

Translating the Symbolism of Flowers: The Effect of 'Location' on Historic Research

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Introduction

All research requires examining and understanding the perspective of another time, place, and culture. The examination must take into account the position of the observer and the bias of their own experiential lenses. The precise perspective of each individual is what Beverley Skeggs defines as 'location(s)'.¹ Understanding these locations is particularly poignant when applied to the study of individuals from the past. By becoming aware of the social, economical, historical, national, and gendered situation of the people being studied, we as investigators of the past can achieve a more accurate picture of their lives and their perspectives. Simultaneously, our locations as researchers and as individuals effect the knowledge we gain about history, the people we aim to understand and, as a result, our interpretation of their lives. It is therefore necessary to recognise that in the very act of conducting historic research we are interpreting history, and as such performing a kind of translation. By applying these methods we are prompted to assess all angles of our own modern perspective in relation to the individual perspectives and historical context of the people we are studying. Subsequently, we become aware of the effect these locations have on our interpretation of history. These same methods can be applied to specific elements of a research topic. Assessing the context, or locations, of a given subject enables us to more clearly understand its particular meaning. Therefore, the act of interpreting the significance of the subject is also a form of translation.

In my research, I am attempting to understand life as it was experienced through the eyes of several Victorian women. This method, defined as an empirical feminist approach, allows me to focus upon the experiences of these women as a means of understanding their lives and individual locations.² The particular focus of my research is on the ways in which they chose to express themselves through different artistic media: painting, photography, embroidery and gardening. In each of these methods of expression, the women used flowers as a focus in their work. It is my hypothesis that this choice of subject matter holds significance. Through analysing the historical and cultural context within which these works were created and assessing the individual locations of the women, I will attempt to interpret the potential meaning that could have been implied by the use of flowers.

In this paper I intend to discuss how these locations effect the translation that occurs in historical research, with regard to the example of translating the symbolism within these women's floral expressions. As an exploration of methodology for my research in progress, it is my aim to inspire contemplation of our roles as researchers, the methods we use to study the past, and the ramifications these have on our research outcomes. I will begin

¹ B. Skeggs, *Feminist Cultural Theory : Process and Production*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 6.

² Skeggs, *Feminist Cultural Theory*, pp. 1-29.

with a brief introduction to my research topic and the women I am studying. Then I will go on to examine my methodologies; first, by discussing the subject of this conference, translation, and what influence this term has had upon my methodology. I will follow this with an explanation of my choices to date, what the terms mean and the impact they have upon my research. I will highlight these by offering a few examples of how translation and ‘location’ affect Victorian women and flowers. I will close with the hope of inspiring further contemplation about the possibility of flower symbolism.

Women, Questions and Hypotheses

In order to conduct my proposed research, I have chosen to study the lives and work of individual Victorian women, including their writings, in the form of letters, journals and publications, and their individual forms of personal expression. Currently I have selected four women: Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) and her poetically illustrative photography, Marianne North (1830-1890) and her botanical paintings, Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) and her artistically inspired garden designs, and May Morris (1862-1938) and her floral embroideries. These four women each chose to use flowers as a subject in their expression.³ I chose these women because of the existence of extant examples of their artworks, letters, journals and publications. Others have been considered, but their primary source material was either unavailable or nonexistent, or their choice of subject matter was something other than flowers. These women are all within the middle class economic bracket. This is in part due to the lack of evidence from either lower or upper class women using flowers in artwork during the Victorian Era. As a matter of course, evidence from the personal lives of lower class women is difficult to find, as these items were rarely saved or donated to museums. Furthermore, women who needed to work for their income would have been unlikely to have time for personal expression. Evidence of the lives of upper class women, is undoubtedly more accessible. However, with the exception of one family, I have yet to come across women using flowers in expression beyond the 18th century.⁴ This begs the question of what makes the social dynamics of the Victorian middle classes particularly primed for women to utilise symbolism within the floral subjects of their creative expression? Although these women do represent a niche in society, being few in number, all of middle-class and majority unmarried. This does not negate the fact that they themselves could have used flowers for symbolic meaning and as such, can still provide evidence to prove my hypothesis. Their work nonetheless, provides further examples of the cultural importance of flowers.⁵

The questions that I am currently facing are: *What role did flowers play in these women’s self-expression?* and, *Why were flowers culturally,*

³ See ‘Forget Me Not?’ section below, where I offer evidence that flowers held significant meaning in Victorian culture.

⁴ For an exception to this rule see R. Mabey, *Frampton Flora: The Secrets of Frampton Court Gardens*, (Surrey London: Quercus Publishing, 2007).

