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Mourning Weeds: Objects of Desire and Objects of Death in *María* by Jorge Isaacs

Rhi Johnson

There is so much pleasure in the memory of a first love: the prickling blush of excitement at even thinking of that special person, the furtive glances that become searingly intense when gazes actually cross, the passed notes and faded flowers that evoke the first profession of sentiment. These ephemera of love, whether in real life or in literature, are a common mediation of the metaphysical discourse of love; the particular instantiation may vary, but the relationship between specific ideations and the universal holds true. This construction of sentiment or metaphysics through physical objects is crucial to the construction of the love between Efraín and María in Jorge Isaacs's *María* (1867). Their love is built of material and sensorially experienced objects, namely flowers and hair. Enrique Anderson Imbert named these two attributes as constitutive of a "fetichismo amoroso" (102) in his 1954 discussion of the novel, but their import exceeds this mark. Indeed, these tokens are not only exchanged throughout the novel as a sexual proxy, rather, they are textually coded as love and as sex itself. What is more, the metonymic associations between these elements and the characters with whom they are correlated prefigure María's death. In this way, the inescapability of the heroine's fate is an intrinsic element of the representation of the novel's central romance. Furthermore, that very predestination, in conjunction with what Anderson Imbert calls the "líneas gruesas de la emoción" (99-100), is what makes the text so pleasurable to read. While Anderson Imbert actually suggests that these broad strokes that form the romance between María and Efraín make it superficial and less credible, he does then reaffirm that the reader's desire is to see the how and the why of María's death in the face of its imminence: "[s]abemos que María ha de morir, pero queremos saber cómo; y queremos saber lo que será de Efraín. La novela renuncia a desplazamientos por el espacio, a aventuras e intrigas, y en cambio nos dramatiza la madurez de los personajes en el tiempo" (99). In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes describes this very type of story, whose end the reader already knows, as one that leads most easily to bliss: it is the process of the arrival of an expected emotion through the anticipation of a foreseen ending that gives a work the power to create the most intense emotional and physiological responses in its readers (47-48). The very desire that is the foundation of *María*'s narrative, through its embodiment of the metaphysical in material culture, beyond its establishment of an empathetic connection with the reader, makes the romance a constant referent and memorial to the heroine's death.

The inscription of emotion and desire onto physical objects is in no way new; one need only think of Othello's handkerchief, or Dumas *filis*'s camellias and annotated copy of *Manon Lescault* (Mudford 112) to accord to their ubiquity.¹ I mention Dumas *filis* here, and *La Dame aux Camélias* in particular, because that novel and *María* have so strong a narrative parallel that their similarity could in itself be a prefiguration of the death of Isaacs's heroine: Marguerite Gautier's popularity in Colombia at the time when Isaacs was writing makes an assumed intertextual connection reasonable, even in the face of the absence of concrete proof of Isaacs's familiarity with Dumas's text. Indeed, tracing the presence and representational features of flowers in Marguerite's story and other novels could bring further nuance to the established critical tradition of considering Isaacs's novel in terms of his stylistic precursors, Chateaubriand and Saint-Pierre. However, in spite of the established assumption of *María*'s dependence on *Atala* and *Paul et Virginie*, the correlation of doomed romantic heroine and flowers is so widespread that to lay its import in Isaacs's novel at the feet of only those two works is unnecessarily reductive.²

This is particularly true as the flowers in *María* do much more than just serve as tokens of love. To take a step beyond the presence of flowers as a leitmotif that acts as a barometer for happiness in the novel (Karsen 686), or as one of the novel's "notas sinceramente vividas" (Anderson Imbert 102), it is necessary to look closely at the method and erotic weight of their exchange between the novel's lovers, and to investigate their metonymic representation of the characters themselves. This reading of the flowers will grant a new entry into the novel's love story, as the majority of María and Efraín's emotional communication and interchange is accomplished nonverbally, by the application of significance to flowers and their exchange. Indeed, the whole trajectory of their relationship can be read in this floral interplay.

