Botanical Mary:Addressing the Virgin with Natural Imagery

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Joining commentary on how best to approach referring to the Virgin Mary, this paper explores the contrasts of her dual nature while also considering the place she should take in relation to Jesus. Reflecting on art, music, poetry, and spiritual practices, a poetic approach to addressing Mary is advocated as the way forward. This poetic approach holds paradox and veneration in tension while embracing beauty, faith, and worship of the Creator.

Flora and the Virgin Mary have a rich devotional friendship. Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote of this connection, stating that "Mary is the queen of spiritual flowers, and therefore she is called the rose, for the rose is fitly called of all the flowers, the most beautiful."[1] St. Bernard of Clairvaux echoed this sentiment, referring to Mary as "the violet of humility, the lily of chastity, the rose of purity."[2] In addition to epithets like these, Mary and botanical images have become inextricably linked over time through music, iconography, poetry, and even gardens, most often as a way of emphasizing Mary's virtues and setting an example for believers to adopt them as well. To explore the basis of this emphasis, it is necessary to expand on the history of Marian floral imagery, interact with different representations of this imagery in various mediums, wrestle with depicting the paradoxes of Mary's nature, and question the appropriateness of using this language to address Mary.

Perhaps one of the best-known floral images related to Mary, aside from the rose, is the lily, often seen in depictions of the Annunciation. Lilies were, and continue to be, viewed as a symbol of purity (or chastity, as mentioned by St. Bernard) alluding to Mary's perpetual virginity. St. Bede was one of the earliest to make this comparison, describing Mary as "a white lily, the white petals symbolizing her pure virginal body and the golden anthers the radiance of her soul" in the 7th century.[3] After this came many different legends related to the church reinforcing the symbolic significance of the lily to the Virgin, insomuch that the lily is often referred to as the Madonna Lily. One such legend describes the lily as sprouted by Eve's tears but picked—read, redeemed—by Mary.[4] Others describe the miraculous sprouting of lilies at key points in arguments about Mary's perpetual virginity. One legend even goes as far as to have three lilies appear, symbolizing Mary's virginity before, during, and after Jesus' birth.[5] This led to many lilies being painted with three flowers on one stalk in paintings of the Annunciation.[6] The lily is seen repeatedly in Annunciation art, spanning from works as early as the Sixteenth Century Annunciation with Flower Symbols from the French Book of Hours,[7] to modern examples such as John Collier's Annunciation (2000)[8] which depicts Mary as a suburban schoolgirl receiving Gabriel's news. However, the lily is not limited to this specific symbolism. In the early 1900s, Easter lilies became representative of the Resurrection of Christ through the way that the dead bulb is buried and grows to life, displaying unique and rich symbolism corresponding to Jesus rather than focusing on Mary and her virginity.[9] Easter lilies being the exact same flower as the Madonna lily holds a deep sense of imagery which informs our theological and physical understanding of both Mary and Jesus' virtues and purposes in God.[10]

The conception of Marian floral imagery was an organic and diverse process, beginning with the Medieval "Doctrine of Signatures." The doctrine was a form of early herbalism that justified each plant having specific properties. This justification was based in the belief that "in the unity of the creation of the spiritual and the material, of heaven and earth, through the eternal Word of God, mirrors are to be found in nature of the persons, events and objects of Revelation,"[11] or, in other words, that God creat-

[1] Moya Andrews. "Flowers for the Virgin Mary," Indiana Public Media, Sept. 2, 2010, https://indianapublicmedia.org/focuson-flowers/flowers-virgin-mary.php

[2] Marian T. Horvat. "The Lily: Symbol of the Annunciation & Resurrection," Tradition in Action, Mar. 21, 2016. https://www.traditioninaction.org/religious/f034_EasterLily.htm

[3] Florence Eccleston. "Medieval Annunciation Symbolism," *I*ntroducing Medieval Christianity, July 9, 2020. https://introducingmedievalchristianity.wordpress.com/2019/07/08/medieval-annunciation-symbolism/

[4] Horvat, "The Lily."

