

The Device of Queen Elizabeth Woodville: A Gillyflower or Pink

ANNE F. SUTTON AND LIVIA VISSER-FUCHS

Queen Elizabeth Woodville is depicted with her husband, King Edward IV, and her children in the glass of Canterbury Cathedral. Behind the king is shown his device of the white rose *en soleil* or 'in splendour', that is a white rose surrounded by the rays of the sun, on a background of blue and murrey, the Yorkist colours. Behind the prince of Wales are displayed the feathers of his title on white and green, and the duke of York has the falcon and fetterlock of the house of York on blue. It is, therefore, natural to conclude that the green and crimson 'pattern' against a light blue background behind the queen also shows a device. This 'pattern' is not readily decipherable at first glance and no one up to now has drawn attention to it. On close examination it turns out to be a plant with a pale bluish-green stem, several long narrow leaves, a five-or-six-petalled, flat, crimson flower with two substantial red buds on either side. This is repeated in a regular pattern, like the devices of her husband and sons, but the design had clearly posed a problem for the glasiere which they did not solve entirely satisfactorily. Nevertheless the flower can be identified as a pink or carnation, called in the fifteenth century a gillyflower. This identification is confirmed by the famous picture of Queen Elizabeth in the book of the Fraternity of Our Lady's Assumption of the Skinners' Company of London, a fraternity to which she belonged. Here she is shown surrounded by a maze of white and pink roses and red and white pinks. There seems little doubt, therefore, that this flower was her device, and that it was one that went supremely well with Edward IV's white rose.

Another, fine illustration of her device can be found in the border of one of the illuminated pages of a copy of Charles d'Orléans' poems commissioned by Sir Thomas Thwaites, probably for Edward IV (British Library MS Royal 16 F ii). The

page shows the famous view across London, along the river and London Bridge, with the Tower of London in the foreground. The border is composed mostly of decorative sprays of acanthus and has only two items which have any meaning: in the centre of the bottom border are the royal arms, crowned, supported by two lions of March, once silver but now badly oxidised; and in the right-hand margin the gillyflower plant, with several flowers in bloom and two buds, which can now be identified as Elizabeth Woodville's device. The book has been dated to before Edward IV's death in 1483 as it was never finished.¹



Drawings of one of the gillyflowers behind Queen Elizabeth Woodville in the Canterbury Cathedral window, and of the gillyflower plant in the border of the well known view of London illustrating the Poems of Charles d'Orléans commissioned by Sir Thomas Thwaites before April 1483. BL MS Royal 16 F ii, f. 73.

The clove pink (*dianthus caryophyllus*) had been domesticated long before the days of Elizabeth Woodville. It is one of about 300 species of the genus *dianthus* which is part of the family of *caryophyllaceae*. The clove pink or clove gillyflower is the progenitor of the modern pink and the carnation, the name for the double flowering variety.² By the fifteenth century flesh-pink, crimson and white varieties

were regularly cultivated. Gillyflower was one of several English names given to the *dianthus caryophyllus*; its English name may be a corruption of July flower, or, more likely, of *caryophyllus*; other medieval names for it were sops-in-wine, queen of delights; and at the end of the middle ages, carnation was the name given to the darkest and double variety. The crimson glass of the Canterbury flower indicates that the darkest red variety was Elizabeth Woodville's choice.

The clove pink was both attractive and extremely sweet smelling, used in cooking for its scent of cloves and sometimes reckoned as a spice. The darkest and the most highly scented variety was especially popular to scent wine, cosmetic waters, syrups, cakes and comfits; it was also used medicinally. Its sweet scent made the flower popular for garlands or chaplets for special occasions.³ There was a confusion, or rather a close connection, between the spice, cloves, and the herb, clove pink. Medieval Latin *gariofilum*, *gilofera*, and many other garbled versions of the word, was used of both the spice and the herb.⁴ Manuscripts of the *Promptorium parvulorum*, a fifteenth-century English-Latin dictionary have: 'Gyllofre, herbe, *Gariophilus*' and 'Gyllofyr, clowe, *Gariepholus*'.⁵

The 'gyllofre' was also one of the most popular decorative images available to the painter or embroiderer and was probably among the many plants and beasts in the rare surviving example of an English 'picture book', a model book for painters, embroiderers and others, the Helmingham Herbal and Bestiary made in the first half of the fifteenth century.⁶ The borders of illuminated manuscripts of Elizabeth Woodville's time – mostly made in the Low Countries – are teeming with naturalistic clove pinks, in white, red and pale pink, together with roses, columbines, lilies and other flowers. In such work the flowers were part of standard decoration and may or may not have carried symbolic meanings.⁷ The symbolism of the clove pink, and the carnation generally, is complicated and confused and its details and development are difficult to trace, and by the fifteenth century the clove pink appears to have had many 'meanings', but a little exploration is necessary to ascertain if Queen Elizabeth Woodville was motivated in her choice by more than a love of the sweet-smelling flower.

