

**‘Roses flowering; and the garden full of lust’:  
Floral Imagery and Sapphic Desire in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction**

A ‘thread’ of ‘sapphic’ desire ‘winds persistently’ through Virginia Woolf’s work, as Krystyna Colburn writes.<sup>1</sup> The fictional depiction of same-sex female desire, is occasionally made explicit; Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway* is seen ‘falling in love with women’ (*MD*, 28), but at other times sapphic desire is encoded in the same floral imagery we can see in Woolf’s personal writing, as in 1926 when she described her desire for Vita Sackville-West as ‘roses flowering’ in a ‘garden full of lust’.<sup>2</sup> This essay examines how Woolf uses floral imagery to express sapphic desire in the short story ‘Moments of Being: Slater’s Pins Have No Points’ (1928), (hereafter, ‘Pins’) and the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *Orlando* (1928).<sup>3</sup> Woolf’s use of floral imagery to ‘encode sexual pleasures and desires between women’ was drawn from an established literary tradition where flowers are a ‘standard trope for lesbian passion’, inspired by writers such as Sappho, Emily Dickinson and Katherine Mansfield.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note Woolf’s ‘coded’ depiction of sapphic desire would be, in part, due to the period’s censorship culture, as Susan Clements notes the banning of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) illustrates how ‘lesbian voices’ in the literature were being ‘silence[d].’<sup>5</sup> Despite, by the times these works were published, Woolf being her own publisher, both Colburn and Patricia Cramer note she would self-censor by ‘adopt[ing] codes and strategies of indirection for her homoerotic themes’, including using floral imagery to capture sapphic desire.<sup>6</sup> However, Cramer argues the metaphoric language ‘intensified’ Woolf’s depiction of desire, and contributed to Woolf’s literary innovation and modernist experimentation.<sup>7</sup>

Examining how Woolf depicts sapphic desire in ‘Pins’ is an ideal place to begin, as Woolf herself called it a ‘nice little story about Sapphism’ and, as Janet Winston notes, she uses ‘nature imagery to symbolise lesbian desire’ throughout.<sup>8</sup> This nature imagery is focussed on the ‘queer’ flower at the centre of the story, that begins as a ‘rose’ which ‘fell out of Fanny’s dress’ (*HH*, 209) and transforms

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<sup>1</sup> Krystyna Colburn, “The Lesbian Intertext of Woolf’s Short Fiction,” in *Trespassing Boundaries Virginia Woolf’s Short Fiction*, ed. Kathryn Benzel and Ruth Hoberman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): 63.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf, quoted in Patricia Cramer, “Virginia Woolf and Sexuality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010):185.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations taken from Virginia Woolf, *A Haunted House and Other Stories*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 2018), *Orlando*, ed. Brenda Lyons (London: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Simpson, “Pearl-Diving: Inscriptions of Desire and Creativity in H.D. And Woolf,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 4 (June 2004): 37, Colburn (2004), p63, Colleen Lamos, “Virginia Woolf’s Greek Lessons,” in *Sapphic Modernities Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 150.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Clements, “The Point of ‘Slater’s Pins’: Misrecognition and the Narrative Closet,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 13 (1994):15.

<sup>6</sup> Colburn (2004), p.65, Cramer (2010), p.189.

<sup>7</sup> Cramer (2010), p.186, 182.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf Diary 3: 397, Janet Winston, “Reading Influences Homoeroticism and Mentoring in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Carnation’ and Virginia Woolf’s ‘Moments of Being’” in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed. Barret and Cramer (New York: New York University Press, 1997):59.

