ROSES DON'T COUNT

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October 5, 2020

Back when I was in high school biology class, each of us had to preserve a collection of some living thing. Plants seemed pleasanter to me than animals or insects, and besides I knew a fair amount about them already, having two avid gardeners as parents.

So, how to cut the plants down to a more manageable number? I knew that the seed-bearing plant world was divided in half into those which had one seed leaf, the monocots, and those with two seed leaves, the dicots. There are many more dicots than monocots, so I decided to go smaller and picked monocots. But I wanted a yet shorter list of candidates. An easy way monocots can be subdivided is into those with showy flowers and those with negligible flowers. The ones with negligible flowers—most particularly the grains—are of tremendous economic importance, but their reproductive parts are not at all showy. (Grains are members of the Poaceae family of plants, alternatively sometimes called the Gramineae.)

(Side note: I have believed for many years that pine trees, sequoias, and the like are monocots as well. Either I was mistaken about what was believed when I was in high school, or what was believed is no longer believed, because these are not considered monocots today.)

So for my high school project I chose to collect, and preserve, showy-flowered monocots, specifically collecting their flowers.

Flash forward 50-some years: when I realized that becoming president of Chicago Literary meant I was going to come up with a paper for this fall, I fell back on showy-flowered monocots, and to give it an appropriate twist for our literary society, I decided to make it about showy-flowered monocots in literature. I started with Shakespeare, and was immediately overwhelmed by how much the Bard knew about dozens and dozens of plants, and decided to settle for only Shakespeare. The problem was coming up with an enigmatic title which did not give the subject away, and you have seen my solution.

To begin with the biggest showy-flowered monocot, let's look at the **palm**. In Wikipedia's words, "The Arecaceae are a botanical family of perennial flowering plants in the monocot order Arecales. Their growth form can be climbers, shrubs, tree-like and stemless plants, all commonly known as palms. Those having a tree-like form are colloquially called palm trees."

Shakespeare talks about palms several times. In *As You Like It* [Act III, scene 2] Rosalind says, "I was seven of the nine days out of the wonder before you came; for look here what I found on a palm-tree. I was never so berhym'd since Pythagoras' time that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember." This encounter is set in the Forest of Arden, which is both a real place Shakespeare experienced growing up, and also a magical forest where genders bend and almost no first impression proves true. UK's National Trust has made the Forest of Arden a calling card for drawing Shakespeare fans to visit their facilities.

True, we associate palm trees with warmer climates than England, but a date palm can take temperatures as low as 12 degrees Fahrenheit, so there is much of England where they will grow.

Shakespeare has Hamlet mention palms, too.

An earnest conjuration from the King,
As England was his faithful tributary,
As love between them like the palm might flourish,
As peace should still her wheaten garland wear
And stand a comma 'tween their amities. [Act V, Scene 2]

Ginger is another monocot that gets many mentions in Shakespeare, thanks to its frequent use in the English diet. My favorite of these is this passage from *Measure for Measure,* where he has Pompey say,

First, here's young Master Rash; he's in
for a commodity of brown paper and old ginger,
ninescore and seventeen pounds; of which he made
five marks, ready money: marry, then ginger was not
much in request, for the old women were all dead. [Act IV, Scene 3]

What I find amusing is the jab at ginger being for old ladies! Botanically, ginger is interesting in that experts do not believe they have located any wild form of it. It has been cultivated for so long that all the forms of it seem to be garden cultivars.

Ginger was also on the bard's mind when he was writing the historic Henry plays, where it is mentioned three times, and it also appears in *Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night, Two Gentlemen of Verona,* and *Winter's Tale*. I confess, however, that Shakespeare does not specifically mention the flower of the ginger plant: it's much more an edible.

I confess that I don't think I've ever seen a ginger plant in bloom. If you're like me, this might be a good time to take a look at the printed handout I've given you, which shows a ginger flower on the far left in the second row.

Shakespeare was of course reflecting his culture when he mentioned its use in improving digestion. A scientific study has been made of the history of ginger as medicine: it makes up a chapter in *Herbal Medicine: Biomolecular and Clinical Aspects,* a book by Floridians Iris F. F. Benzie, and Sissi Wachtel-Galor. They say: "It was an exceedingly important article of trade and was exported from India to the Roman Empire over 2000 years ago, where it was especially valued for its medicinal properties. Ginger continued to be a highly sought-after commodity in Europe even after the fall of the Roman Empire."

Aloe is another showy-flowered monocot (and the only relative of asparagus he mentions) that was popular in Shakespeare's day. It appears in his "A Lover's Complaint," a poem which was published in the 1690 quarto version of his sonnets.