This conflation of romantic intent with both the receipt and appreciation of a physical object, and its relationship with the correlation of femininity and flowers, are illuminated by Lou Charnon-Deutsch's book *Fictions of the Feminine in the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Press*. In her discussion of Romantic poets borrowing from previous traditions and ascribing "ever more sensory metaphors to female body parts," she found that the flower was the single token most commonly associated with the feminine, with roses and lilies carrying particular prevalence (24-25). This mixture of lilies and roses, a combination that threads its way all through *María*, is made yet more powerful by the symbolic weight of each: the lily as the main floral symbol of the Virgin Mary, and as such a symbol of purity (Ward 243), and the rose as a connotation or embodiment of sexual passion (311). In visual media of the period, women smelling roses appear to have "already savored the perfume of love, [while] women who hold lilies to their breasts are young girls whose innocence is emphasized" (Charnon-Deutsch 25). However, the pinnacle of floral representation of femininity is one that is both alluring and modest, full of both innocence and desire (32). It is just such a comingling of sexuality and purity that Isaacs build into the floral backdrop of *María*.³ Indeed, he often subverts the expected social or moral significances of the flowers to allow each of them multiple, often-contradictory signifiers.

Just as María's constant identification with roses and lilies demonstrates this balance, as this essay will show, a similar construction is clear in Dumas *filis*'s white camellias. While they are by far the more innocent of the two colors that his beloved courtesan wears, they

indicate her sexual availability. Further, they do so in a counterintuitive fashion, according to the Victorian language of flowers, where the white *Camellia japonica* denotes the sentiments of unpretending excellence and steadfastness, and the red-flowered form suggests loveliness (Ward 78). While Marguerite's vacillation between the two types of camellias is based on either her illness or her monthly cycle (Mudford 117), it still mixes purity and sexual experience, for the more sexually-charged red flower is demonstrative of her unavailability, and the white is representative of the lack, rather than presence, of purity, as when Marguerite delays an amorous encounter: "taking from a great bunch of red camellias a single camellia, she placed it in my buttonhole, 'because one cannot always carry out agreements the day they are signed.' 'And when shall I see you again?' I said, clasping her in my arms. 'When this camellia changes color'" (Dumas 44). While the chaste nature of María and Efraín's relationship holds them back from the level of candour that Marguerite expresses, a balancing act of this very type is the basis of a great deal of the sexual tension between them, and is based in an erotics of exchange.

The whole of Efraín and María's relationship can be charted in their dealings with flowers. From their first flirtations, their negotiation of passion and interest revolve around the blossoms that they collect and exchange. This is perhaps most obvious in a drawn-out encounter near the beginning of the novel. Accustomed to finding flowers in his room each day, left there by the object of desire, Efraín brings her lilies on his return from a visit to the mountain: "Levantó María otra vez los ojos, fijándolos en el ramo de azucenas que tenía yo en la mano izquierda, mientras que me apoyaba con la derecha en la escopeta; creí comprender que las deseaba, pero un temor indefinible [...] me impidieron ofrecérselas" (Isaacs 26). The juxtaposition of the phallic (the shotgun) and the traditionally chaste (the lilies) in this visual composition mirrors his conflicting passion and propriety, and it is in the lingering of María's gaze on the flowers that he can read reciprocated emotion.

Yet, in even this representation of the chasteness of lilies, brought to the fore by the exchange-based economy of love tokens between the two, there is another side to the relationship between flower and lover. It is not only María who is associated with flowers in this scene, but Efraín as well. The bouquet that he holds is not only a counterpoint to the phallic imagery of the shotgun, but also its mirror. What is more, the physicality of Efraín's desire in regards to the potential offered by the interest in María's eyes gives the lilies a potential to represent the masculine experience of a sexual act, an act that would be a symbolic possession and a physical marking of social ownership: "Mas me deleitaba imaginando cuán bella quedaría una de mis pequeñas azucenas sobre sus cabellos de color castaño luciente" (26). Indeed, the connotation of a sexual stand-in in the artistic representation of women and flowers often hints at the male aspect of the interaction. Where a woman is displayed *as* a flower, the sexuality displayed is hers; but where there is interactivity or an exchange wherein the flower is a stand-in for the sexual act, it holds masculine weight.