⁵ J. Edwards, *Gertrude Jekyll: Embroiderer, Gardener and Craftsman*, (Dorking, Surrey: Bayford Books, 1981); H. Helmut, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work*, An Aperture Monograph. (London: Gordon Fraser, 1975); J. Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story 1839-1938* (London & New York: Pandora, 1986); M. North, *A Vision of Eden: The Life and Works of Marianne North*, (ed.) J.P.M. Brenan, 4th edn. (London: HMSO; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew 1993).

artistically and personally significant? It is therefore my hypothesis that, due to the cultural milieu and to the immense number of flowers in Victorian artwork, these women's use of flowers as a subject held significance, both personally and socially. Through this topic, I intend to analyze these four women, the meaning behind the use of flowers in their artwork, and what cultural, gender and personal context affected their choices of subject matter as well as assisted in shaping, their lives.

Translation

When I began thinking about the topic of this conference 'Lost (and Found) in Translation', I took some time to consider the multiple uses and definitions of the term *translation*. The definition I chose to reflect upon was: the 'change or conversion to another form, appearance, etc.'⁶ In this definition, the term *translation* could also be replaced with *transformation*, which is defined as: 'a process by which one figure, expression, or function is converted into another that is equivalent in some important respect but is differently expressed or represented'.⁷ When I related this to my own research, two images came to mind. The first is of a diary lying open on a desk. The book is new and has a strong smell of leather and clean paper; the scrawled ink is fresh. There is some handwriting on several of the pages, but the book is only partially filled. In the second image, this same diary is lying open on a different desk, a modern desk. The book has maintained some wear; the smell of leather is faint and has been replaced by a dusty parchment aroma; the ink has faded somewhat, but the book's pages have been filled with writing. Although these two diaries are in fact the same object, the separation by time has altered its physical features. Furthermore, in the first image, the woman writing in the diary is experiencing and recording her thoughts as they occur. By contrast, in the second image, a different woman is reading those recorded words and recognizing that the events described in the pages, occurred many years before.

Although, as I have said, this diary is the same object in both images, the two women interacting with it are experiencing it in two distinctly different ways; from two different perspectives. The different perspectives of these two women are a result of each individual's position in time, in culture, in society; their economic situation, their family and heritage, their nationality; in short, because these two women are each unique individuals. These differences are what Beverly Skeggs, in her edited book, *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production* defines as an individual's 'location'.⁸ She discusses this term within the context of conducting research. Skeggs argues that 'as researchers... we are [individually] positioned through locations such as history, nation, gender, sexuality, class, "race", age.' All of which influence our perspectives and therefore our understanding of certain contexts.⁹ As a result, '[o]ur social and cultural location may inform what we say and how we say it'.¹⁰ Simply put, our own background and life experiences

⁶ <http://dictionary.reference.com>

⁷ *Microsoft Office Dictionary for Apple* (2008)

⁸ Skeggs, *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

help to define our outlook. Because of this, it is necessary for us to identify and understand our own perspective.

As researchers, our locations are particularly important to recognize when we study people or events in the past. This is even more critical if the source material is text-based, as textual understanding can only be perceived through the interpretation of the reader. In other words, what we read is based upon our own individual perception. Consequently, our understanding of the past can potentially only ever be an individual interpretation.

As in the example of the first woman writing in the diary, the concept of 'location' simultaneously applies to the people that we study. And, although research may inevitably rely on the interpretation of the researcher, by becoming aware of the social, economical, historical, national, and gendered situation of our research subjects, we as investigators of the past can create a more accurate picture of their lives and their perspectives. By achieving this, we can attempt to understand their individual reality, which could in turn provide us with the knowledge to portray a faithful representation of history.

Woman-centred Empirical Theory

I am attempting to understand life as it was experienced through the eyes of several Victorian women. One definition Skeggs provides for this methodology is an *empirical feminist approach*. This is two pronged: The first part is empirical theory, which is based upon the idea that knowledge is formed through experience.¹¹ This can be broadly represented as Experience = Knowledge. Although this equation has its benefits and consequences, for my topic, I appreciate that by using this, I am able to recognise experience as a valid form of knowledge.¹² The second aspect of this methodology applies empirical theory to feminist research. Feminism is a heavily laden term that has multiple meanings, which are often dependant upon the implications imparted by the individual.¹³ This being said, for the purposes of my research, the use of feminism simply conveys a woman-centred perspective. As a consequence, by applying feminism to empirical theory, wherein the experiences of the individual are regarded as unique, this methodology allows me to assert that 'women have a particular way of seeing and knowing the world'.¹⁴ Therefore, using an empirical feminist theory as the basis of my methodology allows me to focus upon the experiences of these selected women as a means of understanding their lives and individual 'locations'.

¹¹ C. Want, and A. Klimowski, *Kant for Beginners*, (Trumpington: Icon, 1996); Skeggs. *Feminist Cultural Theory : Process and Production*.

