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The Meaning of Strawberries in Shakespeare



SHAKESPEAREAN details of rather minor intrinsic significance sometimes can be worth the most careful examination not only because they previously have been ignored or misinterpreted, but also because such study may serve to indicate neglected resources of the playwright's dramatic language and the methods of historical criticism requisite to master them. The concern of this article is to demonstrate that Shakespeare's references to the strawberry, appearing in quite different dramatic contexts in three plays widely spaced through his career, are examples of such details. Of course the most memorable of these references (and the one to which our main attention will be drawn) occurs in *Othello* (III.iii.433–435) where mention of the strawberry 'spots' on the fatal handkerchief helps to vivify Iago's climactic flourish of evidence in the temptation of the Moor.

Tell me but this—
Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief
Spotted with strawberries in your wive's hand?¹

At the admission which quickly follows, Othello is utterly convinced of the truth of Iago's slander: 'Now do I see 'tis true' (444). Though indeed we have heard of the handkerchief's embroidered 'work' before now (III.iii.296), this is the first we learn of its specific and identifying design. What we must ask critically is whether Shakespeare's reservation of the strawberries for this decisive moment has any value beyond identification, a dramatic value in intensifying the episode's essential effect and meaning.

One sound reason for asking this question is that Shakespeare took the trouble to put strawberries on the precious 'napkin' in his play in—

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from *The Complete Works*, ed. G. L. Kittredge (New York, 1936).

stead of simply retaining the 'alla moresca' embroidery of his source.² Initially, we might be content to suppose that the playwright departed from Cinthio in this detail merely to bring the dramatic situation closer to his audience. For the strawberry plant—its fruit, flowers, and leaves considered—is among the most frequently occurring of such objects represented in English domestic embroidery surviving from the period.³ The very nature of the embroiderers' sources and output, however, itself urges us not to rest with this answer. The embroiderers of the time drew their designs, either at first or second hand, largely from illustrated books, such as emblem books and books of hours, where many of the motifs they culled were being used in a symbolic way.⁴ And the resultant embroidery itself frequently manifests a marked interest in emblematic significances. 'Elizabethan decoration' (as Rosemary Freeman has remarked) 'was universally emblematic and wherever the needle could penetrate the tendency to personification and allegory finds expression.'⁵

Shakespeare's other two references to the strawberry provide further reason to suppose that this emblematic tendency was in fact operative in his conception of the otherwise elaborately symbolic 'handkerchief spotted with strawberries'. For in both cases it would appear that his meaning must depend or at least draw upon established figurative values of the plant. The simpler of these references occurs near the start of *Henry V* where the two bishops express their relief and astonishment at the near-miraculous reformation of the prodigal Prince Hal. When Canterbury wonders at the new king's skill and learning in divinity, statecraft, war, and policy 'Since his addiction was to courses vain, | His companies unletter'd, rude, and shallow, | His hours fill'd up with riots', Ely attempts to explain by a horticultural reference (i.i.60–62):

The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,
And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best
Neighbour'd by fruit of baser quality.

² Gio. Battista Giral di Cintio, *De gli hecatommithi* (Nel Monte Regale, 1565), I, 578: 'il qual pannicello era lavorato alla moresca sottilissimamente'.

³ See A. F. Kendrick, *English Needlework* (London, 1933), p. 87; A. J. B. Wace, 'English Embroideries belonging to Sir John Carew Pole, Bart.', *The Twenty-First Volume of the Walpole Society* (Oxford, 1933), p. 55.

⁴ See Preston Remington, *English Domestic Needlework of the XVI, XVII, and XVIII Centuries* (New York, 1945), p. 3.

⁵ *English Emblem Books* (London, 1948), p. 94. For discussion, see J. L. Nevins, 'English Domestic Embroidery Patterns of the 16th and 17th Centuries', *The Twenty-Eighth Volume of the Walpole Society* (Oxford, 1940), pp. 5–6.

Prothero has already pointed out that the strawberry, although a ground-creeping plant in habit of growth, was an exception to the belief of Elizabethan gardeners in the importance of a plant's neighbors in the determination of its qualities. Even though the strawberry was 'exposed to every sort of contamination, yet no evil companionship could taint its purity'.⁶