'When thou impressest, what are precepts worth
Of stale example? When thou wilt inflame,
How coldly those impediments stand forth
Of wealth, of filial fear, law, kindred, fame!
Love's arms are peace, 'gainst rule, 'gainst sense, 'gainst shame,
And sweetens, in the suffering pangs it bears,
The aloes of all forces, shocks, and fears.

Orchids are a wonderful group of monocots that Shakespeare knew about, though he never used the word orchid. (Orchidaceae, as their family is called, have more than 28,000 members of their family tree, giving the aster a run for the money to rank as largest plant family.) It seems likely he must have known the Cypripedium, what we call the lady slipper, since they were common in England and on the continent. The one he mentions is the so-called "long purple," which rates a mention in Act IV of Hamlet, saying

Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.

Having disposed of palms, ginger, and orchids, we arrive at the big three of the showy monocot world: the lily, the iris, and the amaryllis. Lilies and iris are pretty self-evident to most gardeners in temperate climes; but the **amaryllis** group is more complicated. Of course we recognize the amaryllis itself, which we always start pn a window sill in December in order to have spectacular flowers in the coldest, gloomiest part of the winter. But all the daffodils are amaryllis, as are the **garlic** and **onion** we cook with.

Onion and garlic Shakespeare mentions, but not as flowers. Lafeu in *All's Well that Ends Well* says "Mine eyes smell onions; I shall weep anon" and the inimitable Bottom says "And, most dear actors, eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath; and I do not doubt but to hear them say, it is a sweet comedy" in *Midsummer Night's Dream.*

In the prologue to *Taming of the Shrew,* Shakespeare cites the onion as useful in enhancing the ability of a beginning actor to weep on cue:

And if the boy have not a woman's gift
To rain a shower of commanded tears,
An onion will do well for such a shift,
Which, in a napkin being close convey'd,
Shall in despite enforce a watery eye.

No doubt about it, both onions and garlic do have flowers, some showy. In particular, some onions form a large round flower head, which seems suggestive of the below-ground bulb. So I stand by my assertion that they belong in this paper.

Daffodils, another amaryllis, are mentioned twice in *A Winter's Tale.* The mention I like is

daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty;

which is spoken by Perdita in Act IV, Scene 4. Where I grew up, in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, daffodils had a long season and were the most cheerful thing in the February garden.

So now we bid the amaryllis family adieu, to move on to the **iris** family. The tipoff that you are looking at an iris is that it has three of everything. Typically three tall petals and three drooping ones, but sometimes other springy petals intended to trap pollinating insects into lingering where they are

needed. (An exception: all the petals on Japanese iris droop.) Most types of iris grow from thickened roots called rhizomes, but so-called Dutch iris grow from teardrop-shaped bulbs that are planted in fall. These Dutch iris are a hybrid developed from species native to Portugal, Spain, and North Africa.

Though Shakespeare knew a lot about flowers and plants, he did not know that iris are a different group of plants than lilies. As a result, he thought the important **fleur de lis**—symbol of the French monarchy—was a lily, when in fact, it is an iris.

In Act IV, scene IV, of the *Winter's Tale,* he has a long passage about the flowers which lead the transition from winter to spring. This refers to Cytherea, another name for Aphrodite, goddess of love.

I would I had some flowers o' the spring that might
Become your time of day; and yours, and yours,
That wear upon your virgin branches yet
Your maidenheads growing: O Proserpina,
For the flowers now, that frighted thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bight Phoebus in his strength—a malady
Most incident to maids; bold oxlips and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one!

(This is a clear-cut place where Shakespeare's sense of plant families does not mesh with current thought.)

"Flag" is another name for iris, and it appears in the voice of Octavius in Act 1, Scene 4 of *Antony and Cleopatra*:

I should have known no less.
It hath been taught us from the primal state,
That he which is was wish'd until he were;
And the ebb'd man, ne'er loved till ne'er worth love,
Comes dear'd by being lack'd. This common body,
Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream,
Goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide,
To rot itself with motion.

It is odd, but the white snowdrop seems missing from Shakespeare. It was certainly grown in England in his period, but I have not found any reference to it in his work.

So, now, from false lilies to real **lilies** we move. Clearly, these are the queens of the showy monocots. In Shakespeare, they are the symbol of purity. Let's have a few examples:

In Cymbeline, Act II scene 2, Iachimo is nothing but worshipful of Cytherea:

How bravely thou becomest thy bed, fresh lily,
And whiter than the sheets! That I might touch!
But kiss; one kiss! Rubies unparagon'd,
How dearly they do't! 'Tis her breathing that
Perfumes the chamber thus: the flame o' the taper
Bows toward her, and would under-peep her lids,
To see the enclosed lights, now canopied
Under these windows, white and azure laced
With blue of heaven's own tinct.