[5] Horvat, "The Lily."

[6] Horvat, "The Lily."

[7] See Appendix A

[8] Collier, John. "Annunciation." Hillstream LLC, 2014, https://www.hillstream.com/artist/john-collier/paintings-gallery

[9] Horvat, "The Lily."

[10] Horvat, "The Lily."

[11] John S. Stokes. "Flowers of Mary's Sorrows," Mary's Garden,

ing nature set it apart as being specifically useful. It naturally follows that Mary, also created by God and whose life held a specific sacred purpose, would be treated as one of these subjects upon which nature becomes a holy mirror. Examples of this mirroring developed in accordance with other religious floral symbols and while some were named directly from scripture like "Mary's Sword (of sorrow)," others were derived from legends based in both scripture and popular tradition, such as Mary's torn locks of hair.[12] These symbols seem to have been spread through travel, by "missionaries, monks and friars, pilgrims, members of the Crusades and other warriors, the wandering scholars, roving singers and travelling players, and merchants."[13] Despite the wide variety of travel options for these symbols, there was some consistency in particular images relating to specific flowers. However, the prevalence of native plants in different regions often led to attributions of general symbolism to whichever plants were available and deemed suitable to convey a particular meaning, so there was some variability.[14]

Today, these meanings are most prominently conveyed in Marian gardens. These gardens are small plots rife with personal growth, as the intention is to plant flowers which embody the virtues of the Virgin, and, while tending to them, to tend to the virtues in your heart. The University of Dayton's vast website of Marian resources describes this devotional practice as a "prayerful work," an "act of faith," and an "appeal to the heart" where, while you read about Mary's virtues and tend to Marian flowers, "they may bloom spiritually within your interior life" and, "with your garden stewardship, foliage, buds, [and] blooms will come of God's creatures the seeds, in due season and according to his established order."[15] As with Easter Lilies, Marian gardens are another Marian floral image that holds the dual purpose of honoring Mary and pointing back to God through a focus on his creation. If the implication of creation isn't evidence enough of this pointing, these Marian Gardens often contain statues of "Our Lady, St. Joseph, or of a Saint or a Crucifix [emphasis added]."[16]

As Mary's soul was magnified by God,[17] Mary is used to magnify others, be they her husband, other fellow saints, or her son, Jesus.

However, some veneration using natural images toes the line between honoring Mary and elevating her to the same, or a higher, level than Jesus. Both the author of The Life of the Virgin (once thought to be Maximus the Confessor), and Hildegard of Bingen, an accomplished nun from the 12th Century, lean towards this type of veneration. In the conclusion to The Life of the Virgin, page upon page is dedicated to epithets referencing Mary, many of which are botanical in nature. Mary is called, "the root of the incorruptible shoot," "the tree of immortal fruit," "the worker, the lover of humanity [who] sprouted forth the planter of life," "the flower of incorruptibility, the crown of virtue, the model of the life of angels," as well as "the thickly leaved tree in whose shade the weary rest, the bearer of the redeemer of captives, the guide of those who have gone astray."[18] Rather than simply emphasizing Mary's virtue, dual nature, or purpose, these descriptions almost elevate her to the level of Co-Redemptrix or Mediatrix with Christ by portraying her as one in whom people are helped from their struggles and delivered from sin. Hildegard of Bingen reinforces this in her Latin antiphon, *O Frondens Virga*—directly translated as "O blooming branch," which "stand[s] upright in [her] nobility"—referring to Mary as one who has power to "deign to free us, frail and weakened, from the wicked habits of our age" and "stretch forth [her] hand to lift us up aright."[19] Once again, Mary is not only given honor and a unique position but power not unlike that of Jesus. This raises many questions. Does elevating Mary to this point become dangerous to Christians by setting her up as an unattainable ideal? Can botanical language such as this go too far, stripping Mary of her humanity, and, consequently, Jesus of his? While these descriptions are beautiful and rightly venerative, they can gloss over the paradoxes that exist in Mary's life if they are not balanced with the understanding of Mary's humanity, or the way she points to her son.

