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Dressed in Nature: Women and Text/Styles in Painting and Literature, from Renaissance Aesthetics to Pre-Raphaelite Poetics and to *Art Nouveau* Painting*

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on paintings and poetry, visualizing fashionable design in clothing, such as flowers, foliage and greenery — characterizing pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting. This paper analyses Sandro Botticelli's *Spring* (1477–82) and its representation of clothing, flowers and natural patterns which take on transformative, symbolical and connotative traits especially in Chloris' metamorphosis. John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851–2) is then framed through Shakespeare's Hamlet and Rossetti's poem *The Portrait* (1870). The nature-steeped poem The Lady of Shalott — which inspired the singer Loreena McKennit — is then made to address the photograph The Lady of Shalott by the contemporary American-German photographer Julia Fullerton-Batten, who recreates John William Waterhouse's painting emphasizing the textile dimension and the symbolic power of greenery. This dialogue between painting and poetry foregrounds the description of garments and textiles, their connection with the natural world, and human vs nonhuman kinship which offers symbolical, allegorical and pictorial readings of artworks and poems. In conclusion, the critical analysis moves on to Gustav Klimt's painting *The Kiss* (1907–1908), example of *Art Nouveau* epitomizing this diachronic comparatist discourse and showing the culmination of all the elements discussed. This paper employs the frameworks of art history criticism, literary theory and environmental humanities.

Keywords: Ophelia; Ecophilia; Flowery Textile Patterns; Human Nonhuman Kinship; Metamorphosis.

* The authors of this contribution, entitled *Women Dressed in Nature: Women and Text/Styles in Painting and Literature, from Renaissance Aesthetics to Pre-Raphaelite Poetics and to Art Nouveau Painting*, shared the outline, methodology, and bibliography. Carmen Concilio authored the section entitled "Herbs and Flowers for Nature Garments in Art and Literature"; Costanza Mondo authored the section entitled "Fashioning and Refashioning Women's Dress in Nature".

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Herbs and Flowers for Nature Garments in Art and Literature

Within the framework of Environmental Humanities, it is by now well-known that the epoch in which we live is named Anthropocene, even though the term has not been approved as indicating a potential geological unit of time by all the scientists.[1] In contrast, Humanists have constantly adopted the term to define the epoch in which humans have the power of transforming the geomorphology of the planet as any other natural forces. This epoch, thus, allows scholars and students to look back at artworks of the canon and to reinterpret them in new ways and according to new paradigms. Examples of this new critical eco-matrix are the studies dedicated to Shakespeare and ecology in the last decade.[2]

In this contribution I would like to give shape to a discourse related to fashion and fashionable texts/styles which are inspired by art and literature and rooted in waves of past experiences of human and non-human cohabiting and waves of aesthetic adoption of floral elements: more specifically, a discourse related to female figures "dressed in nature". A first step towards this goal is looking back at classical works of art, namely paintings, to detect the origin of fashionable garments bearing floral and vegetal or foliage-shaped patterns and designs of greenery, essential in defining specific and emblematic women, which later on also become a *Leitmotiv* in the *fin de siècle* artistic style. These fashionable pieces of clothing, so to speak, in paintings and in literature, have translated and transplanted figurative elements derived from nature, which today also translate into the use of compostable recycled matter, such as orange and apple peels for the production of clothes and accessories, as will be demonstrated in the present volume. It is therefore interesting to retrace and follow the evolution of this fashion-able way of being "dressed in nature", a form of horti-culture that is also fashion-culture.

The starting point of the present analysis is Sandro Botticelli's *Spring* (1480 c.). This masterpiece, a product of the Humanist, Medicean and Florentine cultural and political atmosphere in which the painter produced his oeuvre, has been widely commented upon by eminent art critics and art historians, as well as psychoanalysts;[3] thus my purpose is not to engage in scholarly art criticism. Suffice it to summarize here some of the relevant features of the work. This large painting (Uffizi, 217 x 319 cm, tempera on wood) does not apply the rules of Renaissance perspective and provides a rather two-dimensional vision. The setting is a thick orange grove, whose trees are all depicted in a row, with tall and slender, parallel dark trunks. An illusory sense of depth is however created by two principal optical effects: first, the forward-slanting lawn, covered by deep-green grass and massively dotted with multi-coloured and multi-species flowers, and, second, the transparent light of the sky in the background, behind the trees, that contrasts with the dark grove in the middle ground. This translucent background, right at the centre of the painting, seems to cut out a perfect arch, where silhouetted dark-green myrtle leaves produce the optical effect of a dark etching, against the clear light. This triumph of foliage and greenery anticipates Liberty wrought-iron works and decorations, and even today's wallpaper decorations, or photomurals — all greenery, foliage, and stems — which are quite popular and fashionable in this age of renewed ecological consciousness.

Moving from the silhouetted luminous and etched-like background to the dark wooden middle ground, the spectator's eye then meets the human and mythological figures in the foreground, before the trees, figures that are regularly distributed in groups of three plus one, in an alternate sequence from left to right.

For the purpose of the present contribution, it seems interesting to single out the grouping of figures on the far-right side of the canvas, which is most relevant to the present discussion. This chrono-logical first section of the canvas evokes a suggestive parallel with the episode of Chloris turning into Flora in Ovid's *Fasti* (V.193–214). More generally, in Ovidian fables about women's metamorphoses into flow-

1. Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams and Colin P. Summerhayes, *The Anthropocene as a Geological Unit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

2. Randall Martin, *Shakespeare & Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Shaul Bassi, *Pianeta Ofelia. Fare Shakespeare nell'Antropocene* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2024).

