetic vogue of the late seventies and the eighties.²⁵ The theme of Lilith, for instance, who in Jewish mythology was related to a class of female demons, caught his attention and inspired *Lady Lilith* (1866). Rossetti himself wrote that this was a Modern Lilith "combing out her abundant golden hair and gazing on herself in the glass with that self-

²¹ See Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 152 and Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 40-41. *The Beloved* has been interpreted as celebrating the diversity of beauty for purely aesthetic reasons, but also as a racial perspective of 'otherness' subjected to white supremacy. The ambiguity of the painter's intention was reinforced when the black boy replaced what was originally a mulatto girl after Rossetti had seen in a London hotel a slave boy travelling with his American master.

See A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Arrow Books, 2003), 247-248. For the image, see <<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=12776&roomid=4354>> and <<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/picture-of-month/displayPicture.asp?id=75&venue=2>>.

²² Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 42-43.

²³ See <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/severans/roses.html>.

²⁴ Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 46-47; Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary*, 48.

²⁵ Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature* (New York and London: Norton, 1973), 291.

absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle".²⁶ The mirror conveyed the idea of selfishness and vanity, and long hair was a symbol of dangerous seductive feminine power, especially in Jewish and Islamic cultures.

In fact, beauty and danger converged in the *femme fatale* and appealed to the Pre-Raphaelite artists who used roses as signs of sensual desire. "Like the narcotic poppy, whose comforting sleep can lead to death, these flowers promised pleasure, but delivered anguish and pain", to use Debra Mancoff's insightful analysis.²⁷ Accordingly, Rossetti filled the background of his painting with white roses, but these were not just any roses. They were freshly cut from John Ruskin's personal garden.²⁸ White roses here symbolised sterile passion and the poppies alluded to death so the painting represented the *femme fatale* interpretation of Lilith and her lethal beauty.

English roses at this time were not, therefore, just depicted as flowers in a literal sense. They were used as a metonymy and a metaphor for women and the embodiment of both innocent and fatal beauty. Flower representations thus combined complex layers of meaning, so that the public – both in the Victorian age and today – could read the painting in various ways as an exercise of the eye as well as of the mind.

Within the Pre-Raphaelite framework of femininity, Jane Morris was acclaimed as a beautiful woman, a striking and real English beauty to be more precise. Actual photographs of her show her distinctive physical characteristics – which were not conventionally pretty – such as her abundant and tightly crimped black hair, large brooding eyes, full and shapely mouth, and long hands and neck.²⁹ In the gallery of English roses, she epitomised a romantic type of beauty, both statuesque and sensuous. Henry James saw her as "a grand synthesis of all the pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made", besides considering her "a wonder".³⁰ She was not a *femme fatale* but she was an enigmatic muse and an object of desire. Rossetti's portrait *The Blue Silk Dress* (1868) features Mrs Morris in a pensive pose. Her wedding ring catches the viewer's eye, while the flowers chosen by Rossetti hint at the artist's hidden

²⁶ See <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s205.rap.html>> and Meaghan Kelly, "The Modern Lilith", <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/dgr/paintings/kelly4.html>>.

²⁷ Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 9.

²⁸ Doug Stewart, "Incurably Romantic", <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/preraph.html?device=other&c=y>>.

²⁹ Stephanie Piña, "Jane Morris: An Enigmatic Muse", <<http://preraphaelitesisterhood.com/jane-morris-an-enigmatic-muse/>>.

³⁰ "English Roses", <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatpicturegalleries/7639336/English-roses.html?image=3>>.

message - red carnations signify a strong avowal of love and white roses mean "I am worthy of you".³¹

Clearly, the stunners – as Rossetti called Pre-Raphaelite models – did not follow the pattern of the angel in the house and of the conventional Victorian ideals of beauty portrayed both in painting and in photography.³² Instead they had long auburn or black hair, a working-class background and sometimes an explicit provocative attitude, such as portrayed in *Love's Shadow* (1867), the first of a series of drawings each of which later became known by the title *Proud Maisie* (1893), by Frederick Sandys, one of the young artists who collaborated closely with Rossetti. In the first painting, the flame-haired woman has a white rose in her hair and she is holding a posy of wild flowers, including a forget-me-not, between her lips while in later drawings she is seen with a red rose tucked behind her left ear and is biting a tress of her hair – an allusion to her sensuality, which makes her a temptress.³³