I found some resolution in relation to these descriptions of Mary in the stained-glass Jesse Tree window of Chartres Cathedral. This window depicts the tree of Jesse

University of Dayton. https://www.udayton.edu/marianlibrary/marysgardens/f/flowers-of-marys-sorrows.php

[12] Stokes, "Sorrows."

[13] Edward A. G. McTague. "Flowers of Our Lady," Mary's Garden, University of Dayto. https://www.udayton.edu/marianlibrary/marysgardens/f/flowers-of-our-lady.php

[14] McTague, "Flowers of Our Lady."

[15] Edward A. G. McTague. "Gardening and Spirituality." Mary's Garden, University of Dayton. https://www.udayton.edu/marianlibrary/marysgardens/g/gardening-and-spirituality.php

[16] McTague, "Gardening and Spirituality."

[17] Lk 1:46-55 ESV

[18] Maximus the Confessor, *The Life of the Virgin*, trans. by Shoemaker, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 149-151.

[19] Hildegard Von Bingen, *O Frondens Virga*. trans. by Nathanael M. Campbell. International Society of Hildegard Von Bingen Studies, Jan. 1, 1970. http://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/10/o-frondens-virga-antiphon.html.

and his descendants, ascending upwards. Mary is near the top of the tree, reinforcing her place in God's plan as well as her connection to nature; however, she is not at the very top. Mary is directly under Jesus with her hands holding the branches that curve to rest under his feet.[20] This subtle intertwining of Mary and Jesus both connects them and allows Mary to be honored in a way that elevates Jesus, rather than elevating her above him. This depiction also makes room for Mary and Jesus to be paradoxically human, as they are both connected to the men who came before them while being elevated themselves.

Marian floral imagery can serve the purpose of highlighting these paradoxes within Mary's human nature. In a 2020 photograph taken by Eric Whitacre in Los Angeles, a pandemic-ready masked Mary (specifically Our Lady of Guadalupe) is painted onto a building, surrounded by heavy-laden rose bushes above and bare vines below.[21] While the cross-cultural referencing of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the insertion of Mary into present times merits analysis and joy, I found the paradox of the living and barren in this image the most interesting in relation to Mary and botanical imagery. Each time I see that picture I wonder, which came first? Did someone see the flowers and then paint the Virgin? Was she painted before any flowers were grown there? Were the flowers all blooming when she was painted, fading into the duality visible in the photograph? While I don't know the answers to these questions, I am not the only one who has asked them or addressed her dual nature as human and favored by God, virgin and mother, expressed through flora.

In T.S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," this paradox is highlighted over and over again. In one particularly well-known passage, Eliot describes Mary as the, "Lady of silences/ Calm and distressed/ Torn and most whole/ Rose of memory/ Rose of forgetfulness/ Exhausted and life-giving/ Worried reposeful/ The single Rose/ Is now the Garden/ Where all loves end."[22] This section has been described by Jacques Maritain, "an eminent critic"[23] of poetry, as "an instance in which clarity and obscurity, explicit abstract meanings and implicit undetermined significations intertwine to compose a complex radiance of an admirable quality."[24] In other words, the rich duality of this poetic style itself captures the myriad of Mary's paradoxical nature in a way which again magnifies her humanity and complexity. As Scott Erickson writes in his book *Honest Advent* in reference to the Virgin birth, "the function of a paradox is not to find the solution to seemingly opposing truths, but to be transformed by living in the middle mystery of them."[25] Eliot and Whitacre both live into this mystery deeply through their art.