While these lilies are destined for María, the exchange of them and their emotional baggage is thwarted by a lack of reciprocation. When Efraín finds that María has not left flowers on his nightstand, as was her wont, it is a clear sign to him that she does not care for him:

Si hubiese encontrado enrollada sobre la mesa una víbora, no hubiera yo sentido emoción igual a la que me ocasionó la ausencia de las flores. ¡Su fragancia había llegado a ser algo del espíritu de María que vagaba a mi alrededor en las horas de estudio, que se mecía en las cortinas de mi lecho durante la noche! ¡Ah! ¡Conque era verdad que no me amaba! (Isaacs 26-27)

In retaliation for her apparent lack of love for him, Efraín discards the lilies that he had picked himself and spends the evening discussing the beauty of the girls he has known elsewhere. María, in turn, goes to the garden and comes back wearing one of the discarded lilies: “Efraín botó unas al huerto y nos pareció que, siendo tan raras, era lástima que se perdiesen” (28). The conflict between the lovers resolves with Efraín’s explanation of the slight that he perceived: “‘me han parecido menos bellas que las que se ponen diariamente en el florero de mi mesa.’ Comprendió ella la causa de mi resentimiento, y me lo dijo tan claramente una mirada suya, que temí que oyeran las palpitaciones de mi corazón” (28). Without even speaking directly to each other, but rather leaving the communication to metaphor, exchange, and glances, María and Efraín make it clear that a desire exists between them.

In the same vein, Efraín too is often associated with flowers, most frequently orange blossoms, but also roses. This construction of the male protagonist as a flower is unusual, and therefore merits a bit of unpacking. The key is that Efraín’s interaction and identification with flowers is not only his means of explaining his love to María, but is as much a part of his social identity as the roses and lilies are of hers. When Efraín returns to “El Paraíso,” his time is measured in baths more than any other activity (apart from lusting after María): they make him a gentleman, and they make him a flower. From the first, his outdoor bath is marked with his flowers. An orange tree grows over it, heavy with fruit and flowers—therefore ripe chastity—and the water is filled with roses: “Un frondoso y corpulento naranjo, agobiado de frutos maduros, formaba pabellón sobre el ancho estanque de canteras bruñidas: sobrenadaban en el agua muchísimas rosas; semejábase a un baño oriental, y estaba perfumado con las flores que en la mañana había recogido María” (15). These flowers in his bath, and the heavily laden orange tree above are both a part of his routine, and of his identity. They are expected of him: “Si es porque falta en el baño algo, yo puedo ponérselo ahora. —¿Rosas? —Sí; pero ya las tendrá cuando vengas” (183).

The particular flowers that are associated with Efraín create a similar tension between desire and purity as is suggested by the roses and lilies associated with María. Like her lilies, orange blossoms too are a symbol of purity. Often associated with bridal regalia, they are the “emblem of Chastity” (Miller 195). Therefore, in the conflation of roses and orange blossoms, there is the same conflation of purity and desire (though a purity of active choice, rather than a purity of innocence—in itself a more masculine construction). Though the association of these flowers with a male character breaks from their traditional association with a bride, it gives Efraín a different kind of potential than the sexuality that is granted to María, because oranges, while they are described in the text solely through their fecundity (flowers, growth, fruit), also have thorns.

These thorns are key in the construction of Efraín's metonymic identification with flowers: while none of the descriptions of the flowers, *azahares*, or trees, *naranjos*—themselves constantly referenced in terms of being heavily laden with fruit and blossoms—make reference to the orange tree's capability to prick, the thorns themselves are referenced separately: "La sala de la casita, perfectamente barrida; poyos de guadua alrededor, cubiertos de esteras de junco y pieles de oso; algunas laminas de papel iluminado representando santos, y, prendidas con espinas de naranjo a las paredes sin blanquear..." (Isaacs 24). This description of the countryman's mountain cottage allows that the sharp, penetrative spines of the orange tree can and should be implied wherever the trees are referenced. The other flower associated with Efraín, the passionate rose, also, clearly, carries thorns. Both of the flowers associated with him, then, though they can be defined by their appositional connotations of sexuality and chastity, are brought together by their ability to prick: a damaging and penetrative force whose phallic potential is never explicit but always implied. That the two lovers are both defined as roses then strengthens the bond between them, moving the correlation from one based on gender and service to one based on sexuality and eroticism. Furthermore, the creation of the expectation of the flowers in his bath throughout the novel exacerbates the masculine coding that is attributed to floral elements, which is not only the metonymic instantiation of the object of desire but also a representation of qualities intrinsic to the desiring male body.

