Roses in History and Literature

A selection of famous rose poems is displayed, including Browning's "Women and Roses" in Dorothy Stemler's copy of the poet's work. The rose has been a frequent or pervasive symbol in world poetry from "la rosa sempiterna" of Dante to Eliot's "burnt roses" in "Little Gidding." Indeed, as the semiotician (and rose novelist!), Umberto Eco noted: "the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meaning that by now it hardly has any meaning left: Dante's mystic rose, and go lovely rose, the Wars of the Roses, rose thou art sick, too many rings around Rosie, a rose by any other name, a rose is a rose is a rose, the Rosicrucians" (Reflections on the Name of the Rose. London, 1983. p. 3). Eco's own best known work, the title decorations of which have been borrowed here as bookmarks, closes with the 12th century lines of Bernard of Morlay:

*stat rosa pristina nomine nomina nuda tenemus*
the rose stays fresh in its name we have only the name

"La Rosa", "Una Rosa y Milton", and "Rosas" are from Obra Poetica of Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires, 1967).

A literature database (LION) contains the texts of 1161 poems on roses. Among these are works by Blake, both Brownings, Burns, Clare, Coleridge, Cowper, Dickinson, Dunbar, Gay, Herbert, Herrick, Keats, Landor, Vachel Lindsay, James Lowell, Lytton, Melville, Thomas Moore, Morris, Nesbit, Riley, Rossetti, Shakespeare, Shelley, Southey, Spenser, Stevenson, Swinburne, Tennyson, Whittier, and Wordsworth (a longer list of these poets and their rose poems is appended to this guide to the exhibit). More recent authors who have used the rose theme include Kenneth Patchen, Dorothy Parker, Doris Lessing, and Tennessee Williams.

A painting of Elizabeth I, the "Rose Queen," has in its upper left corner an image of the Tudor Rose, which, in its stylized petals, reconciled the old rose rivalries of York (white) and Lancaster (red), a conflict dramatised in Shakespeare's Henry VI, Part 1 (reproduced from Michael Gibson's Book of the Rose (London, 1980), p.32-35.

An illumination from a Flemish manuscript (c.1500) of Le Roman de La Rose (Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung) appears in several of the donated rose books. The one shown is from The Rose (New York, 1979). The facsimile of the Kelmscott Chaucer Romaunt of the Rose shows a Burnes-Jones' illustration framed by a complex interwoven Morris rose design. (UCSC's copy: PR 1850.1958). In Aldous Huxley's Literature and Science, there is an elegant essay contrasting the rose of the scientist and the rose of the poet. (UCSC's copy: PN55.H8).

This exhibit was curated by Alan Ritch, Head of Collection Planning at McHenry Library. If you have questions or comments please write him at: aritch@cats.ucsc.edu

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