

RED AND WHITE: A ROMAN COLOR SYMBOL

Red and white as a combination of colors are frequent in Latin literature, but their symbolic import has been little discussed¹⁾. Here I shall point out a number of instances in which these two colors both jointly and individually indicate present or imminent death.

The Greek antecedents to this Roman color usage are explicitly related to violence and death. Homer's description of the wounding of Menelaus (*Il.* IV. 140-141) compares ivory and red stain with bones and blood. Aeschylus has the chorus relate Clytemnestra's dream in which a snake nursed by her draws milk and blood (*Ch.* 533). Orestes interprets this dream as foretelling his mother's violent death at his own hands (548-550). Likewise, Sophocles uses the red and white motif when describing the dead Antigone and the dying Haemon (*Ant.* 1238-1239):

καὶ φνισῶν ὄξεϊαν ἐκβάλλει ῥοήν
λενκῇ παρειᾷ φοινίον σταλάγματος.

1) While no one has suggested an overall, symbolic meaning of the red and white color combination in Latin poetry, several scholars have touched upon possible interpretations in particular works: R.D. Williams, ed., *Aeneidos Liber Quintus* (Oxford, 1960), 5.79n.; C.J. Fordyce, ed., *Catullus: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), notes on 61.9 and 187, and 64.308 and 309; Michael C.J. Putnam, "Horace *Carm.* 1.54: Love and Death", *CP*, LXV (1970), 253; and D.P. Harmon, "Nostalgia for the Age of Heroes in Catullus 64", *Latomus*, XXXII.2 (1973), 311-331. Eleanor Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), pp. 117 and 119-120, also discusses some Greek examples of the colors in a chapter on color contrasts. While Irwin concentrates on hue, H. Blümner, "Ueber die Farbenbezeichnungen bei den römischen Dichtern", *Philologus*, XLVIII (1889), 142-67 and 706-712 lists the range of objects described by color terms. Karl Büchner, "Die Elegien des Lygdamus", *Werkanalysen: Studien zur römischen Literatur*, Band VIII (Wiesbaden, 1965), 141 and 163-169 compares passages in Lygdamus and Ovid to show that they are not borrowing their red and white imagery from each other but rather from a common descriptive practice.

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In examples drawn from Latin literature it may be fairly questioned whether death is not so frequent in these works that any quality or object can be found in such a context as to be taken, rightly or wrongly, as a symbol of present or imminent death. This problem is further aggravated by the fact that a majority of Latin examples are not in an immediately adjacent position to passages containing death and also do not often contain such an obvious component as blood, unlike the Greek examples I have cited above. Fortunately, several passages indicate that the colors red and white were an intimate part of the Roman funeral ceremony. *Sanguineus*, according to Servius, is a color used in offerings to the dead²), and in the ceremony for Anchises both colors are present when Aeneas makes a double libation of wine, milk, and blood and then scatters red flowers (*Aen.* V. 75-79). Propertius juxtaposes bones and roses (I. 17.22) in an imaginative description of his own funeral.

A common method of including the two colors in poetry is through the use of appropriate flowers, especially poppies and lilies. Horace describes the lily as *breue lilium* (*Carm.* I. 36.16) while the opiate qualities of the poppy are mentioned in Ovid *Am.* II. 6.31 and Virgil *Geor.* I. 78. In a work depicting the underworld Lygdamus (*Tib.* III. 4.29-34) has lilies and apples as two of several repetitions of the red and white color contrast:

candor erat qualem praefert Latonia Luna,
et color in niueo corpore purpureus,
ut iuueni primum uirgo deducta marito
inficitur teneras ore rubente genas,
et cum contexunt amarantis alba puellae
lilia et autumnno candida mala rubent.

In the context of death lilies are found with other flowers in *Aen.* VI. 882-886 (*purpureos...flores*), XII. 68-69 (*lilia multa/alba rosa*), and Ovid *A.A.* II. 115-116 (*uiolae...rosa*) where the flowers are included in a warning about old age. Poppies are combined with other flowers in Ovid *F.* IV. 531-534. In the *Copa* are found lilies and *croceo uiolae de flore corollae/sertaque purpurea lutea...rosa* (13-14). In his Hylas poem Propertius foreshadows by the use of poppies and lilies (I. 20.37-38) the end of Hylas' companionship with Hercules and his subsequent death by drowning at the hands of the water nymphs:

2) *Auct.* on *Aen.* 3.67. Also, Statius *Silv.* II. 1.159.

et circum irriguo surgebant lilia prato
candida purpureis mixta papaveribus.