One final relevant point in the ascription of a floral counterpart to the male protagonist is in its creation of the positive elements of his character in a social context. Carlos, Efraín's rival in María's affection, who is representative of the negative elements of modern masculinity, sees only the femininity and therefore implied weakness of the flowers with which Efraín identifies, and is contemptuous of Efraín's desire for them: "—¿Quieres que todo huelga a rosas? El hombre debe oler a chivo" (56). Efraín, however, defends his choice as a mark of masculinity, and of refinement: "—Seguramente; y en prueba de que lo crees, llevas en tus zamarros todo el almizcle de un cabrero" (56). In Efraín's auto-association with flowers, there is a masculinity that is sensitive, and which has a high emotional quotient: a masculinity defined by the ability to feel things strongly. Efraín's identification with flowers allows him a truly romantic manhood. It is then with this idea of romantic manhood as an auto-identification with the beauty of nature that we can return to Efraín's desire to see the white petals of the lilies that he has gathered—or the physical manifestation of his passion—adorn María's hair.

Efraín's physical passion for María is not only represented by flowers, but is also spent upon the flowers that she brings daily to his room. These flowers, then, are stand-ins for not only the emotional content of the relationship between the lovers, but also for the woman herself: "Cerré las puertas. Allí estaban las flores recogidas por ella para mí, las ajé con mis besos; quise aspirar de una vez todas sus aromas, buscando en ellos los de los vestidos de María; bañélas con mis lágrimas...¡Ah, los que no habéis llorado de felicidad así, llorad de desesperación [...], porque así tampoco volveréis a amar ya!" (19).

This metonymic expression of the act of love, the desire to possess and consume its object, in the simple, yet charged, act of smelling the flowers, not only cements the sexual undercurrent of the flower exchange, but also of the flowers as a concrete representation

of passion. The metaphoric conflation of sexual release with the flowers that the lovers exchange extends to the presence of an outsider in María and Efraín's private Eden. When Efraín's classmate and María's sometime suitor Carlos visits "El paraíso," and is going to stay in Efraín's room, the flowers, and what they represent, form a point of potential jealousy: "Le agradecí sobremanera la fineza de no permitir que las flores destinadas por ella para mí adornasen esa noche mi cuarto y estuviesen al alcance de otro" (Isaacs 83). Efraín's desire to keep María's flowers all to himself is, because of the conflation of the gift of flowers with sexual expression, representative of his deeper desire to keep her sexual favors from being granted to anyone else.

The flowers of "El paraíso," particularly in terms of the space in which they grow, form a physical manifestation of the lovers' commitment as well as their passion. The house's garden can be explored, beyond its biblical allusion, in terms of the similar space that her doomed lover builds for Carlota in Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab* (1841). The garden there is both a pure expression of love, and a space that is demarcated solely for pleasure:

No había en Puerto Príncipe en la época de nuestra historia, grande afición a los jardines. [...] Sin embargo, Sab, que sabía cuánto amaba las flores su joven señora, había cultivado vecino a la casa de Bellavista un pequeño y gracioso jardín hacia el cual se dirigió la doncella, luego que dio de comer a sus aves favoritas. [...] Sab no había consultado sino sus caprichos al formarle. (77)

The fact that the garden is María's domain in *María*, as opposed to a male construction like the one that Sab builds, is key in her sexual and romantic agency, particularly in light of her impassioned subservience to the will and whim of her love. The garden is the one place where she reigns and initiates discourse, though she does so with the goal of bringing him pleasure.