The genus of the dianthus derives its name from Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, who called it *Dios-anthos*, 'flower of Zeus' or 'flower of God'⁸ and this exalted name may have helped to create its reputation. The plant's strong scent and its ensuing connection with cloves made it share in the spice's reputation of possessing healing and protective powers.⁹ The shape of its leaves and fruit reminded people of the nails with which Christ was nailed to the cross.¹⁰ Its five petals may have been thought to represent the five wounds of Christ and its colour His blood. As a result it also became one of the flowers connected with the Virgin Mary, and came to stand for her purity and virginity, but also for her motherhood and fruitfulness. Finally the red clove-pink in particular became a symbol of virtuous love, and betrothal and

marriage.¹¹ Examples of most of these uses can be found in fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century panel paintings.

From the 1430s on there are many copies and versions of the Virgin with Child holding a single pink – or small carnation, the distinction is not always clear – which are said to derive from an original by Roger van der Weyden now in the Groeningemuseum, Bruges.¹² In one 'Virgin and Child Enthroned', painted by Memling about 1485-90, the Child is offered a red pink by an angel.¹³ In one late instance, of *circa* 1508, the painting was altered and the Child's spoon replaced by a spray of pinks, while His mother was already holding a single pink.¹⁴ In scenes from the Virgin's life, such as the Annunciation or Nativity, the gillyflower was often painted in the company of the Virgin's other flowers such as the lily, iris, columbine, marigold, violet and rose.¹⁵

Less exalted human beings are depicted holding a pink or small carnation. The northern Dutch painting of a man wearing the Order of St Anthony and holding a red and a white pink, was inspired but not actually painted by Jan van Eyck and must be dated to the 1420s.¹⁶ In one of Memling's portraits (*c.* 1475-80) an unknown man holds a red carnation in his left hand and an unopened letter in his right; this was probably part of a diptych commemorating the sitter's marriage contract.¹⁷ In a dry point engraving by the Hausbuch Master (*c.* 1485), which was frequently copied, the artist showed a fictional pair of lovers absorbed in each other, seated on a stone bench; behind the girl is a pot of flowering pinks, supported by a little trellis.¹⁸ Similarly the painter Joos van Cleve painted himself, probably in 1519, holding a bright pink flower, undoubtedly a pink, and this self-portrait may have been one of two panels, the other showing van Cleve's future wife, whom he married the next year.¹⁹

Perhaps the most interesting painting in the context of Elizabeth Woodville's use of the clove-pink is the mysterious 'Diptych with the Allegory of True Love', by Memling (*c.* 1485-*c.* 1490). The left wing shows two horses, a white one with a grinning monkey on its back, bending its head to drink, and a brown one, its head lifted and turned to look towards the left panel, in which a young lady in a dress of the 1470s is standing, looking out of the painting towards the right and holding a single bright red flower, clearly a pink. Recent commentators have assumed that the white horse with the monkey is the bad, self-centred lover 'slaking its thirst', while the brown horse is faithful and unselfish; and the lady is virtuous and holds the symbol of marriage.²⁰

It is possible that Elizabeth Woodville was aware of a contemporary Flemish tradition, which was perhaps the inspiration behind these paintings, and which puzzled Maximilian of Habsburg, the *fiancé* of Mary, Duchess of Burgundy, when he met his bride in August 1477. In the crowded great hall of the palace at Ghent Mary waited for him, accompanied by her step-mother, Margaret of York, and one of her ladies-in-waiting, Jeanne de Halewijn. The two older ladies told him that somewhere in Mary's



Qur moost gode and gracions. Ourue Elizabeth
Soder vi to this oure skaterint. Of oure blisset
ladi. Lad moost of merty. sanct mary virgyn the

Queen Elizabeth Woodville in her regalia and robes of estate, standing between two plants of red and white gillyflowers tangled with red and white roses. She became a sister of the Fraternity of Our Lady's Assumption of the Skinners' Company of London in 1472 and they celebrated the event with this painting. London, the Skinners' Company, the Book of the Fraternity of Our Lady's Assumption. By kind permission.



St Anne, the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child seated in the centre of a deep red gillyflower, the symbol of virtuous love. The Hague, Royal Library, KB MS 135 E 19, f. 25v. By kind permission.

clothes a gillyflower was hidden and that he should try to find it. Maxmilian hesitated, then tried delicately with two fingers and without much conviction, until the aged archbishop of Trier ordered him to undo the bodice of his bride. The archduke obeyed, found the flower and kissed it, as well as 'the altar on which he had found it'.²¹

Finally, and at a different level, there is an interesting series of invocations of St Anne in a Dutch book of prayers of *circa* 1490 (Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 135 E 19). Each of the seven texts focuses on a single flower and associates it with one of the joys of St Anne: the pink with the joy she felt when she heard she was to be the mother of Mary, lavender with being pregnant, thyme with her giving birth, etc. The first prayer is decorated with an historiated initial *G* in which the tiny figures of St Anne, the Virgin Mary and the Child are sitting together in the centre of a large, bright red gillyflower. The prayer begins:

God bless you, noble red gillyflower (*anjelier bloem*), you are full of grace, o holy lady and mother, St Anne; you have helped many in their need and therefore come to my aid, o high lady, and help me, by the joy you felt when the angel of God told you that you would be the mother of the mother of God.

