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Natural scents or cultural perfumes: the revelations of floral fragrances

Margaret Bullen

Abstract

I would like to reflect—in an exploratory way, since I have very little fieldwork in this area—on the symbolic meanings given, by humans in different cultural contexts, to the fragrances of flowers. I choose the fragrances of flowers as the object of my study, (a study that is, at times, done for pleasure), and one that investigates the pleasure of flowers and in this case, their scent. I explore the uses and functions given to floral perfumes, including gendered classifications, marketing, ambience and decoration, as well as their evocations and the associations attached to them. I find fascinating the elaboration of cultural meanings around a naturally occurring phenomenon that has its own purpose, to attract insects for pollination, thus allowing a reflection on the uses and abuses of “natural” scents in the anthropocene.

Did you ever wonder why the flowers you bought, with such a desire to please, look beautiful but don't smell at all? My mother, who loved to have cut flowers around the house, used to say, “Flowers don't smell like they used to”, and I had to agree, though I never really wondered why. Mass production, I assumed: a consequence of the journey they travel, like bananas and pineapples, packed green and, even when ripened, with very little taste. Flowers put a smile on our faces, jolly a room, and generally brighten our day,^[1] but what is the source of that pleasure? What is it about flowers that communicates happiness? Is it the gesture of giving, the relationship represented? Or their colours, shapes or fragrance?^[2]

And, if the flowers we buy don't smell, is their colour and form sufficient to transmit joy, or even love or affection? In a study on the positive emotions produced by flowers, Wilson et al. find that flowers are multimodal:

Different flowers will induce their effects through different combinations of modalities. Some might be primarily visual. Others might be visual and olfactory. Some may even mimic human pheromones (2005, p 127).

Just as flowers have different modes of messaging, humans have many different responses to both colour and odour, and so it follows that we vary in our responses to particular flowers. However, although I set out to explore different ways people incorporate flowers into their daily lives, I must

admit that anthropocentric bias prevented me from realising that most flowers are not trying to communicate with humans at all. Rather, their scent is programmed to attract insects for pollination, and it is, in fact, essential to their reproductive success.

That is, the scent of flowers—like their colour—is a mechanism to attract insects, and most especially bees, to do the job of pollinating, thus enabling their sexual reproduction. In *The Conversation*, a professor of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture answers 9-year-old Harry E.'s question as to why flowers smell, explaining that some flowers produce a particular scent “that acts as a smelly kind of welcome sign for just the right pollinator”, whether bat or insect.^[3] Botanists Wright and Schiestl explore not only the benefit to the flowers but also to the pollinators in the form of food rewards:

Why do flowers produce scent? Many plants produce flowers that are multi-sensory advertisements, which lure pollinators into contact with a plant's reproductive structures. In turn, pollinators rely both on the visual and olfactory cues provided by these advertisements to locate and identify flowers with food resources such as nectar, pollen and oils (2009, p. 841).

So, as we probably already knew from school biology lessons, “plants, like animals, have a sex life”, as Cass Peterson tells in a saucy account in the *Fine Gardening Magazine*. He describes flowers as “sexual devices”, comparing their outer form to a “silk negligee” to lure intermediaries in to move the pollen from anther to pistil.^[4] But did we know that humans seem to pick up on the sexual undertones of floral fragrances? Michael Viney reports in the *Irish Times*,^[5] taking an amusing look at the associations between hawthorn scent and sex, not missing the chance to take a jibe at the English for being notoriously “obsessed with sex” yet laying the blame on the French:

Geoffrey Grigson may have started it. In his *Englishman's Flora* of the 1950s he told how the French (who else?) put branches of hawthorn outside the windows of every young girl. “The stale, sweet scent from the triethylamine the flowers contain makes them suggestive of sex” (Viney, 1998).

Interestingly, this chemical component is not only present in human semen and vaginal secretions but also in decaying tissue. Once the hawthorn blossom is pollinated, that “heavy, musky fragrance with sexual undertones”, described by botanist Charles Nelson, gives way to a “fishy scent”, explained by Richard Mabey in *Flora Britannica* (1996). Again, this is caused by triethylamine; it is not only present in sexual secretions but “one of the first chemicals produced when living tissue starts to decay” (Viney, 1998; 2006). So, it is clear that the chemical components secreted by the hawthorn's flowers may function like a pheromone to humans and are attractive to pollinating insects. In popular culture, hawthorn blossom is related to fertility and spring rites, where, in first bloom, the trees are said to smell of arousal, juicy and enticing.^[6] So, it is clear that the chemical components secreted by the hawthorn's flowers may function like a pheromone to humans and are attractive to pollinating insects. In folk culture, hawthorn blossom is related to fertility and spring rites, where, in first bloom, the trees are said to smell of arousal, juicy and enticing. However, its subsequent smell of rotting flesh has led to a shift in the folklore, culminating in associations with death and a taboo on taking blooming hawthorn into the home, as it was believed to bode death.

Following the sensuality of floral fragrances, I came across Christina Bradstreet's fascinating article “Wicked with roses: Floral Femininity and the Erotics of Scent” (2007). Bradstreet analyzes the representation of sexual desire in nineteenth-century art, carrying out a cross-sensorial discussion of nineteenth-century debates surrounding smell and female sexual morality through analysis of depictions of women and flowers in the artwork of the period. . She looks at how women are portrayed through body language in relation to flowers, in the gesture of smelling or in other postures, referring to contemporary popular and scientific ideas about odour, olfaction and female

sexuality. Her article makes for an engrossing read about the historic symbolism of the rose as the female genitalia, the potential of floral scent to arouse women's libido—to make them feel “wicked”—and the opening of the bud in readiness for sexual activity.