Truth be told, beauty was seen as being both dangerous and a valuable asset in high society circles. Although Emilie Charlotte Langtry was not exactly a Pre-Raphaelite model, she was one of the most beautiful women of her time – she was indeed a real stunner – and posed for Millais. In fact, it was reported that the painter once told her that she looked "just beautiful for fifty-five minutes of an hour, but for five she was amazing".³⁴ She was born on the island of Jersey, had an affair with the Prince of Wales, became a sophisticated PB – i.e. a Professional Beauty – and was known as Lillie Langtry. In Millais' portrait of her, entitled *A Jersey Lily* (1878), she wears a black mourning dress with a white gardenia tucked into a white lace collar, and she holds a particular kind of crimson lily in her hand.³⁵ As a follower of

³¹ Greenaway, *Language of Flowers*, 11, 37; Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 82-83; Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary*, 23, 129.

³² Nevertheless, it should be noted that women photographers such as Lady Clementina Hawarden and Julia Margaret Cameron not only aimed at what can be called an "idealised truth" but often captured an unconscious sensuality in the female sitters. See Cameron's photograph entitled "The Angel in the House" (1873) and the Victoria and Albert Museum sites "Lady Clementina Hawarden: Themes & Style", <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/l/lady-clementina-themes-and-style/>> and "Julia Margaret Cameron Working Methods", <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/j/julia-margaret-cameron-working-methods/>>. The bicentenary of Cameron's birth will be marked by an exhibition from 28 November 2015 to 14 February 2016 at the V&A.

³³ See <<http://www.artmagick.com/pictures/picture.aspx?id=5977&name=loves-shadow>> and <<http://www.leicestergalleries.com/19th-20th-century-paintings/d/proud-maisie/11681>>.

³⁴ Iolanda Ramos, "The 'Jersey Lily': A Tangled Web of Victorian Celebrities", in *A Tangled Web: Ideas, Images, Symbols*, ed. J. Carlos Viana Ferreira and Teresa de Ataíde Malafaia (Lisboa: CEAUL, 2007), 51.

³⁵ See "Pictures of Lillie", <<http://www.lillielangtry.com/Pics14.htm>>.

the Ruskinian principle of being true to Nature, the little flower was sent from the Channel Islands specifically for the occasion, as Lillie herself recollected.³⁶ Given that red usually conveys passionate feelings, the picture could hint at Mrs Langtry's true nature beyond her plainness and her demure pose, but it seems that "the painter's purpose was only to add a touch of colour to a rather grim black and white scheme".³⁷

Lillie Langtry sat for many artists of her time, notably for Burne-Jones in works such as *The Golden Stairs* (1880) and *The Wheel of Fortune* (1883), which she disliked because she was depicted as Dame Fortune, an implacable character with a pitiless face.³⁸ It is important to stress that there are other paintings that combine her natural beauty – the white lily standing for purity and sweetness – with a darker symbolic meaning. For instance, in 1878 Edward Poynter portrayed Lillie Langtry in a languid pose, wearing a sumptuous golden gown and a string of pearls. Surprisingly, instead of lilies, she holds two roses.³⁹ According to the Victorian flower code, yellow roses signified adultery or a decrease in love while white roses meant silence or pure love.⁴⁰ Most significantly, Poynter's Lillie is holding the yellow rose to her heart, while the white rose is held away in her left hand, which could be read as a comment on her marital situation.⁴¹