Propertius also uses red and white flowers in III. 13.28-31 in a scene describing the Golden Age, a period according to him that has passed away because of *luxuria*:

illis munus erant decussa Cydonia ramo,
et dare puniceis plena canistra rubis,
nunc uiolas tondere manu, nunc mixta referre
lilia uimineos lucida per calathos, . . .

Ovid also makes use of the red and white symbol in his treatment of the Persephone story. Shortly before she is taken to Hades, she picks flowers:

. . . quo dum Proserpina luco
ludit et aut uiolas aut candida lilia carpit . . .
(*Met.* V. 391-392)

and:

ipsa crocos tenues liliaque alba legit
(*F.* IV. 442)

Later, in an already cited passage, Ceres while searching for her daughter near Eleusis meets Celeus whose son is ill. Entering his house she picks a wild poppy and eats it (*F.* IV. 531-534). Inside she finds the child dead. Restoring him to life, she puts him into a restful sleep with a broth of milk and poppies.

While red and white flowers presage death, either color alone, usually red but occasionally white, may also bear this same function. Sometimes a flower of one color is accompanied by objects other than flowers which are of the other color, but even that is not necessary for the symbolism to be present³). The instructions of Cyrene in *Geor.* IV. 545-546 include poppies in a rite to appease the *manes* of Orpheus and Eurydice who are the cause of the nymphs' hostility towards Aristaeus:

post, ubi nona suos Aurora ostenderit ortus,
inferias Orphei Lethaea papauera mittes. . .

3) Putnam, p. 253, notes that roses are present at funerals in Prop. I. 17.21-24 and Ausonius *Epit.* 31.1-4. Also, see Prop. IV. 7.60. In Tib. I. 3.62 roses grow in the underworld, and later in the same poem after his description is finished, Tibullus ends with the following: *hoc precor, hunc illum nobis Aurora nitentem/Luciferum roseis candida portet equis* (I. 3.93-94).

In the fourth book of the *Aeneid* when Dido has secretly decided upon suicide, she tells her sister about a distant land in which there is a priestess of the Hesperides:

Hesperidum templi custos, epulasque draconi
quae dabat et sacros seruabat in arbore ramos,
spargens umida mella soporiferumque papauer.
(IV. 484-486)

Poppies appear again in the description of Euryalus' death (IX. 433-437). Ovid, telling of the destruction caused by Envy (*Met.* II. 791-794), uses the poppy as a symbol of ensuing ruin:

. . . quacumque ingreditur, florentia proterit arua
exuritque herbas et summa papauera carpit
adflatuque suo populos urbesque domosque
polluit

In *F.* IV. 661-662 poppies are associated with a night-sleep-death complex of ideas in the prophetic dream of King Numa.

Catullus uses flowers as part of a much wider red and white color symbolism in Catullus 64⁴). He describes the Fates with a double combination of these colors:

His corpus tremulum complectens undique uestis
candida purpurea talos incinxerat ora,
at roseae niueo residebant uertice uitae,
aeternumque manus carpebant rite laborem.
(307-310)

Citing Plato's description of the Fates in *Rep.* 617c as a parallel, Fordyce nonetheless finds the roses in this passage "an unlikely adornment for these aged ladies"⁵). Segal argues that flowers in general "are associated with virginal purity and also with its vulnerability"⁶). He notes the correlation in Ovid between the hyacinth and "tragic or premature death"⁷), and associates

4) See Harmon, pp. 316-318, 321, and 324-325 for the relationship of the red and white color imagery with the themes of Cat. 64.47-49, 160-166, 307-309, and 362-364.

5) Fordyce, *ad loc.* In 61.10n. Fordyce says that the color *luteum* is a bridal color. W. Kroll, ed., *Catullus* (Stuttgart, 1959), 64.309n. sees no deeper meaning in the colors.

6) Charles Paul Segal, "Landscape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", *Hermes*, Einzelsch. XXIII (1969), 23.

7) Segal, p. 33 n. 3. Hyacinths are also found at a funeral in Prop. IV. 7.33-34: *hoc etiam graue erat, nulla mercede hyacinthos/inicere et fracto busta piare cado.*

picking flowers with sexual violation⁸). Elsewhere, he draws attention to the connection between violets, poppies, and lilies and the love and death themes in the Hyacinthus story (*Met.* X. 190-191)⁹). D.P. Harmon has recognized the "ominous significance" of red and white in Catullus 64 through a study of the contextual use of those colors, but he does not suggest that they are part of a larger Roman scheme of symbols¹⁰).