It is rather surprising, therefore, to find the strawberry associated with a quite different kind of character in the other passage in which Shakespeare refers to it. This is the curious incident, drawn by the dramatist from his historical source, of Richard, Duke of Gloucester's requesting some of the Bishop of Ely's strawberries just before he bares his withered arm before the council and manages the dispatching of Hastings (*Richard III* III.iv). More's account in the *Historie* places such unexplained and pointless emphasis on the 'messe of strawberries' that their presence in the episode only makes for mystery.⁷ In a recent note, Professor J. Dover Wilson has quoted approvingly an explanation of Richard's demand for strawberries suggested by a physician, Dr. J. Swift Joly, who thinks the intriguer required them to establish the claim that he was being victimized by witchcraft. His idea is that the historical Richard 'was allergic to strawberries and knew that he could produce an urticarial rash by eating them'.⁸ Professor Wilson believes 'Dr Joly . . . has discovered the point' of the historical episode which, being lost, has left the versions of both More and Shakespeare 'oddly pointless'. We may perhaps allow that this supposition can help to account for the obscurity of More. But we will suppose it serves to explain Shakespeare's version only if we also assume that the dramatist, under no obligation to use the episode, deliberately chose to carry over into his play without essential reinterpretation matter whose obscurity in his source must have been as apparent to him as it is to us. Hence Professor Wilson pictures for us a Shakespeare, not shaping the matter of his source into something new and comprehensible, but vainly trying to give some plausibility to an episode whose secret key he did not possess.

Shakespeare endeavours, not very successfully, to make it work by suggesting that Richard's request for the strawberries is an expression of the geniality he affects when

⁶ *Shakespeare's England* (Oxford, 1916), I, 373.

⁷ For the episode of the strawberries at 'the counsel in the Tower' see *More's Life of King Richard III*, ed. J. Rawson Lumby (Cambridge, 1883), pp. 45-48.

⁸ J. Dover Wilson, 'A Note on "Richard III": the Bishop of Ely's Strawberries', *MLR* LII (1957), 563-564.

he first comes in. At least that appears to be the reason why after sending the bishop out to dispatch a messenger to Ely Place he brings him back to remind us of the strawberries just before the infatuated Hastings utters the tribute to Richard's sincerity of character which begins

His grace looks cheerfully and smooth this morning;
There's some conceit or other likes him well.

As a matter of fact, Professor Wilson's own critical observation points our way to recognition of Shakespearean intentions in the passage that have nothing to do with Richard's supposed allergies or Shakespeare's ignorance of them. The first reference to the strawberries in the passage could be merely an expression of Richard's affected geniality and his device to get Ely momentarily out of the way so he can tell Buckingham of Hastings' refusal to assent to his occupancy of the throne. But the second reference (III.iv.46–59) must be intended to be meaningful in its context, Hastings' commentary on Richard's character, unless Shakespeare deliberately has gone out of his way to produce an entry, line, and grouping which are otherwise dramatically inert.

Enter the Bishop of Ely.

Ely. Where is my lord the Duke of Gloucester? I have sent for these strawberries.

Hast. His Grace looks cheerfully and smooth this morning;
There's some conceit or other likes him well
When that he bids good morrow with such spirit.
I think there's never a man in Christendom
Can lesser hide his love or hate than he,
For by his face straight shall you know his heart.

Der. What of his heart perceive you in his face
By any likelihood he show'd to-day?

Hast. Marry, that with no man here he is offended;
For were he, he had shown it in his looks.

Enter Richard and Buckingham.

Rich. I pray you all, tell me what they deserve
That do conspire my death with devilish plots.

Ely's entrance to remind us of the 'good strawberries' (32), just preceding Hastings' praise of Richard's lack of dissimulation, can only be meant, like the purposeful reëntry of the intriguing Richard and Buckingham immediately following, as an ironic commentary on that tribute.

If we were to consider the *Henry V* and *Richard III* references to the strawberry from an emblematic point of view we might guess that it could have been used as an emblem either of the good or uncorrupted man, or of the seemingly good man, the hypocrite. Actually, both of these senses had vigorous, and more complexly significative, traditions behind them. The passage in *Richard* depends on an idea of the strawberry which is classical in origin and which involves the hoary proverbial phrase 'There is a snake in the grass'.⁹

Qui legis flores et humi nascentia fraga,
frigidus, o pueri, fugite hinc, latet anguis in herba.

These lines from Vergil's *Eclogues* (III, 92–93) were often cited, as earlier by John of Salisbury in his counsel to Christian readers of pagan literature in the *Polycraticus* (Lib. VII, Cap. X), as a warning against moral or intellectual seduction hidden beneath literary seeming sweets. A device in this tradition appears in Claude Paradin's *Symbola heroica* which I reproduce here from the 1591 English version, *The Heroicall Devises* (fig. 1). The explication of the device in the translation of P. S. runs:

In gathering of flowers, and strawberries that grow low vpon the ground, we must be verie carefull for the adder and snake that lieth lurking in the grasse, for looke whom-soeuer she stingeth, they hardly recouer after. So in reading of authors, and bookes, which carrie a faire shew to the eye, and yeelding small delight to the eare, we must be carefull that we runne not into absurd, and wrong iudgements, and opinions, & by that meanes make shipwracke of our soules.¹⁰

Other similar dangers were capable of being symbolized by the same device of the strawberry and snake. When Geoffrey Whitney culled this device for his *A Choice of Emblemes*, he applied the proverbial idea of the 'faire shew to the eye' to the colored speech of flatterers and viperous hypocrites.