Lilies are called out as symbols of purity in Cymbeline, Henry VIII, the sonnets, Titus Andronicus, and Troilus & Cresida.

Here's the one from Cymbeline, spoken by Guiderius:

O sweetest, fairest lily!
My brother wears thee not the one half so well
As when thou grew'st thyself.

As it turns out, there is a whole industry supported by Shakespeare and flowers. Shakespeare's Garden, in Brookfield, is a garden store built around the Shakespeare theme. There are Shakespeare garden sections in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, and Central Park in New York City, just to name a few.

Botanical Shakespeare is a coffee-table-ish book with beautiful color illustrations and an introduction by Helen Mirren. That book pointed me to the **Fritillaria,** a kind of lily I knew from childhood, and which Shakespeare discusses without naming in his poem "Venus and Adonis":

And in his blood that on the ground lay spill'd,
A purple flower sprung up, chequer'd with white,
Resembling well his pale cheeks and the blood
Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.

"Purple flower chequer'd with white" perfectly describes fritillaria meleagris.

In Sonnet 99, he mentions a whole garden of flowers, including the lily:

The forward violet thus did I chide:
Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
If not from my love's breath? The purple pride
Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells
In my love's veins thou hast too grossly dyed.
The lily I condemned for thy hand,
And buds of marjoram had stol'n thy hair:
The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
One blushing shame, another white despair;

A third, nor red nor white, had stol'n of both
And to his robbery had annex'd thy breath;
But, for his theft, in pride of all his growth
A vengeful canker eat him up to death.

Shakespeare likes the phrase “lily-livered” to denote a man who does not rise to his masculine duties, using it in both *King Lear* and *Macbeth.*

This quote from King Lear, Act 2, Scene 2, is spoken by the Earl of Kent:

A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud,
shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy,
worsted-stocking knave; a lily-liver'd, action-taking, whoreson,
glass-gazing, superserviceable, finical rogue;
one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of
good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave,
beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.

I wish I understood the meaning of all those slurs. “Son and heir of a mongrel bitch” surely makes an effective capper, unless, perhaps the listener is particularly fond of all dogs. What are broken meats? Wouldn’t a knave of only a hundred pounds be beneath notice? And what’s the problem with worsted stockings?

The line in Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 3, is shorter but equally negative:

Go prick thy face, and over-red thy fear,
Thou lily-liver'd boy. What soldiers, patch?
Death of thy soul! those linen cheeks of thine
Are counsellors to fear. What soldiers, whey-face?

Some claim this is the first appearance of lily-livered, anywhere.

From palm trees to lily-liver’d boys, our tour of showy monocots in Shakespeare is done for tonight.

On to the collation!

Male sago palm flower

https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/trees/sago-palm/sago-palm-flower-removal.htm

Amaryllis Napoli

https://www.whiteflowerfarm.com/amaryllis-bulbs-napoli

Fleur de Lis

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fleur-de-lis#/media/File:Arms_of_the_Kingdom_of_ France_(Moderne).svg

Queen lily ginger flower

https://www.birdsandblooms.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Queen-Lily-Ginger.jpg

Purple Sensation allium

https://www.highcountrygardens.com/flower-bulbs/allium-flower-bulbs/allium-aflatunense-bulbs-purple-sensation?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpZT5BRCdARIsAGEX0zkEXtyyBJ1m01vJXoCq0Jsgvc95FQlRbYQHtX8RNmcHibLclOCLm90aAktYEALw_wcBproduct.html

Fritillaria meleagris

https://www.whiteflowerfarm.com/251125-

Aloe Arborescens

https://plantcaretoday.com/aloe-arborescens.html

Trumpet daffodil Golden Harvest

https://www.dutchbulbs.com/product/_Golden_Harvest_Trumpet_Daffodil?p=3600572&gclid=Cj0KCQjwpZT5BRCdARIsAGEX0znPeqfp9F6H1VqNjp0cd4IxPPIifZ03Mjuf1Cj1FGihCEF8dDwnawgaAsnsEALw_wcB#&gid=1&pid=1

Lily

https://www.dutchbulbs.com/product/lili henryi?p=3600572&gclid=Cj0KCQjwyJn

Broad-leaved marsh orchid

https://www.etsy.com/listing/539322481/25-dactylorhiza-majalis-seedsbroad?gpla=1&gao=1&

Dutch iris

https://www.brecks.com/product/dutch-iris-mixture?p=0729246&gclid=Cj0KCQjwpZT5BRCdARIsAGEX0zmokG726RVobD8s78zgH0pKrZOLYIMYZAUA8zaVEu2jV_4w86nSIIlaAo0CEALw_wcB#&gid=1&pid=1