3. Giulio Carlo Argan, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, vol. II (Firenze: Sansoni, 1974), 236–249. Massimo Recalcati, *Il miracolo della forma. Per un'estetica psicoanalitica* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2024), 138–145.

ers, plants or trees, the transformative process springs from a traumatic act of violation of natural laws and/or rape, and consists in a dramatic moment of paralysis, rootedness and astonishing metamorphosis.[4] This process of "becoming vegetal" also ends up in a radical way of being "dressed in nature": bark and fibers first block the feet, then slowly cover the trunk of the body and finally shut the mouth, nose and eyes of the woman, who thus gains branches, a luxuriant canopy of foliage and aesthetically pleasing beauty to be admired forever, apart from being rendered immortal by poetry and literary iconology. A well-known example is the case of Daphne,[5] who turns into a laurel tree with the help of her father, the river Peneus, who saves her from Phoebus' s pursuit:

> ... torpor gravis occupant artus;
>
> Mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,
> in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescent;
> pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,
> ora cacumen obit: remanet nitor unus in illa. (*Met*. I. 547–552, 28)

In spite of the violence that is implied in those types of metamorphosis, it is interesting to quote J.M. Coetzee's interpretation of Ovid's fables:

> My feeling is that Greek fables like the one about Apollo and Daphne are a later, and in a way more rational, overlay over a deep feeling in primitive religion that all of life is one, i.e., that the life-force is mutable and expresses itself almost at will, unpredictably. The body of a girl (or a youth) and the trunk of a tree are just different manifestations (metamorphoses) of the same deep force. [6]

The continuity that the South African Nobel prize winner sees in Ovid's metamorphoses between the world of humans and of non-humans is similar to the one that the Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia embeds in his study on metamorphosis:

> Metamorfosi muove da un'idea molto semplice: la vita di tutte le specie è una, e una sola. [...] Tutte le specie sono un solo *demos*, un solo popolo che condivide una sola carne. [...] Ogni identità specifica determina esclusivamente la formula della continuità (e della metamorfosi) con le altre specie.[7]

Botticelli's interpretation of metamorphosis, as a sort of 'filmic' sequence, presents three moments. First comes the attempt by Zephyrus to capture the nymph Chloris. He is one of the four gods of the winds, actually the north-westerly wind, prompting and announcing the forthcoming Spring. Zephyrus intrudes on the scene from the right side, bending the laurel branches (an allusion to poetry and to 'Laurentius' de' Medici) and thus forcing an oblique descending angle onto the scene, thus also pointing towards the centre of the painting, where Venus stands, statuary in a red cloak and white gown and with a tender spectator's look of control, tolerance, acknowledgement and blessing.

The gaze of the young nymph Chloris is particularly intense; her open, slightly staring and bulging eyes look straight into the eyes of the god, whose touch produces vines, leaves and flowers springing from her mouth, as a sign that a metamorphosis has taken place. This second moment leaves room to a third scene, where Chloris has been transformed into the goddess Flora, a pregnant woman, with a dress all decorated with foliage and flowers. A flowery garland also enriches the neck of Flora, as well as her head. The first two of these three figures, Zephyrus and Chloris are linked by the repeated and parallel gestures of their arms and hands stretched forward, mimicking the pursuit of a prey, each attempting to hold onto the next person. Only Flora keeps her hands cupped around her womb, holding the bunches of flowers

4. Publio Ovidio Nasone, *Metamorfosi*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1979).

5. "And yet the scene in Botticelli's *Spring* has reminded more than one observer of the pursuit and transformation of Daphne." Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 102.

6. Berlinde De Bryyckere, John Maxwell Coetzee, *Cripplewood. Kreupelhout. 55^th International Art Exhibition The Venice Biennale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 47.

7. Emanuele Coccia, *Metamorfosi. Siamo un'unica, sola vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2022), 6,7,11.

gathered in her lap. In this way, Flora is here symbolized as a generative power, and her pregnant womb and the flowers in her lap insist in a cumulative metaphor, on bearing life and seasonal renewal and rebirth; as Coccia says, "the body is transformed into a matrix traversed by a life."[8] The canvas has been interpreted as a pedagogic warning to upper-class young married women, providing a model of proper attire in the public sphere in the figure of Venus, as an incarnation of decorum and dignity, along with a more sensual model of behaviour in private life — one which proposes consent to the husband's desire in order to give birth to the male heir of the House.[9] Thus, carnal love on the right might be seen as opposed to sublimated love on the left side of the canvas.

Moreover, Flora's rich dress creates a continuity between Chloris on the one hand and the lawn on the other. The profusion of flowers springing from Chloris's breath is echoed in the flowers scattered on the green grass — in itself an ecosystem characterized by a rich biodiversity.

Famously, the scene progresses from right to left in a sequence of linear actions and groups of characters. A putto-like Cupid flies above the figure of Venus. To the left the three Graces are dancing in a harmonic circle and are dressed in veils of pure light, not differently from Chloris. The last figure on the far left is Mercury, the god with winged sandals, who points his staff to ward off the clouds, in order to grant perfect spring. His wind-related figure is opposed to that of Zephyrus, for his gaze points towards the upper left corner of the canvas, alluding to a metaphysical dimension of sublimation. While Cupid and Mercury are endowed with their typical magic tools, respectively the firing arrow of love and the magic staff, two of the dancing Graces, namely the one on the far left and the one on the far right, wear jewels that hint at a renewal of political harmony between the Medicean family (Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici), referenced through a red ruby, and Pope Sixtus IV, referenced through the oak leaves which are to be seen in his coat of arms. Their jewellery and positioning also hint at their different status with respect to the third Grace, Chastity, who is more modest, younger and turning her gaze towards Mercury, to create a symmetry with Chloris's engaging the gaze of Zephyrus. Chastity is the target of Cupid's arrow, and she is being initiated to the beauty of passion.[10] At the same time, allegorically, the dance of the Graces might also represent the renewed concord between political powers in Botticelli's time, a concord that actually Botticelli favoured.[11] Interestingly, the winged feet of Mercury are echoed and replicated in the lower rim of the women's long dresses floating in the air due to the movement of their feet, which produces leafy or fanning winged shapes and movement in the textiles, too. Significantly, all the women in the painting walk and dance with their bare feet on the grass, as if to reiterate that women, soil, turf, green grass and flowers create a consistent kinship.