Of flattringe speeche, with sugred wordes beware,
Suspect the harte, whose face doth fawne, and smile.¹¹

'For by his face straight shall you know his heart', says the infatuated

⁹ For the Elizabethan proverbial use, see Morris P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950), proverb 5585.

¹⁰ *The Heroicall Devises of M. Claudius Paradin* . . . Translated out of Latin into English by P. S. (London, 1591), p. 84.

¹¹ Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblemes, and other Devises* (Leyden, 1586), p. 24.

Hastings. Obviously, this sense of the strawberry is the one operative in the *Richard III* passage, and in fact the idea of the hypocrite also appears in other Shakespearean contexts where the proverb is referred to without mention of the strawberry.¹²

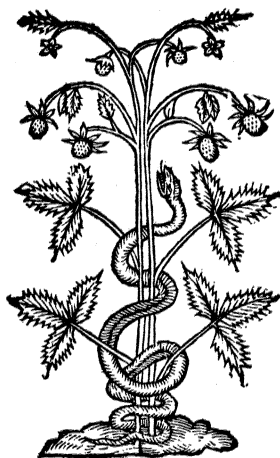
It was perhaps inevitable that the proverb should also be frequently applied to beautiful women. In this sense it often appears in Elizabethan writings, as for example in Lyly's *Euphues* in a discussion of the female disposition.¹³ An important extension of this sense resulted in application of the proverb's basic thought to the seeming beauties of love it-

DEVISE.

83

Latet anguis in herba.

The adder lurketh privilie in the grasse.



F 1

70

1. 'Latet anguis in herba', device from *The Heroicall Devises* of M. Claudius Paradin (London, 1591), p. 83

¹² See 2 *Henry VI* iii.i.228, *Richard II* iii.ii.19, *Romeo* iii.ii.73. Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers* (London, 1870), pp. 340–341, notes the use of the proverb in emblem literature and in Shakespeare, but makes no reference to its classical origins or its relevance to the meaning of strawberries in the plays.

¹³ John Lyly, *The Complete Works*, ed. R. Warwick Bond (Oxford, 1902), I, 202.

self: 'O loue, a plague, though grac'd with gallant glosse, | For in thy seates a snake is in the mosse'.¹⁴ This point helps to account for the appearance of the strawberry in two indicative pieces of Elizabethan minor art in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London). The first is a linen panel embroidered in black silk from the end of the sixteenth century, entitled 'The Shepheard Buss'. The lover complains (in rebus emblems) that false Cupid has wounded him to death. Four appropriate devices from Paradin are in the corners of the inner square of the piece, and one of these is the 'Latet anguis in herba'.¹⁵ The other piece (Acquisition No. 333A-1898) is a trencher of sycamore (c. 1590) whose inner circle is decorated with painted and gilt strawberries accompanied by scriptural quotations (Prov. v. 3; Ecclus. ix. 8; Prov. xxix. 3). These concern the dangers to a man's substance and life attendant on the seductive pleasures which the 'strange woman' offers. While the direct reference is to the perils of feminine beauty and illicit love, the actual perniciousness of the objects of concupiscent desire in general may be implied since the seductions of the scriptural *mala mulier* referred to were well known to pertain to all desires misguided from the love of God. In any event these references do suggest the final step in this tradition of the strawberry which is the generalization of its meaning so that it can represent any 'show of goodness', pleasurable to man's corrupt nature, which can spiritually damage him through unwary moral choice.¹⁶ Joachim Camerarius' fairly compendious account of the strawberry and serpent emblem in his *Symbolorū & emblematum . . . centuria vna*, first published in the last decade of the sixteenth century, illustrates the tendency to this inclusive meaning (fig. 2). The emblematiser notes that the hidden poison of illicit loves is one significance of the symbol; but he emphasizes two more general interpretations. The similitude warns us, he says, against fair appearances which lead the mind into dangerous error, particularly 'dum persequamur in opiniones absurdas,

¹⁴ Whitney, p. 219: 'In amore tormentum'.

¹⁵ The other devices from Paradin are the flower and the sun ('Following no meane things', p. 46), the peacock feathers and the flies ('Take awaie the priekes [*sic*] of pleasres [*sic*]', p. 288), and the dog jumping from the sinking ship ('A defence or safeguard in the dangerous waters', p. 252). For discussion, see Nevinson, 'English Domestic Embroidery Patterns', pp. 6-8; for reproduction of the panel, see his Plate III or Kendrick, Plate XII.

¹⁶ For the conception of moral choice referred to, see Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, I.vii.3 ff.; in *The Works*, ed. John Keble, 7th ed. rev. R. Church and F. Paget (Oxford, 1888), I, 221 ff.; for discussion, see J. V. Cunningham, *Woe or Wonder* (Denver, 1951), p. 108.

pravas, & à vero nos longissimè abducentes'; but others, he admits, interpret the strawberries as riches which may tempt one to such proud and intemperate abuse of luxuries and pleasures as will prevent him from arriving at true virtue and enduring tranquillity of soul.¹⁷

ET EMBLEMATUM CENTVR. I.

