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**Review article**

**Berit Dahl Soltvedt**, *Maria Vandrer Over Bergene: Maraianavn i Gamle Blomstertradisjoner* (Mary wanders across the mountains in the way of the Lord: Marian names in old plant lore), Oslo: Emilia Forlag 2002, ISBN 82-7419-065-3, Hardback 255pp

## MARY'S FLOWERS

This has been one of the most pleasant reviewing tasks I can remember. I approached the book with some misgivings because my Norwegian is of a rather nodding kind, but I was immediately captivated by the author's paintings and line-drawings, then drawn further in by her research and speculations, links with other European traditions, the poetic associations, mythology, and the extraordinary presence of the plants. This last element is hard to convey to those who have never got to know, or fallen under the spell of, our European wild plants. But it gives the book a magical window into the natural world, and a kind of sensuous groundedness.

The book developed from a series of 24 symbolic paintings, each evoking a plant with Marian connections. The paintings, apparently on wood panels, are diverse and original and cannot easily be given a stylistic label. They are variously reminiscent of traditional Scandinavian *rosemåling*, of Orthodox devotional icons, of Chagall, of Norwegian expressionism, or of paintings in the Anthroposophical tradition.

Around the paintings the book grows vigorously, sprouting hundreds of ideas, insights, associations. It is hard to do justice in a short space to the fertility of the author's imagination. Her research has taken her all over northern and western Europe. It is a little surprising that the richness of Marian plant-names appears to be greater in Protestant northern Europe than in the Catholic south, especially, it seems, in Lutheran Sweden. Plant lore is full of religious allusion, and I was constantly astonished to be shown the connections that were right in front of me all along: Marigold, Star of Bethlehem speak for themselves, but Lady's Mantle is of course *Our Lady's Mantle*. And so on.

What kinds of plants are commonly associated with Mary? There is no single defining feature. The author notes the following recurrent qualities:

Bitter plants, for penance

Evergreens, symbolic of eternal life

Flecked or spotted plants: symbolic of sin or disease, that can be healed by Mary's influence (frequently, and paradoxically in this context, with the botanical epithet *maculatum*)

Plants with vegetative reproduction, symbolic of fertility, nurture, generosity

Plants with glandular hairs secreting liquid, symbolising tears

Aromatic plants, whose scent has been brought by Mary from the heavenly garden

Yellow plants, symbolising gold and eternity

Plants local to specific holy places, often with local names

Plants with milky sap or other milky associations, symbolising Mary's milk

Blue plants, after the blue robe commonly associated with the Virgin

Plants with runners, perhaps with pagan origins, representing Mary as the bride of the earth.

There are of course many pagan connections, and many Maria-plants also have links to Isis, Cybele, Venus and Freya, goddesses of fertility. Thus, curiously, there are Maria-plants with reputations as aphrodisiacs, often with local names connecting them with cuckoos. For example *Cardamine pratensis* is sometimes called 'cuckoo flower', but more usually 'lady's smock', which I now know to be a contraction of 'Our Lady's Smock'. Lovely. *C. pratensis* is edible and tastes of mustard and cress, but I have never heard of its attempted use as an aphrodisiac.

The 'floral catalogue' part of the book, containing the paintings, is semi-organised into thematic chapters. Each chapter has sub-themes and deals with its own plants, along with resonant names in many languages, legends associated with them, and countless diversions. This is an enthusiast's classification, and conveys much of the flavour of the book

#### **Four significant plants from antiquity:**

Rose, Madonna lily, violet, iris

#### **Two from Norse/Germanic mythology:**

Strawberry, spotted orchid

#### **Old goddess-themes:**

**Milk:** milk-thistle [Our Lady's Milk-Drops], lungwort (which the author notes is 'Llaeth Bron Mair' in Welsh— 'Mary's breastmilk'; I have heard it called 'Jenny spilled the milk'), Lady's Smock ['milkmaids' in some parts of UK], milkwort

**Tears:** lily of the valley [Our Lady's Tears], sundew

**Keys:** cowslip [Our Lady's Fingers], *Botrychium lunaria* (a pan-Scandinavian fern with conspicuous spore-cases, no English name)

**Sewing, Spinning and Weaving:** harebell [(Our) Lady's Thimble], tufted vetch, flax.

#### **More about the legacy of the goddesses:**

(Our)Lady's mantle, forgetmenot, (Our) Lady's slipper, birdsfoot trefoil [Lady's Slippers], columbine, grass of Parnassus, daisy

**Bedstraws:**

(Our) Lady's Bedstraw, northern bedstraw, hedge bedstraw, perforate St. John's wort, thrift [(Our) Lady's Pincushion], thyme.