Mrs Langtry was also celebrated as a new Helen of Troy by both artists and poets, which testifies to her power of seduction. John Ruskin himself admired Mrs Langtry's beauty but he is said to have told her that beautiful women like her held the fortunes of the world in their hands to make or mar, comparing her to Jezebel.⁴² In the 1870s, when Oscar Wilde was in his early twenties, he began to be called 'The Apostle of the Lily' for his worship not only of Lillie Langtry – they were close friends and promoted each other's fame – but also of aestheticism. In the heyday of his popularity, he was parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan in *Patience* (1881) in these famous lines: "You will rank as an apostle / In the high aesthetic band, / As you walk down Piccadilly / With a poppy or a lily / In your mediaeval hand".⁴³

³⁶ Lillie Langtry, *The Days I Knew: An Autobiography*, ed. Chris Lake and Mike Lezala (Jersey: Redberry Press, 1989), 36-37.

³⁷ Ramos, "The 'Jersey Lily'", 52.

³⁸ See <<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=1795&roomid=3454>> and <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/bj/paintings/13b.html>>; Langtry, *The Days I Knew*, p. 40.

³⁹ See "Pictures of Lillie", <<http://www.lillielangtry.com/Pics15.htm>>.

⁴⁰ Greenaway, *Language of Flowers*, 37; Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 84-85; Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary*, 23, 130.

⁴¹ Both the portrait and an enlightening analysis can be found at <<http://www.jerseyheritage.org/collection-item/lillie-langtry>>.

⁴² Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1998), 109.

⁴³ Ramos, "The 'Jersey Lily'", 54.

In reality, although the lily was adopted as one of the emblems of the Aesthetic Movement, according to the conventional floral symbolism within Victorian culture the lily represented spiritual love whereas physical love was embodied by the sunflower. As a bright and radiant flower it expressed adoration, but it also bore the meaning of false riches and superficiality. In the humorous *Punch*, George du Maurier and Edward Linley Sambourne often caricatured Wilde as a sunflower, although Wilde himself preferred the lily as his emblem. He actually explained that both flowers were the most perfect models of design, the lily for its precious loveliness and the sunflower for its leonine beauty.⁴⁴

The language of flowers was thus powerfully put to use to support the arts, and aestheticism in particular, as well as being applied to society in general. In 1851, John Ruskin wrote in *The Stones of Venice* that "the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance",⁴⁵ and in 1865 he gave one of his most popular books the title *Sesame and Lilies*, which was read as reinforcing the conventional and idealised notion of the public and the private spheres by representing men as sesame and women as the aforementioned beautiful but useless lilies.

3. Victorian female roles and social identities

In a time ruled by industrialisation, the Ruskinian "go to Nature" precept inspired not only Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism but ordinary women who longed to turn their home into a paradise as well as a garden, where they could play the part of angel and queen. In fact, the qualities of the ideal home were the same as for the ideal garden, that is to say, "beauty, oasis-like fertility, and enclosure".⁴⁶ The idealisation of social roles is thus close to the development of utopian identities in the everyday sense of something to dream about that does not actually exist. Moreover, we must bear in mind that social identity is related to what society says we should do and be.⁴⁷ By both sustaining and subverting stereotyped female roles, flower imagery therefore fits into the multidimensional symbolism of the

⁴⁴ Greenaway, *Language of Flowers*, 39; Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica*, 74-75; Kirkby, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary*, 139-140.

⁴⁵ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (1851), in *The Works of John Ruskin on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and The Ruskin Foundation, 2000), vol. IX, 72.

⁴⁶ Michael Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988), 227. For a history of the qualities of the garden, see Twigs Way, *Virgins, Weeders and Queens: A History of Women in the Garden* (Stroud: The History Press, 2006), *passim*.

⁴⁷ Warren Kidd and Alison Teagle, *Culture and Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 9, 15-16, 26.

garden, which is first of all a place and a piece of land, usually with an area of grass, where flowers as well as fruit and vegetables can be grown. But the garden can also constitute a metaphor and a metonymy used in an imaginative way to describe or to refer to something else, such as a place of natural harmony and happiness where freedom and order is combined, in other words, a paradise, a sanctuary or an inner world.