92

XC.

VIGILATE TI-
MENTES.



*Passim fraus cecis latet infidiosa tenebris:
Nec capiare carpe, & sobrius ad-vigila.*

Quemad-

2. 'Vigilate timentes', emblem from Joachim Camerarius, *Symbolorū & emblematum ex re herberaria desuntorum centuria vna collecta* (Francofurti, 1654), fol. 92^r

¹⁷ *Symbolorū & emblematum ex re herberaria desuntorum centuria vna collecta* (Francofurti, 1654), fol. 91^v. Wilhelm Fränger, *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch*, tr. Eithne Wilkins & Ernst Kaiser (Chicago, 1951), p. 116, finds that the strawberry appearing as a prominent symbol in Bosch's painting 'represents the essence of earthly voluptuous delight'.

In most of these treatments the strawberry is emblematic of an only apparent good whose real perniciousness is symbolized by the lurking adder. By another tradition, however, the strawberry represents a real good. This is reflected in the passage about Hal;¹⁸ but it also is present to reinforce the effect of the dramatic symbolism of the scene in *Richard III*. Characteristically, Shakespeare brings the two traditions of symbolism together as he does again in these lines in *Macbeth* (I.v.66–67), where Lady Macbeth advises the hero to

... look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

The strawberry, because its flower is white, its fruit red, its smell and taste sweet, and its foliage 'like the Trefoile',¹⁹ was an excellent choice for the expression of the fruit of the spirit (Gal. v. 22–23). While it is nowhere mentioned in Scripture and depends for its appearance rather on the allegorical interpretation of the book of nature, it enjoys a very widespread popularity in religious illustration from the late fourteenth century to well past Shakespeare's time. 'Its meaning' (as Elizabeth Haig long ago pointed out) 'always appears to be the same; it is the symbol of perfect righteousness, or the emblem of the righteous man whose fruits are good works.'²⁰ It thus appears near the blessed or in the Eden of unfallen Adam and Eve in representations of the celestial or earthly paradise.²¹ Examples are the depictions of these subjects in a

¹⁸ An interpretation of the strawberry which bears some relation to the purport of the *Henry V* passage is found in Philip Picinelli's encyclopaedic *Mundus symbolicus* (Coloniae Agrippinae, 1687), Lib. x, Cap. xviii, p. 622: 'E Locis infirmis ac sylvestribus nonnunquam animos prodire nobiles & generosos, fraga demonstrant, quae illustriminio obducta, & in alpium desertis nata, à Carolo Rancato epigraphen cepere; SYLVESTRI NATA SUB UMBRA. Verbis ex Ovidio [*Meta*. iii] mutuatis . . .'. It is significant, in connection with the tradition of interpretation *in bono* discussed in my text below, that he should add: 'Talis omnino Epithalamii Divini sponsa erat, quae ascendit de deserto, delitiis affluens. Et rursum, sub arbore malo suscitavit [Cant. viii. 5].'

¹⁹ John Gerarde, *The Herball: a Generall Historie of Plantes* (London, 1597), p. 844.

²⁰ *The Floral Symbolism of the Great Masters* (New York and London, 1913), pp. 269–270. She remarks (p. 268) that 'the strawberry stands apart from all other symbolical fruits. It is found in Italian, Flemish and German art, and also in the English miniatures. . . . As a symbol it is not only widespread, but of comparatively early origin.'

²¹ It is conceivable that Ovid's description of the Golden Age, in which the strawberry is mentioned among the fruits brought forth by nature without man's travail (*Meta*. i, 104), had some part in the development of this convention. In the moralized Ovid, where strawberries remain a typical Golden Age food, the world of the Golden Age is explicitly related to the Biblical Paradise; see 'Ovide moralisé,' *Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, ed. C. de Boer (Amsterdam, 1915), Livre I, ll. 492, 928–933. On the

Garden of Paradise by a Master of the Upper Rhine (around 1410) in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut (Frankfurt), and in Giovanni di Paolo's paintings of Paradise (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and the Expulsion from Paradise (collection of Mr. Robert Lehman; detail: fig. 3). It is also often used in representations of the other paradisaical garden conventionally related to these two paradises in Biblical exegesis: the *Sponsa* as *hortus conclusus*.²² In the Canticum the *Sponsus* sees the *Sponsa* as without 'spot' (Cant. iv. 7) and addresses her, in a passage endlessly echoed in Elizabethan poetry, as a garden enclosed filled with precious fruits.