into a 'carnation' when it is 'picked up' (*HH*, 211) by Julia.<sup>9</sup> This transformation symbolises an unspoken shift towards required desire between the women, as the flower transforms from a conventional symbol of love, a rose, into a sapphic symbol which has been appropriated by Woolf from the 19th-century tradition of gay men wearing green carnations.<sup>10</sup> This transformation can be interpreted Fanny's own sapphic blossoming. Julia, in the role of the mentor, perhaps inspired by Woolf's own 'infatuation' with her Greek tutor, shows Fanny that by understanding her own sapphic desire she can 'break' the 'glassy surface' (*HH*, 210) entrapping her in a heteronormative society and not 'sacrifice her independence' (*HH*, 213) to a heterosexual marriage in a patriarchal society.<sup>11</sup> The sapphic desire Fanny harbours for Julia is made very clear through the evocative floral imagery Woolf uses. As Winston notes, the 'eroticized descriptions' of Julia 'handling' the flower 'suggest forms of lesbian lovemaking'.<sup>12</sup> For example, as Fanny watches Julia 'crush' the carnation 'voluptuously' or pleasurably 'in her smooth veined hands', she believes the 'pressure' of Julia's 'fingers seemed to increase all that was most brilliant in the flower', (*HH*, 211). Julia's fingers have a sapphic transformative power of the flower, making it more beautiful, and if the flower is read as a shorthand for female genitalia, this moment where she 'set' the flower 'off' (*HH*, 211) also suggests sexual pleasure. Through Woolf's eroticised description, Erin Douglas argues, Fanny fantasises 'the flower is her own body' which illustrates she desiring or 'yearning for Julia to touch her'.<sup>13</sup> The floral imagery is reiterated as a metaphor for sapphic desire after Julia kisses Fanny (fulfilling her newly-discovered sapphic desire) by Fanny's excited 'trembling fingers' when she 'pinned' the newly-queered carnation, 'to her breast' (*HH*, 214), marking herself with this sapphic symbol.

Sapphic desire is also made explicit in *Mrs Dalloway* by Woolf's linking of floral and combustion imagery to depict the passion between Clarissa and Sally. Woolf's free indirect discourse allows the reader to access Clarissa's deepest desires and thereby to know Clarissa 'undoubtedly [...] felt what men felt' (*MD*, 28); she desired women. This 'revelation' (*MD*, 28) of sapphic desire is described orgasmically, the physical sensations emphasised; Clarissa experiences a 'blush' which 'spread' and 'rushed', 'quivered' on the point of climax before it 'gushed' (*MD*, 28) into the 'sexual and spiritual epiphany' as Cramer puts it, of 'illumination' (*MD*, 28).<sup>14</sup> For the first time, Clarissa sees her sapphic desire, she is set alight like 'a match in a crocus' (*MD*, 28), a combination of floral and fiery imagery in which the petals of the flower and the burning match are, combined, symbolic of female genitalia and sexual arousal. This association of sapphic desire with fire is also used by Woolf in 'Pins', where Julia 'blaze[s]' 'kindle[s]' and 'burn[s]' (*HH*, 214) with desire for Fanny. By using a

<sup>9</sup> Erin Douglas, "Queering Flowers, Queering Pleasures in 'Slater's Pins Have No Points,'" *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 82 (2012): 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Winston (1997), p.69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas (2012), p.14.

<sup>14</sup> Cramer (2010), p.187.

crocus to represent sapphic desire Woolf could be alluding to Sappho fr. 94, wherein the speaker remembers ‘wreaths of violets and roses and crocuses’ wrapped around the ‘tender neck’ of her lover, followed by ‘in softs beds [...] you would satisfy your longing’, suggestive of sapphic desire and sexual fulfilment.<sup>15</sup> Woolf repeats the link between crocuses and sapphic desire in ‘Pins’ as Julia’s ‘favourite’ student is Fanny, and her ‘favourite’ flowers are ‘crocuses’ (*HH*, 213). Floral imagery is tied to sapphic desire in *Mrs Dalloway* in ‘Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips’ (*MD*, 31). ‘Flower’ and ‘kissed’ are placed together, suggesting all moments of floral imagery lead up to this point, but are separated by a semicolon, which allows the reader to pause, suggesting there was a pause between these actions, so that they reader could be immersed in the experience of sexual tension between the characters to emphasise their desire. Moreover, the connection between floral imagery and sapphic desire could be read in Clarissa’s sensory experience of the florist, where Woolf describes the experience as ‘exquisite’ (*MD*, 10) the same word used to describe kissing Sally; ‘the most exquisite moment of her whole life’ (*MD*, 31). In the florist Clarissa envisions the flowers being harvested in the early evening light which would hit ‘every flower’ so they ‘glow’, (*MD*, 10) as if the light came from within them, foreshadowing the image of a ‘match in a crocus’. The flowers’ colours ‘white, violet, red, deep orange’ are the colours of a flame, making it appear as if ‘every flower seems to burn by itself’ (*MD*, 10) which could represent unfulfilled desires, and as this ‘burn[ing]’ occurs ‘softly [...] in the misty beds’ (*MD*, 10), perhaps alludes to the sapphic sexual pleasure in the ‘soft beds’ of Sappho fr. 94.<sup>16</sup> Thus the floral imagery is suggestive of Clarissa’s hidden desires for a more sexually-fulfilling relationship than her relationship with Richard, which is placed in direct contrast to the ‘illumination’ of sapphic desire by the ‘half-burnt’ (*MD*, 27) candle beside the bed she does not share with him, representing stasis and a lack of desire.