Though the pictorial evidence is mainly to be found in continental sources, it can be sensibly concluded that Elizabeth Woodville chose her clove-pink device because it stood for virtuous love and marriage and was also a devout reminder of the Virgin Mary's own chastity and motherhood.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. British Library MS Royal 16 F ii, f. 73; the illumination of the ms was completed under the Tudors. J. Backhouse, 'Founders of the royal library: Edward IV and Henry VII as collectors of illuminated manuscripts', *England in the Fifteenth Century. Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. D. Williams, Woodbridge 1987, pp. 36-38.
2. *Everyman's Encyclopaedia*, 4th ed., London 1948, under *dianthus* and carnation.
3. T. McLean, *Medieval English Gardens*, London 1981, pp. 69, 150-51, 255. Basic information on the plant's properties was comparatively easy to come by, e.g. in the *Rustican, du cultivement des terres* by Petrus de Crescentiis, of which Edward IV had a copy, BL MS Royal 14 E vi, ff. 179v-80.
4. R.E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List*, London 1980, s.v. *gariofilum*, the verb *gariofilo* meant 'to spice wine'.
5. *Promptorium parvulorum ...*, ed. A. Way, 3 vols, Camden Society Old Series 25, 54, 89 (1843, 1853, 1865), vol. 1, p. 194.
6. The early 15th-century ms (once Tollemache MS 6 at Helmingham Hall and now a Paul Mellon ms.) was copied in the early 16th century almost exactly, into what is now Oxford, Bodleian, MS Ashmole 1504. N. Barker, ed., *Two East Anglian Picture Books. A Facsimile of the Helmingham Herbal and Bestiary and Bodleian MS Ashmole 1504*, Roxburghe Club 1988, passim. The 'gylofre' does not occur in the earlier ms, but it was presumably there? The later ms. was also ed. C. Putnam, with W.O. Hassall, *Flowers and Trees of Tudor England*, London 1972.
7. See, for example, the hours of William Hastings, BL MS Add. 54782, passim (*The Hastings Hours*, ed. D.H. Turner, London 1983); the hours of Engelbert of Nassau, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 219-220, passim, but especially f. 186v, which has a glass containing a spray of red pinks (*The Master of Mary of Burgundy*, ed. J.J.G. Alexander, New York 1970); and the later *Livre des échecs amoureux*, Paris, BN MS fr. 9197, passim, but especially f. 48, which has a large red pink growing in a pot, supported by a little trellis (ed. A-M. Legaré *et al.*, Paris 1991); or BL MS Add. 38126, f. 110, which has enormous plant-pot of pinks being pushed on a wheelbarrow by a woman-gardener, far smaller than it, round its border.
8. Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, bk 6.
9. See particularly Elisabeth Wolffhardt, 'Beiträge zur Pflanzensymbolik', *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft*, vol. 9 (1954), pp. 177-96, esp. 184-96.
10. In German *Nelke* and Dutch *nagelbloem* this connection survives.
11. F. Mercier, 'La valeur symbolique de l'oeillet dans la peinture du moyen-âge', *Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, vol. 71 (1937), pp. 233-36.

12. Inv. no. 1945-S. See e.g. *Anonieme Vlaamse Primitieven*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Groeningemuseum, Bruges, 1969, no. 69, pp. 141, 271-73.
13. Dirk de Vos, *Hans Memling. The Complete Works*, Ghent 1994, no. 68, pp. 254-55.
14. *The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. Early Netherlandish Painting*, ed. Colin Eisler, London 1989, no. 22, pp. 174-77, Master of Frankfurt, c. 1508.
15. See e.g. the Portinari altar-piece. R.A. Koch, 'Flower symbolism in the Portinari altar', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 46 (1964), pp. 70-77.
16. A. Châtelet, *Early Dutch Painting. Painting in the Northern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century*, English trans., New York 1981, no. 41, ill. 57, pp. 68, 209.
17. De Vos, *Memling*, no. 26, pp. 140-41.
18. *Livelier than Life. The Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet or the Hausbuch Master*, ed. J.P. Filedt Kok et al., Amsterdam 1985, no. 75, pp. 173-75.
19. *Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*, no. 25, pp. 186-89.
20. De Vos, *Memling*, no. 73, pp. 264-67.
21. The story of Maximilian is quoted in several secondary sources e.g. Luc Hommel, *Marie de Bourgogne, ou le Grand Héritage*, Brussels 1945, pp. 307-08.