My sister my spouse is as a garden inclosed, as a spring shut vp, and a fountaine sealed vp. Thy plants are as an orchard of pomegranates with sweete fruites . . . (Genevan, 1602: Cant. iv. 12-13)

In Catholic commentary and continental and pre-Reformation art this garden often was directly identified with the Virgin Mary who, by a convention arising in the twelfth century, was taken by one mode of interpretation to personify the *Sponsa*.²³ Hence the strawberry is a symbol very frequently associated with the Virgin and is generally known to appear in many pictures of the mystical enclosed garden among the flowers used to express her virtues. In *Partheneia sacra*, a Catholic emblem book in English and one of the works which helped later in the

Ovidian reference to the strawberries itself, Peter Lavinius has the following note in his commentary on the *Metamorphoses* (in *P. Ovidii Nasonis Poetae ingeniosissimi Metamorphoseos libri XV*, Venetiis, 1536, fol. 7^v): 'Montana fraga: forsitan illud explicare uoluit quod Moses scripserat. Ecce dedi uobis omnem herbam afferentem semen super terram: & uniuersa ligna quae habent in semetipsis sementem generis sui: ut sint uobis in escam [Gen. i. 29].' The tradition of comparing the Golden Age and Eden is still in evidence in George Sandys' *Ovids Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd, and Represented in Figures* (London, 1640), p. 14.

²² See Richard of St. Victor, *In Cant.*, *P.L.* cxcvi, cols. 490-491; the discussion in D. W. Robertson, Jr., 'The Doctrine of Charity in Mediaeval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory', *Speculum* xxxvi (1951), 31; and the note in the Genevan Bible (1602 Bible quoted) at Cant. v. 1: 'The garden signifieth the kingdome of Christ'.

²³ 'Omnia quae de Ecclesia dicta sunt, possunt etiam de ipsa Virgine, sponsa et matre sponsi, intelligi' (Honorius of Autun, 'Sigillum beatae Marie', *P.L.* clxxii, col. 494). There are continual references to the Virgin as the *sponsa* in the sermons of St. Bernard (*P.L.* clxxxii-clxxxv). For the tradition of interpretation whereby 'Maria est paradus plantatus a Deo' see Bede, *P.L.* xci, col. 1102; Rupert, *P.L.* clxviii, col. 896; *Speculum humanae salvationis*, ed. J. Lutz and P. Perdrizet (Mulhouse, 1907), I, 228; and Martino Del'Rio, *In Canticum Canticorum Solomonis commentarius literalis, et catena mystica* (Paris, 1604), p. 1[5]4.



3. Giovanni di Paola, *The Expulsion from Paradise*: detail (collection of Mr. Robert Lehman, New York)



4. Martin Schongauer, *The Madonna of the Strawberries* (formerly in Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg)



5. Il Bronzino (Agnolo di Cosimo), *The Holy Family* (National Gallery, London)



6. Miniature illumination of the Virgin as the 'woman clothed with the sun' (Rev. xii. 1), with border of strawberries in apparent relief. From *Horae Beatae Mariae Virginis, ad usum Romae* (written in Flanders about 1500), fol. 104^v (Garrett Collection ms. 57, Princeton University Library)



7. Embroidered binding of a copy (C. 65. k. 10) of *Christian Prayers* (London, 1570): crimson velvet, worked with metal threads mixed with colored silks, with guimp affixed spangles (British Museum, London)

seventeenth century to give 'wide currency to the symbols which had been associated with the Virgin Mary since the beginning of her cult',²⁴ we are told to 'Note there', in the symbolic garden which Mary as *Sponsa* is,

the humilitie of the Violet, how like the strawberrie she keeps by the ground, hiding, what she can, here beautie in her leaues, But is discouered whether she wil or no; partly by the flashes of her luster . . . partly with the odour she can not choose but send forth.²⁵

In the Madonna and Child by Schongauer (fig. 4), the Virgin is seated in a bed of strawberries, and to show that she herself is the garden, she wears strawberry leaves in her crown as the emblem of her righteousness. The same idea is represented by strawberries embroidered on the Virgin's cloak in Lorenzo d'Alessandro da Sanseverino's altarpiece: the Marriage of Saint Catherine of Siena (National Gallery, London).²⁶ More usually this plant appears among the flowers which spring in the earth as symbols of the church's faith and justice and of God's promise of the heavenly paradise. Typical examples are Schongauer's Birth of Jesus (Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar) and the Virgin and Child with Angels by a follower of Bernart Van Orley in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁷

Of course the faith and justice of the church are assumed to be derived from Christ, the fruit of righteousness whom the Virgin brought forth. When the *Sponsa*-garden was identified with the Virgin Mary,

²⁴ Freeman, *English Emblem Books*, p. 181.

²⁵ H. A., *Partheneia Sacra* (Rouen, 1633), p. 10. Elizabeth Haig remarks that the strawberry is ' . . . almost invariably accompanied by the violet, from which we may gather that the truly fruitful soul is always humble' (*Floral Symbolism*, p. 271).