Woolf’s use of flowers as symbolism for female genitalia and sapphic desire in *Mrs Dalloway*, can also be seen in *Orlando*. Woolf affirms the titular character’s bisexuality, noting how Orlando ‘enjoyed the love of both sexes equally’ (*O*, 153) and their love for Sasha persists as a woman; ‘though she herself was a woman, it was a woman she loved’ (*O*, 115). Therefore, even in the early parts of the novel, when Orlando is male-presenting, Woolf’s use of floral imagery can still be interpreted as depicting sapphic desire. Woolf uses an extended floral metaphor to describe Orlando’s sexual exploits, ‘he was no lover of garden flowers only’, symbolic of the beautiful, socially cultivated aristocratic women, but was also attracted to ‘the wild and the weeds’ (*O*, 20), suggesting Orlando conducted love affairs, and thereby desired, lots of different women from different parts of society. Perhaps this is alluding to Vita’s sexual exploits, as Woolf wrote in a letter to her, ‘it’s all about you and the lusts of your flesh’, which reiterates how, despite Orlando being male-presenting

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<sup>15</sup> Sappho fr. 94, trans. Campbell.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

while having love affairs with women, the novel is saturated by real and fictional sapphic desire.<sup>17</sup> Orlando's desire for Sasha is portrayed as a visceral bodily symptom, like a fever, he 'trembled; turned hot; turned cold' (*O*, 27) which echoes the language of sapphic desire used in 'Pins' when Fanny is 'trembling' with desire (*HH*, 214) after kissing Julia, and in *Mrs Dalloway*, where Clarissa remembers the 'overpowering' desire she felt for Sally, which made her 'cold with excitement' (*MD*, 30). While Clarissa passively experiences desire, is 'overpowered' by it and 'yields' to it, Orlando plays an active, traditionally masculine, and overtly phallic role in his desire; 'his manhood woke; he grasped a sword in his hand' (*O*, 28), which contrasts to the interiorised 'vulva-like' floral imagery in *Mrs Dalloway*.<sup>18</sup> However Woolf continues utilising floral imagery to represent female sexuality in Orlando's fantasy; Orlando envisions actively diving into 'deep water [where] he saw the flower of danger growing in a crevice' (*O*, 28). This image of a flower in 'crevice' is suggestive of female genitalia, the flower itself perhaps suggestive of the clitoris, and the act of diving towards it representative of penetration or perhaps a search for female desire. Orlando's fantasy is interrupted before he can reach this 'flower', disrupting the active, phallic energy of his 'diving' and suggesting a lack of fulfilment of desire which foreshadows Sasha's departure. A similar floral disruption of phallic imagery, and thereby evoking a sapphic, gynocentric world, occurs in *Mrs Dalloway*, when Sally 'cut [the] heads off' (*MD*, 29) some flowers (as established, representative of female genitalia), separating them from their stalks (which could be representative of male genitalia) and places the heads directly into the water, echoing the underwater 'crevice' of *Orlando*. Moreover, as Sally choose 'hollyhocks, dahlias' (*MD*, 29) which in Victorian floriography opposingly symbolised fecundity and instability, and thus were 'flowers that had never been seen together' (*MD*, 29), I would argue Woolf is disrupting heteronormative structures of desire by appropriating floriography, an unspoken flower language, and turning it into a way to voice unspoken sapphic desires.<sup>19</sup>

By examining these examples, this essay has illustrated how Woolf has employed floral imagery to evoke desire between women in her fiction. In 'Pins' floral imagery is used to evoke a transformative sapphic coming-of-age, in *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf linked established patterns of floral imagery with fire to portray sapphic desire, and in *Orlando* she used flowers as representations of female sexuality. As Diana Swanson writes, Woolf's 'love for women was [...] central to her [...] writing', and this can be seen in the encoded, but clearly intended, images of sapphic desire and female sexual pleasure which are rooted in an established queer literary tradition of floral imagery.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Woolf, quoted in Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 65.

<sup>18</sup> Cramer (2010), p.192.

<sup>19</sup> Brent Elliott, 'The Victorian Language of Flowers', *Occasional Papers from the RHS* 10, (2013): 66-70.

<sup>20</sup> Diana Swanson, "Lesbian Approaches," in *Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies*, ed. Anna Snaith (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 185-7.

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