The Victorian concept of the separate spheres was indeed a fallacy but a very convenient one so as to ensure social and gender presumptions in a society that depended largely on the pillar of respectability. Everyone had their place in the social hierarchy and man was the master of his castle. The famous lines of Lord Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847) speak for themselves: "Man for the field and woman for the hearth: / Man for the sword and for the needle she: / Man with the head and woman with the heart: / Man to command and woman to obey; / All else confusion".⁴⁸ This ideology celebrated women's "natural" place in society within the respectability of the domestic sphere, for, as Martha Vicinus points out, a woman's education "was to bring out her 'natural' submission to authority and innate maternal instincts".⁴⁹ Various domestic manuals and cultural representations moulded public opinion and helped to sustain the traditional role of the perfect housewife within the safety of home. This in turn sought to respond to both female and male expectations of making a house a home, in other words, a site of physical and psychic comfort, and a safe haven from the world outside.

The Victorian discourse of domesticity and respectability, however, was intertwined with issues of power and conflict that exposed a set of identity paradigms based on the perception of the self and the other. This provides a background for the survey of difference and otherness, inasmuch as difference is "as important an aspect of identity as similarity"⁵⁰ and identity itself is often defined by "differences, that is, by what is not".⁵¹ In the Victorian frame of mind, women were seen as different beings, either explicitly or implicitly inferior to men. Accordingly, masculine categories like order and pragmatism were contrasted with the fragmented and sentimental feminine tendencies. From this point of view, the language of flowers, widely used in the arts and literature, enhanced the conventional paternalist perception of children as daisies and the feeble sex in general as delicate flowers. In *The*

⁴⁸ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847), V, 165, lines 437-441. See <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/791/791-h/791-h.htm>>.

⁴⁹ Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1973), x.

⁵⁰ Kidd and Teagle, *Culture and Identity*, 26.

⁵¹ Kathryn Woodward, ed., *Identity and Difference* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 2.

Victorians: Britain Through the Paintings of the Age, Jeremy Paxman underlines the powerlessness of women: "The art of the period demonstrates the very limited number of roles available for those women who, by choice or chance, found the conventional position of 'angel in the house' uncongenial or unattainable".⁵²

This conventional feminine identity – corresponding to the ideal of the perfect woman according to standards of the time – was borrowed from *The Angel in the House*, a four-part narrative poem written by Coventry Patmore, who also contributed to the Pre-Raphaelite periodical *The Germ*. Patmore had planned to call his text *The Happy Wedding*, but the work met with little success when it began to be published in 1854. The title itself had been previously used by the poet Leigh Hunt twenty years earlier, but it eventually became more famous than the work itself ever did. 'The angel in the house' became a stereotyped phrase, which has been used from the Victorian age onwards to describe a woman's traditional role. However, the constraining pattern of behaviour set by the Madonna role and the traditional image of womanhood did not escape criticism. Virginia Woolf, for instance, wrote that she had to kill the angel who in those days dwelt in every house.⁵³

Drawing on the romanticised notion of home, John Ruskin presented his concept of the perfect wife, something, it is important to add, he did not find in his own marriage: "And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glow worm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her".⁵⁴ He admired Patmore and it can be said that both *The Angel in the House* and *Sesame and Lilies* represent key texts in the Victorian canon of woman worship. Ruskinian scholars, however, tend to emphasise that Patmore's womanly ideal of angel is more conservative than Ruskin's queen because the former is represented by the angel in the house and the latter by the angel out of the house.⁵⁵

⁵² Jeremy Paxman, *The Victorians: Britain Through the Paintings of the Age* (London: BBC Books, 2010), 141.

⁵³ Ian Anstruther, *Coventry Patmore's Angel: A Study of Coventry Patmore, his Wife Emily and The Angel in the House* (London: Haggerston Press, 1992), 2; Iolanda Ramos, "Between Heaven and the Garden: Some Female Roles in the Victorian Age", *Anglo-Saxónica: Revista do Centro de Estudos Anglisticos da Universidade de Lisboa*, no. 21 (2004): 160-161.

⁵⁴ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), in *The Works of John Ruskin on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and The Ruskin Foundation, 2000), vol. XVIII, 123.