**Some feast-day flowers:**

Mullein [Our Lady's Candle/Flannel], snowdrop [Our Lady's Bells], star of Bethlehem (I think the author missed this one, but gives 'Our Lady's Cowslip', which I did not know), marigold

**Mary's grasses, ferns and herbs:**

Holy grass, reed-grass [Lady Grass], wall-rue, maidenhair spleenwort, black spleenwort, maidenhair fern [Our Lady's Hair], rosemary

**Mary's shrubs and trees**

Juniper, hawthorn [Lady's Meat (Scotland)]

A genuinely transformative book, it has permanently changed the way I encounter certain plants, and indeed Mary herself, whose acquaintance I have been very glad to make through these pages.



Category in Catalogue		Norwegian Name	Botanical Name	Common English Name	Comments by the reviewer
Generic flowers of ancient religious significance		Rose	<i>Rosa</i> sp	Rose	See below for themes of blood, chastity, fragrance. Roses are of great significance in muslim tradition
		Lilje	<i>Lilium</i> sp	Lily	White for purity. <i>Lilium candidum</i> is the Madonna lily.
		Fiol	<i>Viola</i> sp	Violet	Symbolic of Mary's humility
		Iris	<i>Iris</i> sp	Iris	The rainbow; the Trinity; Mary's belt
Two important examples from Nordic and German mythology		Jordbær	<i>Fragaria vesca</i>	Wild strawberry	The odour of sanctity; blood; associations with pagan goddesses
	Marihånd	Vårmarihånd	<i>Orchis mascula</i>	Early purple orchid	Very rich variety of names associated with themes such as blood, tears, milk, hands, two hands, suckling, spinning, clothes, keys
		Flekkmarihånd	<i>Dactylorhiza maculate</i>	Heath spotted orchid	
Old goddess-themes	Milk	Maritistel	<i>Silybum marianum</i>	Milk thistle	In naming this plant, the botanist Adanson was obviously alive to the traditions associated with it. 'Our Lady's Milk-Drops' is another English name;
		Lungeurt	<i>Pulmonaria officinalis</i>	Lungwort	In Wales 'Llaeth Bron Mair', Mary's breastmilk.
		Blåfjær	<i>Polygala vulgaris</i>	Common milkwort	The botanical name also refers to milk. Blue and white colours are associated with Mary's apparel.

	Tears	Liljekonvall	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	Lily of the valley	The small white bells are reminiscent of tears. English names include 'Mother of God Lily', 'Our Lady's Tears'.
		Soldogg	<i>Drosera rotundifolia</i>	Common sundew	The insect-trapping sticky hairs are the tear-drops
	Keys	Maria Nøkleblom	<i>Primula veris</i>	Cowslip	The inflorescence is like a bunch of golden keys. Relates to many legends. In French 'Coucou de la Sainte Vierge'
		Marinøkkel	<i>Botrychium lunaria</i>		This is a pan-Scandinavian fern with no English name. It has prominent clusters of spore-cases that might be thought to resemble keys
	Sewing spinning and weaving	Blåklokke	<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>	Harebell	The bells of the campanulas are like thimbles and relate to legends about Mary sewing with her mother St. Ann. A blue flower.
		Mariklokke	<i>Campanula medium</i>	Canterbury bells	These are much bigger bells. The English name is significant. Another name is 'Our Lady's Nightcap'.
		Lin	<i>Linum usitatissimum</i>	Flax	Another blue flower. There is a legend that Mary herself wove Christ's winding cloth, and spun the yarn for it.
		Engkarse	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	Lady's Smock	Associated with ancient goddesses having connections with textiles. Alternative name is 'cuckoo flower', and known as 'milkmaids' in some parts of UK