This special empowerment of the female protagonist is also a subversion of the power structure in an equally central garden in *Paul et Virginie*. In that novel, the "most agreeable spot" is "Virginia's Rest," where "when Paul saw that this place was a favourite of hers, he brought to it the nests of every sort of bird from the neighboring forest" (63). While this special place is not demarcated by flowers, the rest of the cultivated space in that work is so defined by fruit and flowers that the birds' songs form more of a focus on *capricho*, or pleasure, than would more blooms. It is this sort of pleasure-space, then, and one loaded with sexually charged memories, where María establishes the floral stand-ins for the longevity and steadfastness of their love, and the material instantiation of their relationship. Just before Efraín leaves for London she asserts: "¿Ves este rosál recién sembrado? Si me olvidas, no florecerá; pero si sigues siendo como eres, dará las más lindas rosas, y se las tengo prometidas a la Virgen con tal de que me haga conocer por él si eres bueno siempre" (Isaacs 179). The gifting of roses to the Virgin Mary, rather than the lilies more commonly associated with her, beyond inverting the expected significance of the flowers, emphasizes the sexuality inherent in the lovers' commitment, and hints at a promise of sexual, as well as emotional, fealty. María's lilies, with their mixture of signifiers that balance them between sex and innocence, will carry forward too, as love

tokens that have the power to communicate emotion over distance through their physical presence: “—Pues las azucenas servirán para una cosa parecida. —A ver. —¿Te gustará encontrar en cada carta mía que recibas, un pedacito de las azucenas que dé? —¡Ah!, sí. —Eso será como decirte muchas cosas que algunas veces no deben escribirse y que otras me costaría mucho trabajo expresar bien” (Isaacs 180). This amplification of the expressive potential of the garden’s flowers allows the lovers to maintain their predominantly nonverbal communication even in Efraín’s absence and, by so doing, establishes a corporality in their communication that allows for their passion to grow, rather than diminish, with distance. This continued passion, unfortunately, kills María. Yet the final functionality of the roses as a concrete representation of love and commitment comes not with the pieces that she sends to him, but after her death.⁴

Indeed, the final flowers to adorn Isaacs’s heroine are a culmination of their metonymic eroticized morbidity: the final garland that, as Juliet’s and Ophelia’s, decorates her tomb and not her bridal bed, the ‘wedding crown’ that Efraín lays at the feet of her sepulcher, is a “corona de rosas y azucenas” (258). Not only is María adorned in death by the same flowers as she identified with in life, but their presence in the mourning of her death suggests that they were destined for that macabre purpose throughout the novel. To transition from reading the flower as an expression of love (or lust) to a marker of a grave and a remembrance of death, we can turn once again to *María*’s antecedents.

In *Atala* too there is a marriage bed/deathbed flower: “A faded magnolia blossom was in her hair, that very bloom which I had laid on the maiden’s bed to bring fertility. Her lips, like a rosebud picked the day before yesterday, smiled languorously” (67). We can turn too to Marguerite Gautier: “An iron fence marked the limits of the ground purchased, and the earth was covered with white camellias. [. . .] Whenever a camellia fades, I [the gardener at the cemetery] have orders to replace it” (Dumas 19). Not only were these flowers, while innocent in appearance, representative of sexual availability, they also, even in their demonstration of the impermanence of life, remain a marker for the receipt of male sexual interest: “I gave one more look at the grave covered with flowers, half longing to penetrate the depths of the earth” (19). In *La Dame aux Camélias*, like in *María*, the heroine’s death is foretold, but due to different contortions of the frame story in Dumas *filis*’s novel, his occurs at the beginning, rather than the end of the novel. However, though Isaacs does not narrate María’s death itself until the climax of the novel, its foretelling is enough to suggest that the flowers throughout the novel are a memorial or a dirge, piling up on her grave every time that they appear.

Indeed, there does not even need to be a direct reference to death for the metonymic association of women and flowers to invoke mourning. Like the flower blooming for just a day, Charnon-Deutsch describes woman as an object to be collected and admired, but not kept and enjoyed. The romantic feminine idol was born to love but is by definition too fragile to survive, and is therefore also defined by a necessary death (25). Perhaps the (most) archetypal character in Spain’s Romanticism, Espronceda’s heroine Elvira, has the same connotation of immanence applied though reference to a floral counterpoint:

Murió de amor la desdichada Elvira,
Cándida rosa que agostó el dolor,

Suave aroma que el viajero aspira
Y en sus alas el aura arrebató. (343-46)