The main focus in this article is to take from classical interpretations of Botticelli's *Spring* those elements that might have inspired (contemporary) fashion, let us turn again to Flora's dress, for it might be considered an icon of femininity and women's fashion in itself. An easy equation between flowery beauty, delicacy and femininity is also hinted at, for instance, in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1480), where the winds blow flowers towards Venus, while the ancilla offers the goddess a gown decorated in herbs and flowers as the dress of nature.[12] As Indian writer Sumana Roy claims, "Centuries of conditioning, of literature and artwork that have entered the stream of the colloquial have enforced the visual equivalence between women and flowers."[13]

At this point, a quantum leap is required in order to parallel Flora's dress and that worn by Ophelia's in visual renderings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600), although one might conclude that Botticelli set a

8. Coccia, *Metamorfosi*, 29.

9. Eynav Ovadia, *Flowering in the Springtime: An Iconographical Analysis of Botticelli's* Primavera, PhD Thesis, (Missouri: Lindenwood University, 2019), 7.

10. "By lifting their hands above Chastity's head, the other Graces define [...] the theme of the dance as her initiation." Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958: 104.

11. Cf. Uffizi, "I gioielli della Primavera di Botticelli," Uffizi, accessed February 15, 2025, https://www.uffizi.it/video/i-gioielli-della-primavera-di-botticelli.

12. Argan, *Storia dell'arte*, 247.

13. Sumana Roy, *How I Became a Tree* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 7.

manner of dressing women's bodies in nature that has inspired subsequent traditions, thus creating a continuity of ecology and eco-philia that only economic and political vested interests would cyclically silence and obliterate. After all, Emanuele Coccia invites us to think not in terms of evolution but in terms of metamorphosis.[14]

Therefore, as a consequence of this 'mannerism' and metamorphosis, Ophelia is one more heroine "dressed in nature", although in a context of 'death by water', rather than in a triumph of regenerative life and pregnancy as in Flora's case. In both cases the woman's body, or embodiment and fashioning of nature, is relevant. Right in contrast to what happens in Botticelli, within his "rewriting" of Ovidian metamorphoses, in Shakespearian tragedies "extinction rather than genetic inheritance is the biological norm"; "and it is sharply gendered", as noticed by Randall Martin.[15] Shaul Bassi, too, stresses this "ecophobia", seen — in Jan Kott's formulation — as a total rejection of the reproduction of the sexual instinct.[16]

Ophelia's case is definitely one further instance of metamorphosis from life to death in nature, for, as Coccia claims, "death is in reality the threshold of a metamorphosis."[17] Ophelia speaks of her father's death, moved by grief and mourning, in terms of a metamorphosis in nature:

> He is dead and gone,
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone.
>
> ...
>
> White his shroud as the mountain snow
> Larded with sweet flowers
> Which bewept to the grave did not go
> With true-love shower. (IV.V. 30–40)[18]

Furthermore, Ophelia's brother, Laertes, once he hears the news of her burial in "ground unsanctified", alludes to a possible metamorphosis:

> Lay her in the earth,
> And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
> May violets spring. (V.I. 232–234)[19]

Apparently, Shakespearian tragedies uncover a "triumph of sterility", childlessness and death of women, as happens in *Hamlet* with Ophelia. Mourning her father's death, Ophelia expresses herself in songs and laments. The latter represent the frustrated sexuality that led her to suicide:

> Her clothes spread wide,
> And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up;
> Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and endued
> Unto that element. But long it could not be,
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death. (IV.VII.150–158)[20]

14. Coccia, *Metamorfosi*, 13.
15. Martin, *Shakeaspeare and Ecology*, 150.
16. Bassi, *Pianeta Ofelia*, 28.
17. Coccia, *Metamorfosi*, 94.
18. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Paolo Bertinetti, (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 288.
19. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 354.
20. Shakespeare, 322–324.

The first part of the description, according to Martin, shows Ophelia like a mermaid, floating on the water surface and gesturing "at an Ovidian refiguring of bodily decay as sublime metamorphosis."[21] In the second half of the description Gertrude represents Ophelia as falling towards the muddy bed of the river: this means death and loss of fertility. However,

> from the perspective of the river's ecosystem it looks different. ... This time it is Ophelia's body that becomes food for worms and other micro-organisms which feed the fish, which the man catches using the worms who have eaten Polonius. The worms recycle Polonius's body-as-nutrients back into the soil to nourish the herbs and flowers Ophelia distributes during her songs, and which Gertrude later strews on her grave.[22]

Elaborating widely on the "worm metaphor" that is thoroughly salient in *Hamlet*, Martin insists on the natural cooperative link between humans and nonhumans, i.e. worms, which seems to be governed by an almost precursive Darwinian logic.[23] Even more interestingly, Martin continues:

> Reimagining John Millais's continually adapted image of Ophelia as riparian detritus represents the kind of dark ecological turn which Timothy Morton argues is necessary for environmentalism to move beyond Romantic aesthetics of nature.[24]