Bradstreet signals the importance of the cultural history of smell (Corbin, 1982) for her reading of artwork, specifically in her analysis of how intangible, ethereal odour is visually represented and what that representation tells us about smell in a particular society and time.^[7] She asks, “to what extent can the scent of roses affect mood and meaning or act as an emotional or intellectual marker when represented visually in a painting or other image?”

“Given that the essence of invisible scent evades capture in pictorial design, with much of the experience of olfactory perception lost in translation, it is useful to consider the degree to which the personal and cultural nuances of the olfactory can nevertheless influence the reception and interpretation of an image in which scent is represented” (Bradstreet, 2007, p. 20).

In the representation of both smell and sound, semiotic codes operate as sight, for example, when music is performed and interaction is established between musicians and audience through bodily expressions, gestures, use of instruments, costume and surroundings. Leffert (1993) argues that “the sight of musical performance...is no less a part of the music than the fabric of the notes and helps situate sounds within social space” (in Bradstreet, 2007, p. 22). Similarly, Bradstreet (ibid.) holds that “late nineteenth-century sights of smell and smelling were infused with class and gender politics, to which today's viewer remains sensible, though the smells represented evaporated long ago.”

During Victorian times, the poet Emily Dickinson expressed muted desire through her passion for flowers and their scent with her own desire;^[8] there was a whole language of flowers, and hundreds of books were written as manuals for a complicated and covert form of communication. This practice evolved from the habitual practice of carrying a small bouquet—called “tussie-mussie”—of pungent herbs and sweet flowers to mask the stench of the streets. From simply covering up bad smells, the posies became coded bearers of messages—of a romantic or relational nature—depending on the type or colours of flowers, but there seems to be no indication that floral fragrance had more than a functional purpose.^[9]

So, did you ever think the red rose was more than a symbol of hot passion, the dusky pink one of romantic desire or yellow, seething jealousy?—although I see today yellow has been re-signified to mean friendship. Did you ever wonder why some flowers smell and others don't? To recap, although we have some compelling information regarding the chemical compounds of flower scents, the moment at which we smell them will also affect our perception, both from the point of view of the plant's reproductive cycle (the literature suggests the scent fades once pollination is performed [Wright and Schiestl, 2009, p. 842]) and from our own sociohistorical context and the value we attach to smells. Not to mention our own predisposition to pick up – and suitably interpret - particular nuances in the perfume.

To return to the Irish Times, Whiney (2006) jokes about what he sees to be the obligatory association between flowers and sex, ironizing, “flower smellers have sex on the brain”. Indeed, I have to agree with him when he says: “I must have missed out on one of nature's promptings—surprisingly, perhaps, since the scent of flowers has been among my keenest joys.”

Notes

^[1] See About Flowers, website of The Society of American Florists, for information and a video of studies: <https://safnow.org/aboutflowers/quick-links/health-benefits-research/emotional-impact-of-flowers-study/>

^[2] Looking for answers to this question, my research has consisted of a netnography, exploring both academic texts available online, websites of florists and floral societies, press articles and blogspots.

^[3] Richard Harkess, "A floral scent can be enjoyable for a person, but it has an important job for the flower", The Conversation, March 1, 2021. Available through <https://theconversation.com/why-do-flowers-smell-151672>

^[4] Cass Peterson, "The Sex Life of Flowers", Fine Gardening, (No Date): Available through <https://www.finegardening.com/article/the-sex-life-of-flowers>

^[5] Michael Viney, "Sexy smell of hawthorn", The Irish Times, Jun 6, 1998: Available through <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/sexy-smell-of-hawthorn-1.160794>; "Flower smellers have sex on the brain", The Irish Times, Jun 10, 2006: Available through <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/flower-smellers-have-sex-on-the-brain-1.1015050>

^[6] There is abundant information on the internet about the powerful odour of the hawthorn and its presence in European folklore. One source I have consulted is a plant healer's blogspot, A.Radicale, where Guido Mase posted the article "Hawthorn - Legends, Pharmacology, Recipes" (8.04.2014).

^[7] This multimodality has been considered for music that is perceived not only as sound but as sight, as something "both observed and represented as well as heard" (Richard Leffert, The Sight of Sound (1993), in Bradstreet, 2007, p. 22). Leffert holds that visual records depicting the performance of music can provide information on the way a society uses music and so what the sounds meant culturally.

^[8] I am grateful to Katerina Sergidou for bringing to my knowledge Emily Dickson's poem: "The lovely flowers embarrass me. They make me regret I am not a bee."

^[9] Two of the most famous of these handbooks of floriography are *Le langage des fleurs*, by Madame Charlotte de la Tour (pen name for Louise Cortambert) in 1819, and Kate Greenaway's illustrated *Language of Flowers*, printed by Routledge in 1884 and still in print today: <https://salisburygreenhouse.com/a-rose-by-any-other-colour-would-have-a-different-meaning/>

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Author bio

Margaret Bullen (Nedging, Suffolk, U.K., 1964) is a feminist anthropologist living in the Basque Country since 1991, and lecturer in the Department of Philosophy of Values and Social Anthropology at the University of the Basque Country since 2005. She graduated in Modern Languages (Bristol, 1987) and obtained her Ph.D. (Liverpool, 1991) on cultural and socio-economic change amongst Andean migrants in Arequipa's shanty towns, Peru. She is a member of AFIT (Feminist Anthropology Research Group) and maintains research interests in migration, identity, language, as well as a gendered perspective on gender and symbolic systems—and focus on women's participation in festive rituals. She teaches on the doctoral programme of Feminist and Gender Studies and forms part of the group "Ez Donk Oraindik" with her students.

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