Legacy of the goddesses	Marikåpe	<i>Alchemilla vulgaris</i>	Lady's mantle	The English is short for 'Our Lady's Smock'. All European languages appear to use the same name. Associations with Venus/Aphrodite and Freya.
	Forglemmegei	<i>Myosotis sp.</i>	Forgetmenot	The small flowers are associated with blue eyes. There are many stories about Mary having blue eyes, which would be surprising in a first-century Levantine woman
	Marisko	<i>Cypripedium calceolus</i>	Lady's slippers	The shoe-like flowers were associated with Venus, Freya and Frigg before being attached to Mary
	Tiriltunge	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	Bird's foot trefoil	These are also called (Our) Lady's Slippers, but originally <i>calceolus veneris</i>
	Akeleie	<i>Aquilegia vulgaris</i>	Columbine	The flowers are so striking they have been used in many symbolic ways. In old Scandinavia they were called 'Frigg's Gloves'
	Jåblom	<i>Parnassia palustris</i>	Grass of parnassus	Known in Sweden as 'Virgin Mary's Heart'
	Tusenfryd	<i>Bellis perennis</i>	Daisy	Dedications can be traced from Ostara (origin of 'Easter'), Venus and Freya
Bedstraws	Gulmaure	<i>Galium verum</i>	Lady's bedstraw	English name of course shortened from 'Our Lady's Bedstraw'
	Kvitmaure	<i>Galium boreale</i>	Northern bedstraw	Bedstraws were used to stuff mattresses and pillows for comfort and fragrance

	Stormaure	<i>Galium mollugo</i>	Hedge bedstraw	
	Prikkperikum	<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>	Perforate St. John's wort	This is the source of an anti-depressant principle, so might have been genuinely useful as a bedstraw.
	Strandnellik	<i>Armeria maritime</i>	Thrift	Another English name is 'Our Lady's Pincushion'
	Timian	<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>	Common thyme	There is an old legend that St Anne used thyme to soothe the infant Mary and help her go to sleep
Festival flowers	Filtkongsllys	<i>Verbascum Thapsus</i>	Mullein	Dipped in tallow, Mullein plants were used as giant candles in religious festivals. 'Our Lady's Candle' is a variant English name. Also, in reference to the woolly leaves, 'Our Lady's flannel'.
	Snøklokke	<i>Galanthus nivalis</i>	Snowdrop	Also known as 'Candlemas Bells' and 'Our Lady's Bells'
	Gullstierne	<i>Gagea lutea</i>	Yellow Star of Bethlehem	Associated in Sweden with Lady Day 25 March, and called Lady-Day Leek.
Mary's grasses, ferns and herbs	Marigras	<i>Hierochloë odorata</i>	Holy grass	A fragrant grass, also used as a bedstraw
	Strandrør	<i>Phalaris arundinacea</i>	Reed-grass	Also known in Britain as Lady Grass, Lady's Ribbons
	Murburkne	<i>Asplenium ruta-muraria</i>	Wall rue	



	Blankburkne	<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>	Maidenhair spleenwort	This whole group of small ferns is associated with hair and many Mary-names in different languages. The specific name for the Maidenhair Fern means 'Venus's Hair'.
	Svartburkne	<i>Asplenium adiantum-nigrum</i>	Black spleenwort	
	Adiantum	<i>Adiantum capillus-veneris</i>	Maidenhair fern	
	Rosmarin	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	Rosemary	The English name in this case is <i>not</i> connected with the Holy Virgin. A legend has it that the flowers turned from white to blue when Mary hung her cloak on a rosemary bush during the Flight into Egypt.
Mary's shrubs and trees	Einer	<i>Juniperus</i> sp.	Juniper	Many stories associating junipers with the Holy Family
	Hagtorn	<i>Crataegus</i> sp.	Hawthorn	Known in Scotland as 'Lady's Meat'. In England the legend of Joseph of Aramathea is connected with the Glastonbury Thorn.