There is no escaping the correlation between floral metonymy and death, yet the value of this floral metaphor is larger than just an inescapable force. In *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey suggest that to be relatable, memory and death must be coded in metaphor because they require mediation (5). Indeed, they mention flowers as particularly effective: [the] “resilience of flowers as expressive materials of memory may be explained paradoxically by their fragility,” as well as their rapid decay upon reaching the peak of their desirability” (5). In this way, the doubled coding of the flowers in Isaacs’s novel allows them to mean both sex and death at the same time. In this way, *María’s* slight frame story, which is how, as Anderson Imbert noted, the reader enters the text with the knowledge of *María’s* doom, creates the novel itself as an effigy to her. Just like the book itself, the material culture within its pages creates a narrative of mourning from the start. As Hallam and Hockey note, the objects associated with the dead both bring them back to the living in memory, and also form a direct tie to the loss of the remembered person (2). Therefore, the doubled cultural connotations of flowers and hair as tokens of both love and mourning help to make their instantiation in the novel into such powerful metonymic representations of metaphysical universals.

Moreover, the roses laid on *María’s* grave are not the first to hint directly to a connection with death. Even the chronic illness that brings *María* to her grave, perhaps the fault of her Jewish mother or an iteration of hysteria, as has been suggested by Doris Sommer in “El Mal de *María*,”—but either way described as an excess of sensitivity and passion—has a direct textual connection to flowers in the fragility of the roses that are textual correspondents of both her self and her passions, as her illness is recorded in the petals of the flowers that stand in for her in *Efraín’s* room: “Mi cuarto estaba frío; las rosas de mi ventana temblaban como si se temiesen abandonadas a los rigores del viento de invierno; el florero contenía ya marchitos y desmayados los lirios que por la mañana había colocado en él *María*” (Isaacs 34). These dead flowers are surrounded by the sublime pathetic fallacy of a thunderstorm, and form the visual backdrop for the late night unwelcome news: “*María* sigue mal” (34). Like the dead flowers, *María’s* brief moment in the sun is fragile at its best. Her identification with the flowers suggests her impending death. Even the flowers that do not have a funereal air are noteworthy in their extreme and frequently remarked impermanence: the flowers that *María* brings to *Efraín* must be replaced *every day*, at the risk of fading from beauty. *María’s* crown of roses and lilies, then, are not the only flowers that mark her death. In fact, every bloom that is given in the novel is both an act of passion, and a flower laid on her grave.

Before the sickness takes hold and *María’s* youth withers, while she and *Efraín* express their commitment to each other in the garden, her unbraided, freely flowing hair tangles itself in the roses as she articulates the correspondence between metaphysical love and the tangible objects that surround them. While the flowers, by being imbued with the metaphysical charge of an emotional relic, are capable of both expressing more than words can, and also of leaving a personal and permanent record of emotional exchanges, the other tactile element of this exchange is equally inscribed as an instantiation of their

love and their passion. This other element is not the roses themselves, but the dark hair that tangles with the flowers, that Efraín so wished to see holding a spray of his lilies.⁵ With María on her knees,

Su cabellera rodaba destrenzada hasta el suelo, y el viento hacía que algunos de sus bucles tocaran las blancas mosquetas de un rosal inmediato. [...] Al tratar de ponerse en pie, asida de la mano que yo le ofrecí, volvió a caer arrodillada, porque la detenían algunos cabellos enredados en las ramas del rosal: los separamos, y al sacudir ella la cabeza para arreglar la cabellera, sus miradas tenían una fascinación casi nueva. (Isaacs 180)

This image of María's unbraided, almost wild, hair is a marker of love and passion beyond its almost living entanglement with the roses that are the physical product of her love. Hair, and loose hair especially, constitutes in itself a sexual exhibition. Furthermore, as Elisabeth Gitter examines in her article on the power of hair in the Victorian literary imagination, the volume and wildness of hair displayed correlates to the openness of the sexual invitation that it suggests (938). Efraín's near-constant references to María's hair, then, beyond just being synecdochic of her person in descriptions, is a constant reference to his perception of her sexual availability. The mixture of loose hair and the flowers that are a marker of sexual desire causes an intensification of both his desire and hers. Though neither says anything aloud when the knotting of flowers, thorns, and hair controls her movement, the new intensity in María's gaze—the place where her sexual agency is most commonly read in her body—demonstrates that it is not only Efraín who finds pleasure in seeing her on her knees before him.