²⁶ This painting is reproduced in the National Gallery's *Illustrations, Italian Schools* (London, 1937), p. 199, and in Haig, *Floral Symbolism*, frontispiece.

²⁷ See Cant. ii. 12, and for commentary, Rabanus Maurus, *De universo*, P.L. cxi, col. 528: '*Flores in terra visi sunt* (Cant. ii); quibus etiam regnum coelorum promissum est.' Also col. 529: '*Flores apparuerunt in terra* (Cant. ii), id est, in otio fidei et iustitia floruerunt in mundo, crescente Ecclesia.' Cf. John Trapp, *A commentary . . . upon . . . Canticles*, p. 212, in *Solomonis CANAPETOS: or, a Commentarie upon the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (London, 1650): 'by flowers . . . are understood . . . the first fruits of the Spirit, whereby the Elect give a pleasant smell: and therein lyeth sweetnesse of speech and words going before workes, even as flowers before fruits.'

The motive is commonplace in painting; for its appearance in graphic art, see the engraving of the Madonna and Child in a garden with strawberries by Master E. S. in Max Geisberg, *Die Anfänge des deutschen Kupferstiches und der Meister E. S.* (Leipzig, n.d., Meister der Graphik, Band II).

the precious fruit of the *hortus* was related to the blessed 'fruit' of Mary's womb (Luke i. 42). Moreover, Christ himself conventionally was identified with the 'welbeloued' *Sponsus* who provided his garden with its fruitfulness in virtue.

The Garden is Christs: the pretious graces of his Spirit, and all acts of grace, those pleasant fruits are all his. He alone is the true proprietary: for of him, and through him, and to him are all things [Rom. xi. 36].²⁸

Hence in Bronzino's Holy Family (National Gallery, London) the Infant St. John holds up the strawberries to the Christ Child in emblematic tribute (fig. 5). Sometimes, as in Signorelli's earlier painting of the same subject (in the same collection), the Infant Jesus holds the strawberry in his hand, as he does also in a famous drawing by Dürer called the Madonna with a Multitude of Animals (Albertina, Vienna).²⁹ Naturally, the symbol is also found in related 'garden' subjects, such as the Agony in the Garden, where it appears growing at Christ's feet with the violet of humility; an example is the painting of this subject by Ambrogio Bergognone in the National Gallery, London. And inevitably, too, the symbol gradually was associated more and more with those who imitate Christ, those who, as faithful Christians, are Christ's spouses and bring forth his fruits. Tropologically, the garden-*Sponsa* was identified with the individual 'faithfull soule', and the fruit signified the state of grace, the possession of the image of God, or the 'frute of the Spirit'. By grace faithful souls 'conceive Christ spiritually' and by bringing him forth in their actions, reveal themselves to be 'gardens' bearing the fruits of good works.³⁰ Thus in later books of hours and similar illumi-

²⁸ Trapp, *A commentary . . . upon . . . Canticles*, p. 266, commenting on ' . . . let my welbeloued come to his garden, and eat his pleasant fruite' (Cant. iv. 16). See also Hosea xiv 8, and the Genevan note at Cant. iv. 15: 'The Church confesseth that all her glorie, & beautie commeth of Christ'.

²⁹ For reproduction of these works, see the National Gallery's *Illustrations, Italian Schools*, p. 331, and Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1948), II, fig. 135. A 'domestication' of the Virgin and Child with strawberry motive, interesting for our purposes, occurs in a Holy Family by the Master of the Magdalene Legend in the Antwerp Museum. This is an interior scene, and a pillow embroidered with the strawberry is in evidence.

³⁰ See 'The Argument' preceding *An excellent Song which was Salomons* in Genevan 1602, and the discussion in Robertson, 'Mediaeval Literary Gardens', pp. 31–32. On the spiritual conception of Christ, see the marginal note and discussion in John Hooper, *Later Writings*, ed. Rev. Charles Nevinson (Cambridge, 1852, Parker Society), p. 28: 'We must conceive Christ spiritually, and so bring him forth in our mouths and actions as occasion shall serve.'

nated texts martyrs and saints are very often accompanied by this emblematic plant.