John Everett Millais's painting, *Ophelia* (1851–1852) in refashioning the protagonist as a woman "dressed in nature", somehow reminds of Botticelli's *Spring*, with the difference that here death and sterility are portrayed and not regenerative life, although flowers with their symbolic meanings allude to life, vitality and passion as well as to death and eternal sleep. For instance, Chloris produces a strawberry flower, and the strawberry with its red colour is the symbol of love and passion, while Ophelia is portrayed in John Everett Millais's painting with a rose brushing her cheek as a symbol for beauty and love.[25] The forest, the green grass, the flowers create a continuity between Ophelia's dress and her surroundings but also between Shakespeare's Ophelia and Botticelli's Flora. Actually, there are a number of paintings of Ophelia dressed in flowers and thus in nature, some of which portray her standing or sitting with bunches of flowers in her arms, in her lap and in her hair. Yet, Ophelia also partakes of the tradition of sleeping beauties as Sumana Roy reminds us:

> In *Ghumonto Puri*, the second story of *Thakumar Jhuli*, a collection of grandmother's tales in Bangla, for instance, a young prince sets out on a '*desh-bhromon*' [...] the young prince suddenly becomes aware of the fragrance of flowers. The fragrance of a thousand blooming lotuses [...] When he enters the flower garden, directed by the fragrance, he finds a bed made of gold end embossed with diamonds, and hanging from them numerous flower garlands, and amid gold lotuses, a beautiful princess poisoned with sleep.[26]

This Bengali fairy tale is assumed by Roy as one more example of a woman's dumb performance within the patriarchal imaginary — dead-like, silent and passive, as most critics see Ophelia. And yet, Ophelia's continuity with the flowers that surround her, the water and the wider green-scape that compose her entourage, escapes the trap of death-ness, dumb-ness, passive-ness and makes kin with all of nature, particularly the flowery nature that dresses her. In her speech, Ophelia makes the flowers speak, similarly to Chloris, who literally speaks/spills flowers from her mouth.[27] Examples of Ophelia's flower-speech are the following:

21. Martin, *Shakeaspeare and Ecology*, 151.
22. Martin, 151.
23. Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetal Mould, through the Actions of Worms, with Observations on their Habits* (London: John Murray), 1881.
24. Martin, *Shakeaspeare and Ecology*, 151.
25. On flower and plant symbology cf. Shaul Bassi, *Pianeta Ofelia*, 32–38.
26. Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, 7.
27. Bassi, *Pianeta Ofelia*, 34–35.

> There's rosemary, that's for remembrance — pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.
>
> [...]
>
> There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you. And here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace a Sundays. You must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. (IV. v. 173–182)[28]

Perhaps, Ophelia and Chloris are not simply among flowers but they generate flowers by which they dress up. Incidentally, daisies and violets are the most numerous in Botticelli's *Spring*, too; daisies are symbols of (dissimulation and unhappy) love, while violets are sacred to Venus and are symbols of faithfulness.[29]

John Millais painted his canvas *en plein air*, according to the pre-Raphaelite style, but also as a precursor of the Impressionists. He mimetically and realistically portrayed the luxuriant nature along the river Hogsmill, at Ewell, in Surrey, where he resided for that purpose for several months, while leaving a white, blank central space where the figure of Ophelia should lie. Later, he chose Elizabeth Siddal as a model. Lizzie, as she was commonly called, was to become the wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As a sitter, she had to lie in a bathtub full of water in the painter's flat in Gower Street in London,[30] in order to render the drowning more realistic, thus catching an invalidating pneumonia, which was quite difficult to get rid of.[31]

Some commentators claim that Botticelli painted hundreds of different species of flowers in his *Spring*. Millais, in turn, painted all the species that are listed in Shakespeare's tragedy, adding some others for their strong symbolic meaning. Moreover, for the sake of realism, Millais also included some animals, a robin and a river rat — which reminds us of Hamlet's (pre-Darwinian) discourse on worms — but also a skull that echoes the famous episode of the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. Thus, in this case Ophelia — "dressed in nature" — becomes a metaphor standing for comp/hosting. Although Martin never uses the expression 'compost', he alludes to a nature ready "to absorb and recycle [...] all to new reproductive uses" and "new biodynamic purposes."[32] Thus, to conclude, Ophelia partakes of a Shakespearian or Hamletian "narrative of organic transience."[33]

Shaul Bassi, too, seems to project Ophelia into the realm of a body "dressed in nature" and immersed in it, in an act of eco/phelia,[34] which is an alternative and all too-pertinent attitude in our Anthropocene. Thus, Bassi stresses readings of the figure of Ophelia directing attention towards her kinship with herbs, plants and flowers, water, mud and nature. Millais redresses and refashions Ophelia in such a way that her full body/corpse ends up resembling the fullness of Botticelli's Flora, thus revisiting a fashion and fashionable texts/styles that make more relevant today's attempt at revitalizing compostable, reusable and recycled natural materials for fashion's design.

One example among many possible others are the creations by Emma Bruschi,[35] a French creative mind, who uses raw materials for her various productions: "sculpture-clothing", jewels and shirts in entwined straws or ears of corn or else vegan and compostable eco-leather (from pulpwood cells of Chinese kombucha tea), all from the region of *Haute Savoie,* where she grew up. Or another example are the creations

28. Cf. footnote at page 303; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 302.

29. On Ophelia's flowers see Shaul Bassi, *Pianeta Ofelia*, 34–36.

30. Jason Rosenfeld, "Ofelia by John Everett Millais", in *Preraffaeliti: l'utopia della bellezza*, edited by Alison Smith and Luca Beatrice (Milan: 24 Ore Cultura, 2014), 74.