An important question to ask when faced with this middle mystery and reconciling these various botanical images of Mary is whether they are poetry or prose. If you have been to a stunning concert, or seen a breathtaking piece of art, or heard a well-crafted poem, or admired the beauty of a sunset, you know the ways poetry of all forms allows people to enter into a headspace of awe that, for Christians, often leads to worshipping God. If the botanical imagery used to describe Mary is prose—that which can only depict one side of her at a time—then it risks elevating Mary too highly as it glosses over the complications of duality in its attempt to always speak in a straightforward manner. However, if this devotion is seen as a form of poetry, an art springing from respect towards God's chosen creation, the paradox of Mary's nature is kept intact and held as a mystery without letting Mary become superhuman: all is eventually pointed back to God through the awe and wonder inspired by admiring God's handiwork.

The poetic and paradoxical approach to the Virgin seen in Whitacre's photo as well as in Eliot and Ericksons' words is the way forward for Mary's role in the lives of Christians through this botanical imagery. The cover image for this paper,[26] *Madonna* or *Madonna of the Crown of Roses*, by Gwyneth Thompson-Briggs (2020) is a beautiful representation of this poetic path to Marian devotion.[27] Calling back to a well-known church epithet of Mary as the Mystical Rose, Mary is depicted with a crown of ghostly roses hovering over her bent figure as she is deep in prayer. In reference to this choice, Thompson-Briggs explained that "Our Lord wore a crown of thorns, it seems appropriate for Our Lady, who

[20] See Appendix A

[21] See Appendix A

[22] T.S. Eliot. "Ash Wednesday" in Collected Poems 1909-1962 (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1991), 87-88.

[23] Peter Anthony Wilson. "T. S. Eliot's 'Ash-Wednesday'," (PhD diss., University of Windsor, 1963), 25.

[24] Wilson, "Ash Wednesday," 25.

[25] Scott Erickson, "Virgin" in Honest Advent: Awakening to the Wonder of God-with-Us Then, Here, and Now, (Zondervan: 2020), 85.

[26] Editor's Note: Because of copywright restrictions, this image was omitted from the current presentation of Miss Stanfa's essay. The image can be seen by clicking the link in the following footnote.

[27] "Madonna of the Crown of Roses," Gwyneth Thompson Briggs, Mar. 23, 2020. https://www.gwyneththompsonbriggs.com/madonna-of-the-crown-of-roses

interiorly shared in His Passion and now shares in His Triumph, to wear a crown of roses."[28] Thompson-Briggs continues, stating that

> As she herself put it in her Magnificat, 'God hath regarded the humility of his handmaid . . . He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble' (Lk 2:48-52). What God has exalted, we must exalt too. I hope my Madonna conveys the same expression of the triumph of humble prayer.[29]

Similarly to what we have seen in lilies, Marian gardens, and the windows of Chartres, a poetic path forward for botanical Marian devotion ultimately points back to Jesus through shared experience and prayer, inspiring similar worship and wonder in the beholder.

Another example of this way forward lies in more traditional poetry. In his book *Sonnets to the Unseen*, Christopher FitzGerald uses each page of this book as a sonnet written out of a place of paradox—both emphasizing FitzGerald's deep questions about his faith and a form of worship. Describing this work, FitzGerald explicitly states that he "longs to go beyond knowing [the figures of the Nativity] as 'occupants of creches' and wants instead 'to see them at the window, in the street as common people,' concluding, 'I envy those who shopped alongside Mary/ And saw her, peach in hand, as ordinary."[30] In this attempt to articulate the humanity of these biblical figures, FitzGerald also writes a sonnet turning to the Magnificat—a poem in its own right—both in relation to Mary and flowers:

> This Ave came the flower of prophecy.
> The voice of God was in the air that day,
> For Mary started speaking in a way
> Unusual to her, so fancy-free,
> So far removed from practicality.
> Elizabeth was graced to hear her say,
> My soul doth magnify the Lord. (To pray
> With beauty thus was purest poetry.)
> My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.
> And when she prophesied, All generations
> Shall call me blessed, Lord, these declarations
> Reflected truth, not arrogant behavior.
> A rich bouquet was her Magnificat;
> Each Ave now, a fresh forget-me-not.[31]

Interestingly, where other works that use floral imagery would have referred to Mary directly with images like these, FitzGerald instead applies them to Mary indirectly by turning her prayer itself into flowers, emphasizing its nature as an organic and poetic thing which grew from her, using this language to venerate her very veneration of God. The line "To pray/ With beauty thus was purest poetry"[32] is an especially beautiful statement of the ways Marian devotion becomes particularly accessible through poetry as we are invited to follow in her footsteps.