This tradition of the symbolic strawberry must have found its way to England in various ways, but in no way more obviously than through the influence of continental artists exercised by means of imported tapestries and illuminated *horae*.³¹ The strawberry can be traced, still in significant usage (although a secularized, purely decorative employment of the motif unquestionably begins to appear around 1500),³² through French and Flemish devotional books used in England, or made for English patrons, through the illuminations and borders in *horae* by English artists under foreign influence, through the printed *horae* (which took over much of the decorative scheme of the manuscripts), and down to the derivative *A Booke of Christian Prayers*, where it still occurs as a decorative border motif.³³ That it was yet capable of

³¹ For examples of the motive in tapestries, see Heinrich Göbel, *Tapestries of the Lowlands*, tr. Robert West (New York, 1924), figs. 219, 370, 389, 393; in *horae*, see fig. 6, a miniature illumination of the Virgin as 'woman clothed with the sun' (Rev. xii. 1), with border of strawberries in apparent relief, from a *Horae ad usum Romae* written in Flanders, about 1500 (Princeton University Library, Garrett Collection ms. 57, fol. 104^v); *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages and Renaissance: An Exhibition* held at the Baltimore Museum of Art 1949 (Baltimore, 1949), Pl. LXXVIII; Abbé V. Leroquais, *Les livres d'heures: manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, 1927), Pls. 46, 47, 52, 54, 58, 59, 69, 72; in breviaries, see Leroquais, *Les bréviaires: manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques de France* (Paris, 1954), Pls. xc, xcii, xciii, xcvi, cv. Good examples less conveniently viewed are *Horae* (British Museum Add. ms. 17280), fol. 130 (scenes from life of the Virgin); *Prayers* (British Museum Egerton ms. 2125), fol. 187 (Annunciation: rose, violet, and strawberry); *Horae* (Pierpont Morgan ms. M6), fol. 37 (Madonna of Humility).

³² See for example the floral decoration of the miniature of the Dance of 'La Carolle' in the *Roman de la Rose* (British Museum Harley ms. 4425), done by the so-called Master of the Prayer Books whose painting of strawberries for the border of a Gerard David miniature of the nativity in *Horae* (Cambridge ms. Add. 4100) was quite clearly intended to be symbolically significant. A similar carry-over of the strawberry as a purely decorative motif in secular books by the artists who did prayer book illuminations can be seen in the *Motets* (British Museum Royal ms. 8.G.VII) made for Henry VIII c. 1519–33.

³³ See *New Testament* (Cambridge ms. Dd. vii.3.), made for John Colet, illuminated by a Flemish artist; see first fol. of Matt., 'Liber generationis iesu . . .' decorated with a border containing strawberries. See *Gospels* (Oxford ms. 223), made for Cardinal Wolsey in 1529, illuminated by a Flemish artist; see border of miniature of Last Supper.

For an English artist under Franco-Flemish influence, see the Sarum *Horae* (Pierpont Morgan ms. M93), borders with violets, strawberries, and periwinkles; for a more native product with such influence in the floral border, see the miniature illumination of Christ blessing in Pierpont Morgan ms. 487 (fol. 245^v), an English *horae* of about 1460.

On the printed *horae*, and the survival of this decorative motif, see Émile Mâle, *L'art religieux de la fin du Moyen Age en France* (Paris, 1908), p. 273. The unique copy of the first liturgical book printed in England [*Horae Beatae Virginis Mariae*, ad usum Sarum (Westminster, c. 1477)], has the strawberry in its borders (fols. [1]^r, and [45]^r); these are done

being used as more than decoration is apparent from some of the surviving embroidery which also drew on this pictorial tradition. The combination of roses, grapes, and strawberries in the embroidered binding of a copy of Bull's *Christian Prayers* (1570) in the British Museum is no accident: it was meant to remind the reader of the 'fruits' his devotions could with grace bring forth in him (fig. 7).³⁴ Other instances of the strawberry in English embroidery for Bibles and other religious texts manifest its symbolic use in connection with faith, hope, and various Biblical personages who brought forth the fruit of righteousness; and they thus illustrate the continuity of this significance of the motif through Shakespeare's time and well into the seventeenth century.³⁵

Shakespeare implicitly calls upon both traditions of the strawberry in investing with significance the embroidered design which he emphasizes in *Othello* by having Emilia plan to have the handkerchief's 'work ta'en out' (presumably to give a copy to Iago), and by having Cassio admire

by hand but by a much less skilled artist than the one who did the initial letters, so that the flowers can not be asserted to have more than a crude decorative effect.

For the decorative border woodcut of the strawberry in *A Booke of Christian Prayers* (London, 1590), see fol. 79^r.

³⁴ Roses and strawberries often occur together, as in the splendid leaf with initial 'O' and miniature of the Pelican in her Piety from a choir book, Spanish, sixteenth century, preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, Acquisition No. D. 287-1892. The grapes occur with the strawberry and the rose in the tapestry of The Infant Saviour Pressing Grapes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Acquisition No. 14.40.709). This is reproduced in Göbel, *Tapestries*, fig. 133.

For a more stylized symbolic and decorative use of the strawberry in connection with an English religious book, see the reproduction of the embroidered binding of a copy of *Christian Prayers* (London, 1584), in Cyril Davenport, *English Embroidered Bookbindings* (London, 1899), Pl. 23.