31. Gordon H. Fleming, *Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), 179.

32. Martin, *Shakeaspeare and Ecology*, 164.

33. Martin, 164.

34. Bassi, *Pianeta Ofelia*, 30.

35. Cf. "Homepage", Emma Bruschi, accessed February 15, 2025, https://emmabruschi.fr/fr.

by Jonathan Anderson, creative mind of the Spanish fashion brand Loewe, for the Spring–Summer 2023 menswear show.[36] He experimented with a collection of sodden garments, denim and shoes, from which there sprang and sprouted turfs of lavish green leaves of grass, which were previously cultivated in greenhouses over 20 days of incubation. Finally, it is extremely interesting to mention the London exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery: "Flowers — Flora in Contemporary Art & Culture" (12 February – 5 May 2025). Here, on two floors, in 9 large rooms, there are more than 500 works, including paintings, sculptures, dresses, jewels, body art and digital installations entirely and exclusively dedicated to flowers. The main hall is occupied by a 50 m2 mural, entitled *Journey of Progress* by Sophie Mess, representing gigantic colourful flowers and corollas, then there are famous still-life paintings from the Seventeenth Century up to Van Gogh and to Pop Art. The latter leave room to Buccellati's flowery brooche and to Marimekko's flowery vintage dress among other female clothes and shoes. More flowers are inspired to photography, film and literature, while botanical body-tattoos by artist Daniel the Gardener also partake of contemporary fashion — another way of being dressed in nature —, of floral and green *Art Nouveau*'s echoes, as well as of echoes of a chapter from the novel by 2024 Nobel Prize winner Kang Han, *The Vegetarian*.[37]

This is only the tip of the iceberg of today's fashionable dress in nature that might have a source of inspiration in canonical and traditional paintings and literature of our past tradition. Botany, writes Emanuele Coccia, is not only a peculiar science: it is a privileged knowledge of the tightest and most elementary bond that life can establish with the world.[38] The initial exploration in the first part of this co-authored work on paintings and literature dedicated to women "dressed in nature" demonstrates that ecology, ecophilia and sympoiesis[39] exist in a continuum, across centuries and across a consolidated cultural matrix and figurative mannerism that only the greed of a consumerist and extractivist society has temporarily succeeded in obliterating and silencing: like the rhizomic body of Ophelia they will surface and diffract again and again.

Fashioning and Refashioning Women's Dress in Nature

Examples of continuity in fashioning women dressed in nature, as mentioned above, as well as of ecology and ecophilia, are the works of the pre-Raphaelite painters/poets. Core to pre-Raphaelite imagery, the combination of painting and poetry took on various guises, oftentimes resulting in collaborations between painters and poets. In this context, the link between John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in relation to the flower-steeped painting *Ophelia* (1851–1852) is particularly interesting. A painter himself, Rossetti frequently made his wife the centre of his artworks, sometimes in the role of the Dantean Beatrice, as epitomised by the painting *Beata Beatrix*. However, in his long poem *The Portrait*, the poet seems to evoke Millais' *Ophelia* through a series of visual elements which a close reading of some parts of the poem will highlight. In this dialogue between visual and verbal artworks, particular emphasis will be placed on representations of greenery and flowers in relation to garments.

Exhumed and rewritten in 1869,[40] *The Portrait* was published in 1870 but might have been begun as far back as 1849,[41] around the same period in which Millais was starting to paint *Ophelia*, completed in 1851–1852 and gracing the heroine with "an excellent likeness of Elizabeth Siddal"[42]. It is necessary to

36. Cf. "Loewe sprouts grasses and plants from sodden clothes at Paris Fashion Week.", *Dezeen*, accessed February 15, 2025, https://www.dezeen.com/2022/06/28/grass-covered-clothes-loewe-spring-summer-2023/.

37. Cf. Saatchi Gallery, "Flowers — Flora in Contemporary Art & Culture", London, 12 February – 5 May 2025, accessed February 15, 2025, https://www.saatchigallery.com/exhibition/flowers-flora-in-contemporary-art-amp-culture.

38. Emanuele Coccia, *La vita delle piante* (Bologna: Il Mulino), 13.

39. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

40. Richard L. Stein, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painting and the Problem of Poetic Form," *Studies in English Literature*, Vol. 10 (1970): 781.

41. Brian Donnelly, *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Painter as Poet* (London – New York: Routledge, 2019), 60.

42. Fleming, *Rossetti and Brotherhood*, 180.

specify that *The Portrait* is a long poem, for Rossetti also published a sonnet with the same title.[43] The painterly traits of this work run deeper than the clearly visual texture of the narrative and also inform its style. According to Stein, the lack of narrative logic in the connection of the stanzas exemplifies Rossetti's painter-like approach to the poem, for in a painting artists present viewers with a finished product of their ideas and thoughts.[44] While poems show the unfurling processes that gave rise to their images, *The Portrait* imitates a more visual artistic guise by offering in its stanzas just the complete results[45] of processes that run behind their surface and are hard for readers to access.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker says that he must paint his beloved's picture, a verbal portrait. The only features of her face that are mentioned are the "the sweet lips part[ed]/To breathe the words of the sweet heart: /And yet the earth is over her,"[46] which resonates with the image of a woman portrayed in the coldness of death as in Robert Browning's *My Last Dutchess* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Oval Portrait*, sources which are subtly echoed in this poem, according to Donnelly.[47] However, the image of agonising parted lips as death approaches is also the chief expression on Millais' Ophelia's pallid face, precariously floating on the water. Although death has not reached her body yet, it has already taken control of her eyes, filled with agony and vacantly staring towards an unspecified place that may well be the Afterlife.

Other interesting painterly references, however, surface in the third stanza where Rossetti describes the "deep dim wood"[48] as the setting for the beloved's image, a grove of lightless trees that is much redolent of the sombre greenery framing Millais' drowning Ophelia.