While it is possible for Marian imagery to cross a line by elevating her beyond her humanity, allowing the friendship of Mary and flora emphasizes her connection with creation and her Creator. In a section of his book *A Ray of Darkness*, Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, touches upon this in a chapter about Christians and music entitled "Keeping Time." He claims that music is a "religious event" which "tells us what we are and what we are not, creatures, not gods. We are creators only when we remember that we are not the Creator, and so we are able to manage the labor and attention and expectancy that belongs to art."[33] While Williams is writing directly about music, this sentiment can also be applied to Mary, as well as her song, the Magnificat. She becomes a creator, like Williams said, when she remembers that she is not the Creator and recognizes God's will for her in the fruit of her womb. As she remembers this truth, we must also remember as we address Mary with this natural imagery that she, like us, is not the Creator, but a creator only in the context of being a creature. Cynthia L. Rigby echoes this near the conclusion to her essay, "Mary and the Artistry of God," writing that "to live as who we are, manifesting the glory of God who made us, is to be creaturely creators,"[34] and that "with Mary, then, *we shape our words into poetry*; we nurture the life that is in us; we ponder what is going on around us.…We live as artists participating in the artistry of God, wondering how our fragile efforts can be essential, marveling that they yield such beauty [emphasis added]."[35] In worshipping our Creator, we can address the Flower of his creation with love and poetic devotion.

[28] Briggs, "Madonna."

[29] Briggs, "Madonna."

[30] Christopher FitzGerald, *Sonnets to the Unseen*, (Lansing: Opus Bonum, 2001), Jacket Notes and p.46.

[31] FitzGerald, "Sonnets," 49.

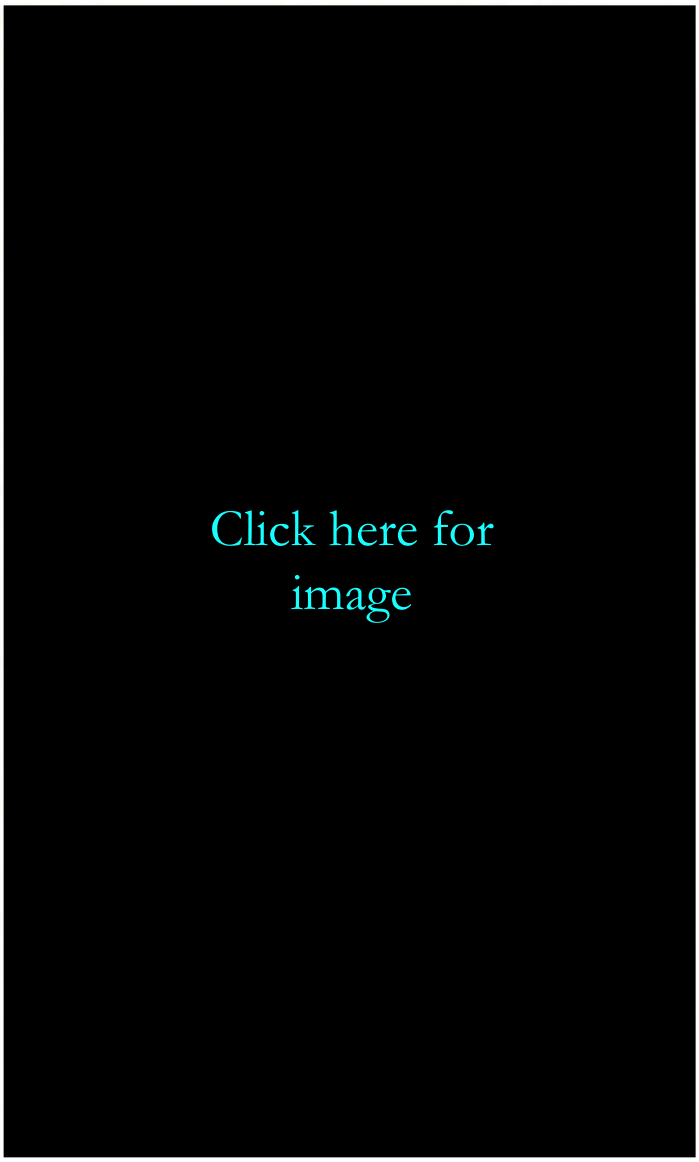
[32] FitzGerald, "Sonnets," 49.