⁵⁵ Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, *Ruskin's Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1998), 111-112; Ramos, "Between Heaven and the Garden", 166.

In fact, the chapter called "Of Queen's Gardens" in John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* can be reinterpreted – if a social constructionist approach to representation is applied – as opening women's dominion beyond the secluded domestic heaven provided by Patmore. If a man's home was his castle, his own kingdom for him to rule, wives and mothers had their own realm where they could build their own identity of queen. Ruskin mastered the two most common perceptions of representation in the Victorian age, that is, images from geology in the form of rocks and gems, and flower imagery. According to him, boys were like rocks that could be chiselled into shape, but "you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does".⁵⁶ Being himself the author of many detailed watercolour studies of plant forms,⁵⁷ he appreciated Kate Greenaway's floral designs because he believed that "her flowers and young children restored the element of fantasy and beauty fast disappearing from industrial England".⁵⁸ In this regard, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement as a whole obviously played a crucial role in interior decoration, seeking to bring Nature to the inside of the house, especially by using wallpapers filled with flowers and symbolic meaning.⁵⁹

Both in the arts and in society, the creation of an ideal womanhood is clearly embedded in the utopian tradition. Not only do images construct meanings and embody identities but produce, transmit and project ideologies,⁶⁰ favouring a dynamic of looking at real and imaginary power relations and social models. Drawing on Ruskin's text *Sesame and Lilies*, which can be read as stretching the boundaries of domestic ideology inasmuch as the home opens up to the world, a distinction can be established between heaven and the role of angel, on the one hand, and the garden and the role of queen, on the other. Hence, a queen's garden goes beyond the limits of home and contributes to the effacement of the traditional approach to the separate spheres, which in turn addresses the issue of how a specific place can be extended to a non-place. This is why, by borrowing the title of Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 novel *The Secret Garden*, we can question if the construction of a pluri-signifying garden from a place of confinement to a potentially liberating and empowering place was indeed secret.

⁵⁶ Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 131.

⁵⁷ See <<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ruskinlib/Documents/Imagelistalpha.pdf>>.

⁵⁸ Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature*, 65.

⁵⁹ See <<http://www.victoriana.com/Wallpaper/williammorris.php>>.

⁶⁰ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 21-22.

The English rose has therefore a lingering political dimension as a symbol of England, and, more significantly, utopianism can be discussed as a philosophy of hope.⁶¹ From a neo-Victorian perspective, the metaphor for being a queen can be reinterpreted as actually giving a sense of power to middle-class women, otherwise reduced to the submissive role of wives and mothers.⁶² Ruskinian principles have also inspired Pre-Raphaelite artists to use their techniques of observation, and they used them in order to portray working-class women empowered by the male gaze⁶³ on female beauty. In my opinion, these practices of representation express a very modern approach to the complex power dynamics underlying the acts of looking and being looked at, for the relevance of an image lies not only in the image itself but in the process of looking at it.

On a symbolic level, Victorian femininity was expressed by the language of flowers as a metalanguage to those who shared it. As a social construction, it illustrated how the Victorians interpreted and understood the process of looking at reality, rather than merely imitating or mirroring what they saw. Besides enabling people to send coded messages via floral allusions, the language of flowers was emblematic of both established and subversive feelings and ideas, for instance in the perception of womanhood as otherness, by not only using but also questioning the normative binary oppositions set by the dynamics of power between man and woman. English roses, in the past and today, are bound to transfer attention from a passive, traditional role of being displayed and looked at to an active, transforming social role. In sum, floral representations, both in the literal but especially in the figurative sense, contribute to a better understanding of Victorian times and their legacy in contemporary British culture, which ultimately links gender and identity questions with cultural history.

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⁶¹ Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

⁶² On the re-visioning of nineteenth-century gender and sexuality, see Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 8-14, 106-108. Also see the *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* 6:2 (2013), a special issue on new approaches to feminism.

⁶³ For the several theories of the gaze, see Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 76-108, 355-56. For the multi-vocal nature of the cultural practices of visual languages, see Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 309-314.

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