> In painting her I shrined her face
> Mid mystic trees, where light falls in
> Hardly at all; a covert place
> Where you might think to find a din
> Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
> Wandering, and many a shape whose name
> Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
> And your own footsteps meeting you,
> And all things going as they came.[49]

As stated by Donnelly, the lines discussing the scant rays of sunlight that break into the wood's darkness display "techniques of the artist: the drawing and the restriction of light, the pure line; elements of painterly practice flowing from the verbal representation to the visual".[50] The stanza clearly draws attention to lush vegetation and a greenery imbued with a supernatural aura, as exemplified by the "mystic trees".[51]

Aside from the visual setting of the poem, other elements echo Millais' painting, such as the reference to "doubtful talk".[52] After this phrase, there follows a list of apparently senseless images like a shape unaware of its name and old dew — which is normally short-lived and therefore always new —, culminating in the narrator's own steps pacing towards him. In Donnelly's opinion, these elements characterise

43. Donnelly, *Reading Rossetti*, 62.

44. Stein, *Rossetti: Painting and the Poetic*, 781–782.

45. Stein, 782.

46. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The Portrait," in *Poems & Translations 1850–1870* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 73.

47. Donnelly, *Reading Rossetti*, 60–61.

48. Rossetti, "The Portrait", 74.

49. Rossetti, 73–74.

50. Donnelly, *Reading Rossetti*, 61.

51. Rossetti, 73.

52. Rossetti, 74.

the otherworldly dimension now inhabited by the lady,[53] but this seems a rather sombre environment. Vagueness, senselessness, chaos and upside-down situations are introduced by the expression 'doubtful talk,' which might hint at Ophelia's unhinged utterings in Shakespeare's tragedy. As a matter of fact, the adjective 'doubtful' has several meanings, including "of uncertain issue" and "[o]f questionable or equivocal character".[54] In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia's madness can be evidenced not just by her deranged mien and utterances, but also by a noticeable floral presence that symbolically heightens her altered state while underlining her ecophilia as a practice of 'making kin'.[55] As pointed out by Mancoff, "Her withering flowers [...] when her seemingly senseless chatter gave way to deathly silence, [...] gave pitiful testimony to all that she had lost".[56]

As a matter of fact, for Millais truthful botanic details were "an essential feature in the interpretation of Ophelia's tragedy".[57] In his painting, the artist paints Ophelia's gown strewn with all the flowers and plants that Shakespeare's heroine carries with her, as relayed by Gertrude,[58] Hamlet's mother. That the flowers become a pattern on her garments is not coincidental but in this case is both an intertextual reference and a visual symbol that alerts viewers to the heroine's madness. Aside from Shakespeare's flowers, Millais depicts a necklace of violets at her neck[59] — a floral choice symbolising modesty[60] — and places a conspicuous poppy in her hand to signify that her journey will end in death.[61] Indeed, oftentimes in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, the poppy is associated with death,[62] in a way epitomised nowhere better than by Rossetti's "Beata Beatrix," where a dying Elizabeth Siddal holds in her hand a white poppy, the source of laudanum, an overdose of which caused her demise.[63] Not uncoincidentally, poppies feature also in John William Waterhouse's 1894 painting "Ophelia," whose heroine is garlanded with poppies and graced with daisies, the latter hinting at virtue.[64]

In the fourth stanza of "The Portrait," the narrator picks up again the image of the dim wood in the first line, but then moves on to portray the woman's image in the stream crossing the wood. Both the wood and the stream in the poem really exist, since Millais decided to paint a tract of Hogsmill River, near Malden.[65] The shifted emphasis on water and the flowing stream gives back an image that circles back on Millais' setting and resonates with Ophelia's face, framed by flowing water. In particular, the narrator despairs at the fact that, although he is able to see his beloved's image in the painting, she is dead:

> 'Tis she: though of herself, alas!
> Less than her shadow on the grass
> Or than her image in the stream.[66]

Surrounded by lush greenery, immersed in the water and covered in flowers, Ophelia — echoed in Rossetti's poem — collects in her figure different natural dimensions in a powerful expression of Haraway's

53. Donnelly, 61.

54. OED, "doubtful," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed February 15, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/doubtful_adj.

55. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

56. Debra N. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (Munich: Prestel, 2019), 18.

57. Mancoff, 18.

58. Mancoff, 18.

59. Mancoff, 18.

60. Mancoff, 20.

61. Mancoff, 18.

62. Donnelly, *Reading Rossetti*, 119.

63. Donnelly, 45.

64. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language*, 20.

65. Rosenfeld, "Ofelia by John Everett Millais", 76.

66. Rossetti, *Reading Rossetti*, 74.

sympoiesis.[67]

Another woman who makes a journey in a stream with a "glassy countenance"[68] lies at the centre of Alfred Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*. The poem made its first appearance in the collection *Palace of Art* published in 1833.[69] Afterwards, Tennyson decided to revise the poem he had written in 1832; I will refer to the revised 1842 version, but will occasionally address also the older edition so as to allow the theme of natural patterns and clothing to emerge more clearly. Divided into four parts, *The Lady of Shalott* is set in an Arthurian context and relates the story of a lady under an unspecified curse that prevents her from leaving Shalott and reaching Camelot. In her solitary existence, the lady's occupations are singing and weaving a web on which she represents the sights offered to her by a mirror that looks out to Camelot.

In this poem, too, the setting is steeped in a lush nature; throughout the stanzas, references to natural elements are the "pale yellow woods"[70], trees like aspens and especially the willows, which feature four times, twice as nouns and twice as fine-grained adjectives: "willow-veiled" and "willowy".[71] The opening lines are particularly interesting:

> On either side the river lie
> Long fields of barley and of rye,
> That clothe the wold and meet the sky;[72]

Akin to a fabric that clothes the 'wold' (the moorland), the cloaking fields could also hint at dissimulation, illusion and disguise for "Clothes [...] are externals that can be deceptive".[73] Yet, they also introduce the motifs of ecophilia and fabrics in the poem, which are as pervasive as the trope of flowers, as the Lady's web exemplifies.