³⁵ See Davenport, Pl. 10 (Hope: one panel of an embroidered binding of *N.T.*, 1625 bound with *Psalmes*, 1635), and Pl. 14 (*Bible*, 1648); J. L. Nevins, *Catalogue of English Domestic Embroidery of the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*, Victoria and Albert Museum (London, 1938), Pl. xxxa (Abraham and Hagar); Pl. xxxiv (Sacrifice of Isaac; Jonah and Whale, 1613). A sixteenth-century Greek Testament and Hebrew Bible in the Durham Cathedral Library (B. III. 31) has an embroidered cover, with strawberries predominant, worked by the Lady Arabella Stuart, who was committed to the charge of the Bishop of Durham in 1611. An early seventeenth-century embroidered cover for a Bible cushion in the collection of Judge Irwin Untermyer (New York City) may be of special interest. The strawberry plant, prominently displayed in the foreground, is here associated (as frequently earlier) with the story of the falsely accused, chaste Susanna. Moreover, a snake pictured at the bottom of the design, though it is separated from the strawberry, may indicate that the other tradition of the symbolic plant—applicable to the two hypocritical elders—might also have been intended. This piece is reproduced in Remington, *English Domestic Needlework*, fig. 42.

it enough to ask his 'sweet Bianca' to copy it (III.iii.296-297; iv.189-190). And these traditions insure a symbolic value for the strawberry 'spotting' appropriate to the present decisiveness of the handkerchief and the complexities of the dramatic situation in which it appears. That the handkerchief is 'spotted with strawberries' allows it to represent Othello's distorted image of Desdemona as perilously deceitful beauty, as the adulterous and hypocritical fair woman. 'Spotted' is an equivocate, as it is, somewhat differently, later in the play at v.i.36. The handkerchief is not merely decorated with embroidered spots; it is spotted as Desdemona in his eyes is now stained, blemished with the mark of the specious and traitorous show of goodness.³⁶ Yet the hero's *sponsa* only seems to be unchaste, only appears to have lost the fruit of righteousness. Actually, that purity and justice have been lost by the Moor himself. Thus the strawberries can stand for the shows of goodness by which he is being betrayed. They ironically suggest the perfect righteousness he deludedly presumes himself to possess; they symbolize the fair appearances which have led him into such 'absurd, and wrong iudgements, and opinions', as can make 'shipwracke' of his soul; they imply the unwise, intemperate, and finally inadequate love which has allowed his vision and virtue to be corrupted. It is not mere coincidence that, according to the Elizabethan marriage service, a husband was bound to imitate by profound love of his wife the divine mercy by which the loving *Sponsus* keeps his 'bride' without 'spot'.³⁷

The strawberries in *Othello* serve as a symbolic crystallization of ironies inherent in the dramatic situation and already displayed in more direct and available ways. They represent an expendable minor enrichment of the dramatic texture, yet one illustrative of the creative abundance and intensity by which Shakespeare's sustained mastery over his materials in this play is partly manifested. While they are supportive of, rather than essential to, the central episode in which they appear, the

³⁶ See *O.E.D.*, s.v. *Spotted*: '1. Marked or decorated with spots. . . . b. Const. with (some colour, etc.). 2. Disfigured or stained with spots. . . . b. fig. Morally stained or blemished. c. Const. with (something disgraceful).'

³⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1559), in *Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer Set Forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, ed. Rev. William Keatinge Clay (Cambridge, 1847, Parker Society), p. 223 (based on Eph. v. 22 ff.): 'Ye husbands love your wives, even as Christ loved the church, and hath given himself for it, to sanctify it purging it in the fountain of water, through thy word, that he might make it unto himself a glorious congregation, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and blameless.'

coherent and precise intent with which they are used is typical of the deliberate detail of this play. It would be a mistake, moreover, to suppose the strawberries an isolated scrap of imagery. For, first, they belong with the fundamental confusions between appearance and reality at the center of the play's method and meaning. More specifically, they are connected, like Othello's reference to Desdemona as a fair 'weed' (iv.ii.67), to the conventional 'garden' imagery whose crucial locus is Iago's memorable discourse on man's body as a garden (I.iii.322 ff.). Finally, it is conceivable too that further research into the traditional imagery associated with Othello, Desdemona, and Iago may show that the profoundest meanings *in bono* of which the strawberry was yet capable would not have been inappropriate in this play. To what extent Shakespeare evoked these meanings is to be judged only when we have examined with sufficient care the possible context which a supporting symbolism, carried through the play, might have provided for it. But this must remain the subject of other and farther ranging study.³⁸

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³⁸ I should like to acknowledge the following sources for the photographs: Fig. 1, the Folger Shakespeare Library; Figs. 2 and 6, the Princeton University Library; Fig. 3, Mr. Robert Lehman (photo: Bulloz); Fig. 4, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg (the painting was destroyed by fire in 1947); Fig. 5, the National Gallery, London; Fig. 7, the British Museum (photo: John R. Freeman & Co., London).