Although it is not always possible to separate love from death, most of the examples cited here primarily refer to death¹¹). Interesting examples of the close relationship between the poppy and the lily as conveyors of death symbolism are the parallel stories of the betrayal of the Gabii by Tarquin's son Sextus. Livy (I. 54.5-6) chooses the poppy and Ovid (*F.* II. 70-708) the lily as the appropriate flowers for the secret message.

The presence of white flowers without red ones is much less common than that of red flowers without white. Besides the lilies in Ovid's Tarquin story (*F.* II. 705-708), they are also found in Virgil's underworld (*Aen.* VI. 708-709) and are listed as one of several flowers on the gnat's tomb in *Culex* 403.

Although the colors red and white are primarily found in flowers, some passages also have other red and white objects, such as the blood, milk, and wine offering at Anchises' funeral (*Aen.* V. 75-79). In the twelfth book Virgil uses red and white in a manner similar to that of the Greeks:

bis magna uicti pugna uix urbe tuemur
spes Italas; recalent nostro Thybrina fluenta
sanguine adhuc campique ingentes ossibus albert.
(*Aen.* XII. 34-36)

Propertius uses the colors in a description of Cynthia's still sleep:

obstipui: non illa mihi formosior umquam
uisa, neque ostrina cum fuit in tunica, . . .
(II. 29 B. 25-26)

8) Segal, p. 34 and 34 n. 65.

9) Segal, p. 35.

10) Harmon, pp. 324-325.

11) A counter-example referring primarily to love is Prop. II. 3.9-12.
nec me tam facies, quamuis sit candida, cepit
(lilia non domina sint magis alba mea;
ut Maeotica nix minio si certet Hiberno,
utque rosae puro lacte natant folia).

and:

heu quantum per se candida forma ualet!
(II. 29B. 30)

In II. 9.9-14 Propertius uses the colors in a scene depicting Briseis' faithfulness to the dead Achilles:

nec non examinem amplexens Briseis Achillem
candida uesana uerberat ora manu;
et dominum lauit maerens captiua cruentum,
propositum flauis in Simoente uadis,
foedauitque comas, et tanti corpus Achilli
maximaque in parua sustulit ossa manu; . . .

The Roman use of the colors red and white chiefly involves flowers but allows some latitude for the inclusion of other objects as well. Likewise, the colors are used in situations which are similar or proximate to death. Cynthia's sleep in Prop. II. 29B. 25-26 and 30 and Numa's in *Fasti* 661-662 are cases in point. Old age, particularly in contrast to youth, finds expression through the use of white, e.g. Prop. III. 25.13 (*albos...capillos*), III. 5.24 (*sparserit et nigras alba senecta comas*), and II. 18B. 5 (*canis aetas candesceret annis*) and 18 (*canae...comae*)¹².

Undoubtedly more passages could be adduced as examples of death symbolism often found in the colors red and white as well as in the flowers which embody them, but as a final note let a refinement which is found in Ovid's Dido poem be examined. In her letter Dido mentions a dying swan which is both a metaphor for Dido herself and a traditional bird of death:

Sic ubi fata uocant, udis abiectus in herbis
ad uada Maeandri concinit albus olor.
(*Her.* VII. 1-2)

The swan alone is sufficient to indicate Dido's forthcoming suicide and yet it is described as *albus*. This word is not, however, redundant. Near the end of the poem when Dido's decision in favor of suicide has become more conscious and her hopes for reconciliation have likewise become less probable, she prepares to stab herself:

12) Iosephus Del Ton, "De Vario Purpurae Colore apud Vergilium", *Latinitas*, I (1953), 35, writes, "*Roseus est apud Vergilium color iuuentae...*" Propertius, in III. 5.21-24, contrasts the roses of present youth with his future gray hair.

Aspicias utinam, quae sit scribentis imago:
 scribimus, et gremio Troicus ensis adest,
 perque genas lacrimae strictum labuntur in ensem,
 qui iam pro lacrimis sanguine tinctus erit.
 (183-186)

Ovid has taken the common red and white combination and has split it. By applying the white to the swan in the opening lines and introducing red in the form of blood at the end, he has neatly constructed a triple frame¹³). The first is formed by the wet grass and Dido's tears; the dying swan and Dido at the point of death make up the second; and the third, a symbol which has come a long way both in usage and variety from Homer's simple imagery, is the contrast of the external white of the swan with the formerly internal red of Dido's blood.

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13) An analogous frame is found in Prop. II. 26A. 5 and 16 where each color is found five lines in from the beginning and end of the poem.