In this rich natural imagery, flowers take centre stage and are imbued with subtle meanings. The castle of the Lady of Shalott overlooks a "space of flowers"[74] — an element which softens the greyness and rigidity of the setting. [75] More crucially, Shalott is tightly connected with the water lily. Historically, the lily has been considered a symbol of purity, as is already manifested in Elizabethan times by Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Indeed, many critics have pointed out that Spenser's influence can be felt at various stages of the poem, for instance in the mirror [76] or the red-cross knight. [77] In nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite paintings, the imagology of the lily features prominently in Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* or *The Blessed Damozel*, for the *lilium candidum* was associated with Mary's Assumption [78] and was therefore reminiscent of Marian iconology. [79] Yet, although at the beginning of Tennyson's poem the secluded island of Shalott is said to teem with lilies, in another section of the poem the flowers that are mentioned are the more ambiguous water lilies. This flower too was linked to untainted purity in the Christian tradi-

67. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*.

68. Alfred Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott," in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Pearson, 2007), 25.

69. Donnelly, *Reading Rossetti*, 120.

70. Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott", 25.

71. Tennyson, 21, 26.

72. Tennyson, 20.

73. Edgar F. Shannon Jr., "Poetry as Vision: Sight and Insight in 'The Lady of Shalott,' " *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 19 (1981): 209.

74. Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott", 21.

75. Shannon, "Poetry as Vision", 209.

76. Christopher Ricks. Introduction and notes to "The Lady of Shalott," in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, edited by Christopher Ricks (London: Pearson, 2007), 22.

77. Shannon, "Poetry as Vision", 214.

78. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language*, 32.

79. Donnelly, *Reading Rossetti*, 28.

tion; [80] it represents lack of knowledge and experience and might foreshadow death [81] like the poppy. Yet, in the 19^th century the stagnant waters surrounding the candid water lilies took on more sinister traits. [82] The floral imagery seems to be in line with Alaya's claim that the resplendent representation of Camelot could have been devised to "make the quality of the Lady's isolation in Shalott repellent". [83] In the 1832 version, Shalott is surrounded not only by the "yellowleavèd waterlily", but also by the "greensheathèd daffodilly," [84] in a jumbled floral assemblage. Conversely, in the older edition the isle of Shalott was also ringed with roses: "all inrailed/ With a rose-fence, and overtrailed/ With roses" [85] — a floral element traditionally associated with love and which Tennyson evokes in "Maud" too, where the lover awaiting his beloved in a garden addresses her as "Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls, [...] Queen lily and rose in one". [86]

The Lady's daily occupation of weaving is another central part of the poem. Whatever image the lady reproduces on the web has been filtered and reflected at least four times, as shown by Chadwick, through different levels involving social constructions, the mirror, magic and the web. [87] On her web, there feature many references to garments worn by people walking outside, such as the "red cloaks of market girls" and the "long-haired page in crimson clad", [88] details featuring spots of colour red to which Hill has drawn attention. [89] Having grown sick of a life of shadows, the Lady breaks the curse after seeing Lancelot flash through her mirror. This seems to be anticipated in the scene where she weaves scenes from funerals and newly-weds, thus cementing the association between love and death. What alerts readers that she has dared look towards Camelot is the fact that she sees directly the water lilies in bloom:

> She left the web, she left the loom,
> She made three paces through the room,
> She saw the water-lily bloom,
> She saw the helmet and the plume,
> She looked down to Camelot. [90]

After reaching a boat, the lady steers it towards Camelot and then lies down, dying. On her journey, she undergoes a metamorphosis which is not just a metaphorical transition from the world of the living to the realm of death, but could entail also a painterly transformation into an artwork that involves her garments and flowers. Taking on a "glassy countenance" [91] like one of the images reflected in her mirror, the lady moves from the state of being to that of becoming; [92] in Hill's words, by the end of the poem the surrounding landscape "is no longer system, but energy". [93] Interestingly, the lady's white robe soon becomes covered in leaves — like Flora's in Botticelli's painting — and its whiteness resembles that of a bride [94] or a nymph, like Chloris. Thus, she becomes another female figure dressed in nature. Potwin

80. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language*, 58.
81. Shannon, "Poetry as Vision", 210.
82. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language*, 58.
83. Flavia M. Alaya, "Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott': The Triumph of Art," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 8 (1970): 281.
84. Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott", 20.
85. Tennyson, 21.
86. Alfred Tennyson, "Maud," in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Pearson, 2007), 563.
87. Joseph Chadwick, "A Blessing and a Curse: The Poetics of Privacy in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott,' " *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 24 (1986): 20.
88. Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott", 23.
89. James L. Hill, "Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott': The Ambiguity of Commitment," *The Centennial Review*, Vol. 12 (1968): 420.
90. Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott", 24.
91. Tennyson, 25.
92. Shannon, "Poetry as Vision", 220.
93. Hill, "Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' ", 425.
94. Chadwick, "A Blessing and a Curse", 24.

highlighted that in the first edition of the poem she was dressed more richly, [95] with a crown of pearls and clutching a diamond. The fact that she is turning into a painting is stressed by Lancelot's passing remark, a blessing which "is merely appreciative, suspiciously close in tone to a museum-goer's casual comment on a painting after a momentary glance". [96]

As a matter of fact, Tennyson's lady also turned into a painting outside of the poem, within the circle of the Brotherhood and the rich verbal/visual enmeshments it fostered. In 1857, an illustrated edition of Tennyson's poems was published by Edward Moxon, and on that occasion both Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt drew different scenes from "The Lady of Shalott": the former addressed the final scene with Lancelot, while Hunt dealt with the moment the heroine sees the knight flashing by her mirror. [97] Other, more modern transpositions involve music and photography. Tennyson's poem was made into a song by Canadian songwriter Loreena McKennitt and influenced the photographer Julia Fullerton-Batten. Taking as inspiration the 1888 painting of the lady by John William Waterhouse, [98] in 2018 the German-American photographer reproduced the painting in a way that gives back Tennyson's Lady in another context — both familiar and new — which still places emphasis on her refined web, now getting soaked in the waters of the Thames strewn by the same fallen leaves which in the poem cover the lady's dress and frame her departure. In this visual rendition of the lady's story, too, textiles and natural elements merge in one of the climactic scenes of the poem.