[33] Rowan Williams, "Keeping Time," in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*, (Cowley Publications: 1995), 216.

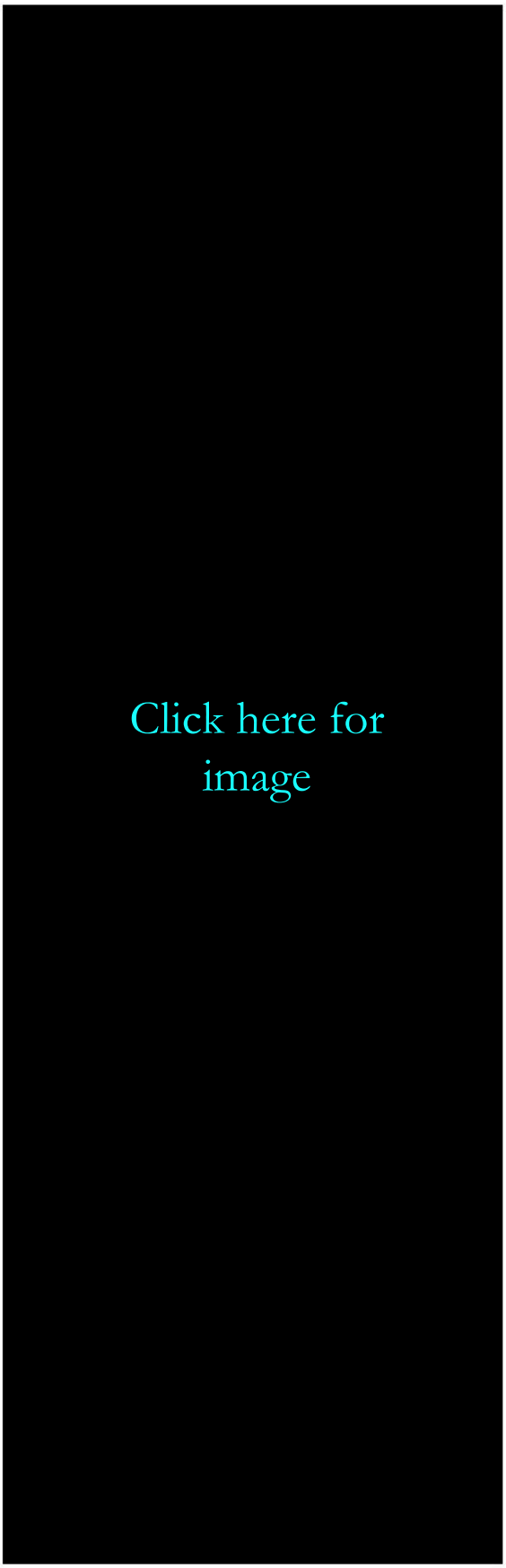
[34] Cynthia L. Rigby, "Mary and the Artistry of God," in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ed. Gaventa, Beverly Roberts and Cynthia L. Rigby. (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 153.

[35] Rigby, "Artistry," 155.

Appendix A



Annunciation with Flower Symbols. XVI Century French Book of Hours.



The Tree of Jesse, 12th century. Stained glass window (Bay 49), Chartres Cathedral, France. Photo: Painton Cowen

Sunday, September 13, 2020. Los Angeles. Photo: Eric Whitacre

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