¹² Skeggs herself argues against empirical theory in favour of more systematic method. See also, Joan Scott 'Experience', in Butler, Judith, and Joan W. Scott. *Feminists Theorize the Political*. (New York ; London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 22-40. Janet Wolff argues that a combination of experiential evidence and historically documented participation must be used to create an accurate interpretation of women's lives in the past. J. Wolff, *Feminine Sentences : Essays on Women and Culture*. (Oxford: Polity, 1990).

¹³ For a layman's example of the complexities of feminism, see Wikipedia's unusually lengthy definition, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>.

¹⁴ Skeggs, *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*, p. 16.

Forget Me Not?

Allow me to provide an example of the effect perspective and cultural knowledge has upon understanding and accurately conducting historical research.



Figure 1: *In Doubt* (1881) Emily Farmer; V&A
© Victoria and Albert Museum

In this painting (Fig. 1), the woman being portrayed casts her eyes down as if in thought. The title, *In Doubt*, implies that her thoughts are turned towards hesitation over something to which the audience is not privy. As modern-day viewers, this may be as much as we are able to deduce about the painting, and we may believe that indeed, this is all the information at hand. In 1881, however, when this painting was completed, Victorian viewers would have seen something more. Notice the bunch of flowers at her breast, which are called forget-me-nots. In the Victorian era, forget-me-nots were commonly given by men to their fiancés as a symbol of their mutual commitment to each other. As such, others recognized that women who wore these flowers were betrothed. Having now learnt this small aspect of Victorian cultural knowledge, when we, the modern-day viewers, look again at the woman in the painting, we can now further surmise that she might be hesitating over her decision to marry.

This example clearly demonstrates that by understanding the perspectives of the original audience and their cultural knowledge the

modern-day viewer is able to understand another, seemingly hidden aspect of the story behind the image. In such examples, the certainty that some Victorians applied symbolism to flower bouquets is made blatantly apparent. Because of this, I feel compelled to question whether the use of implied symbolism could have been applied to flowers in other forms, such as photography, gardening or embroidery.

Two further examples I have come across in my early research pose additional questions, but more importantly inspire me to continue my search for flower symbolism and deeper meaning. Gertrude Jekyll began her training at the South Kensington School of Art in Botanical Drawing. Her degenerative eyesight, however, caused her to transition from painting to embroidery and needlework and finally to garden design. Thus, much of her gardens were inspired by artistic and aesthetic rules of design and colour. In later years, she began publishing and writing articles in several periodicals. Gertrude wrote and edited for a monthly periodical called *The Garden* for forty-six years (1881-1927).¹⁵ Each month, before sitting down to write her article, she would take a seat in her garden and absorb inspiration directly from the source.¹⁶

May Morris was a part of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain. Her embroidery designs were often inspired by nature, a common choice for textiles of the movement, flowers appeared regularly in her work. She recognised however, that patterns could never be a completely accurate depiction of their original source, but were more importantly a symbolical representation of nature, designed to inspire rather than mimic. In a publication for her students instructing them in the art of embroidery, May wrote:

Draw flowers you must. The flower borders you draw for embroidery can only be a rough sort of note, or symbol of the loveliness of garden or field; but the symbol reminds us very pleasantly of spring and summer.¹⁷

Conclusion

By exploring my methodologies, I hope that I have demonstrated the potential in these theories. Using empiricism allows the experiences of women, who have been previously overlooked in historic research, to be validated and to help us understand their personal lives and roles within society. Furthermore, by recognising our own perspectives as modern researchers and how these may colour our understanding of the past, and contextualising the experiences of those whom we are studying, we are able to more clearly translate the past and interpret these individual experiences.

Recognising the original context of Emily Farmer's painting (Fig. 1) and the general social knowledge of those who would have viewed it, this image once again

¹⁵ For Gertrude's complete list of books and articles, see the Gertrude Jekyll Estate website, <http://gertrudejekyll.co.uk>

¹⁶ F. Jekyll, *Gertrude Jekyll: A Memoir*, (London: Jonathon Cape, 1938).

¹⁷ M. Morris, 'Lecture Notes: Municipal School of Art, Birmingham, 1905', (Walthamstow, London: William Morris Gallery, 1989); M. Morris, *Decorative Needlework*, (London: Hughes & Co., 1893).

comes alive to us in the present day. We are able to see beyond the depiction of a fair woman and can look deeper into the implied meaning.

During the course of my research, I anticipate the discovery of many more such examples of women utilising the symbolic nature of flowers in their writing and artwork. My expectation is that this evidence will provide an understanding of the deeper meaning behind flowers in Victorian women's personal expression and in society at large. By doing so I aim to create an understanding of the potential underlying symbolism within medias of self-expression for middle class Victorian women, including the interpretation of this by their contemporaries in English society and the personal significance for the women themselves. In this way, the experiences of these women, their own perspective, that of contemporary society and of the modern researcher, will culminate in an effort to translate the symbolism of flowers.

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