The interest in flower print patterns and transformation was picked up by *Art Nouveau* and one of its masterpieces, Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* (1907–1908). In this beautifully gilded painting, a man and a woman are covered in flowing rich garments with colourful prints, mainly of small flowers seemingly on the point of blossoming. Although critics have often pointed out that Klimt was inspired by the Egyptian art and sarcophagi due to the prevalence of the golden colour, the blossoming flowers of the female figure's garment and the green lawn at the feet of the two figures creates a continuity with tradition as represented in Botticelli's floral garments and Millais' Ophelia. Moreover, in this way, the two figures are connected with earth, soil and gardens in a combination that foregrounds the human and the nonhuman, thus emphasising the importance of nature, which has been picked up also by contemporary sustainable fashion. Klimt's choice of flowers, coupled with the ivy adorning the man's head, might hint at the theme of rebirth and blooming life, in line with the beginnings of love foreshadowed by the kiss in the painting's title.

In conclusion, both the character of Ophelia in her transmedia metamorphoses and Klimt's portrayed figures continue to garner the interest of the world of fashion. In the case of Ophelia, designer Alexander McQueen proposes, in his 2018 Spring–Summer collection, a white trench embroidered with black outlines of flowery patterns, long dresses decorated with laces and tulle the colour of ivory, and eccentric tops with a romantic and rebellious note reminding us of Ophelia. [99] In this case the inspiration also comes from English gardens. In a similar vein, Luisa Beccaria alludes to aquatic nymphs with loose gowns all dotted with flowers, using pastel colours[100] to reproduce variations of flowery carpets. Instead, Simone Rocha favours dark colours with bright flowers to stress the sad side of Ophelia's destiny. [101] Lastly, Giambattista Valli chooses fluffy clothes full of flowers to evoke Ophelia's delicate and gentle temperament as well as her iconic image in the water. [102] These fashion designers are advertised by quoting

95. Lemuel Stoughton Potwin, "The Source of Tennyson's the Lady of Shalott," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 17 (1902): 476.

96. Chadwick, "A Blessing and a Curse", 25.

97. Richard L. Stein, "The Pre-Raphaelite Tennyson," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 24 (1981): 278, 286, 293, 295.

98. Julia Fullerton-Batten, webpage juliafullertonbatten.com, https://juliafullerton-batten.com/project/the-lady-of-shalott-2018/.

99. Dafne Funeck, "Nel sogno di Ofelia," *The Ducker*, accessed February 19 2025, https://www.theducker.com/fashion-glamour/primavera-estate-2018-moda/.

100. Funeck, "Nel sogno di Ofelia".

101. Funeck.

102. Funeck.

both Shakespeare's lines as well as Rimbaud's poem dedicated to Ophelia. [103] Last but not least, Ophelia inspired also Photo Vogue, where a series of photographs portray, reinterpret and "rewrite" Ophelia's myth of metamorphosis from life to death, thus combining photographic art and aesthetics (models posing while floating on the water, immersed in the water, half naked, half submerged), fashion (beautiful fluffy dresses in hues of violet, white, ivory, pink, light blue, and pearl), flowers (multicoloured and biodiverse), water (waterfall, river, swimming pool), mud (river bed), in a triumph of beauty and in a full immersion of kinship between human and non-human presences. [104] As far as Klimt is concerned, the world of fashion has taken inspiration from his paintings and unique floral patterns printed on textiles and clothes for the collection by Alberto Zambelli captured by the photos of the exhibition 'Klimt Experience' held at the MUDEC (Museo della Cultura) in Milan in 2018. [105] Finally, the Exhibition *Les Fleurs d'Yves Saint Laurent*, held in Marrakech, and later in Paris, shows women fashion reproducing flowers and flowery patterns both in embroidery and in print, imagined as "a symbiosis of fashion, nature and literature". It recreates garden-like atmospheres and text/styles, alternating the floral mannequins with large scale book-reproductions of Marcel Proust's pages from *La recherche*, with smaller book-like exhibitions of flowery jewels and accessories, and with paintings by Pierre Bonnard reminding of southern France late impressionist nature landscaping.[106] Further, similar examples of bodies "dressed in nature" will be discussed in this volume.

103. Funeck.

104. Alessia Glaviano, "Ophelia Photo Vogue", *Vogue Arts*, *Vogue Italia*, January (2012), accessed February 19, 2025, https://www.vogue.it/galleries/gait11377.

105. Redazione, "Klimt dalla mostra al MUDEC all'influenza sulla moda contemporanea," *ADLmag*, accessed February 19, 2025, https://www.adlmag.it/2017/11/22/klimt-influenza-sulla-moda-contemporanea/.

106. Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris, "Making of Exposition les Fleurs d'Yves Saint Laurent, 20 septembre 2024 – 4 mai 2025", Youtube, accessed February 19, 2025, https://youtu.be/q3Mg4RkcJfo?si=1tWPOREB33DKu2_e. Jean-Paul Faure, "Les jardins couture", Youtube, accessed February 19, 2025, https://youtu.be/f4cWWAN9I3Y?si=07CQWR8CSGCj16zQ.

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