This hair, that seems to have a life of its own, is so omnipresent in Efraín's descriptions of María, so deeply coded as the identifier of her beauty, that it merits here a visual exploration. Perhaps more than in any other movement, the symbolically loaded conception of female beauty that focuses on a sexualized innocence of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood can most readily be employed as a point of comparison with Isaacs's María. Nor is this comparison outside the realm of influence, for the links between the brotherhood and English Romanticism are well established, allowing their validity in discussion of Isaacs as well. Even if he had not seen the paintings themselves, he knew their spirit.⁶ Like Isaacs, the works of such artists as Hunt, Millais, and Rossetti are characterized as expressing an aesthetic that is both symbolic and expressive of heightened feeling and significance (Marsh 14). Further, the dichotomy between "sexuality and sanctity" is one of the key preoccupations of the movement (9). The visual representation of this tension, so similar to that which the flowers demonstrate in Isaacs's lovers is amply demonstrated by John Everett Millais's 1851 painting "The Bridesmaid" (See fig. 1).



Figure 1: Millais, John Everett. “The Bridesmaid.” 1851.
Oil on panel. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.

This painting is a clear example of the dynamics created by a composition based in the symbolisms of both innocence and experience. The vesture and posture of the painting’s subject speak of her modesty. Her gesture towards the ring that she holds indicates the nuptial scene. The whiteness of the blossoms pinned to her breast and the tightly tied ribbon binding them both intimate matrimony and speak to her untouched chastity. And yet, her slightly parted lips, and her gaze, in its quest for reciprocity, are far from chaste. Adding to that the cascading gold of her hair, of such quantity that it dwarfs her figure, and in a level of undress that only a husband would ever see, makes even the chaste images begin to acquire shades of gray. The finger gesturing to the ring edges toward penetrating it, and the spray of flowers, pointing to her face, acquire, along with the silver vessel before her, and indeed the portion of her body not masked by her mane, a phallic connotation. The flow of hair in this painting transforms it from a vision of piety to a promise of carnal delight, and it is in this way that María’s hair acts for Efraín.

Even more than Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti fetishized hair. While he considered all of his women as representations of the soul in its different forms, they are, in their own forms, not so distinct. As John Hunt notes, they all have “the same heavily sensual lips, the massive hair... only the eyes are different” (180). This entrusting to the eyes the weight of conversation is, like the sexualization of the hair, a clear trait of Isaacs’s novel, as we have seen. Indeed, Rossetti would shift the appearance of models who did not meet his specific type to make them more homogenous with his ideal. Jan Marsh, in her book on the women depicted by the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, goes so far as to say that Rossetti’s process of falling in love can be clearly seen in an increasing focus on the hair of the object of his ideal (51). Where his work “Boca Baciata” (1859) does not betray so much of an emphasis on the sexual potency of innocence, it does form a second perfect comparison to Isaacs’s heroine (See fig. 2). The title of the painting, offering up the erotic availability of the painting’s subject, is not disappointed by the image’s symbolic weight. The subject’s kissable lips, indeed, take second place to her flowing, ensnaring curls,

which are pinned back, but escape their bonds to brush against and tangle with the skin of her hands. That hair is, furthermore, decorated with passion's rose, a flower that is echoed by the garden behind her and the single bloom clutched in her hand.⁷ The apple in the foreground of the painting tempts the viewer to linger on the open jacket that reveals only a single fold of white fabric: a handkerchief, a piece of dress, or a flag of surrender. Again, in the combination of flowers and hair, there is an inscription of passion onto the subject of the painting, just as the same aspects are used to construct María's character.



Figure 2: Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "Boca Baciata." 1859.
Oil on panel. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

While María's lips are never kissed, the closest to sexual contact that Isaacs's lovers attain reinforces the sexual coding of María's hair. Just before he leaves her to go to London, Efraín kisses María's hair: "Mientras enjugaba yo sus últimas lágrimas, besaban por primera vez mis labios las ondas de cabellos que le orlaban la frente para perderse después en las hermosas trenzas que se enrollaban sobre mis rodillas" (Isaacs 210). The syntactical construction of this sentence creates the promise of a first kiss before establishing its object as other than María's lips. By doing so, it builds the expectation that the lovers will finally come together physically, and puts all of that emotional weight onto the brush of his lips against her hair, and her hair against his knees. In addition, through the active construction of the verb describing the motion of her braids, the same verb used previously to describe the snake that Efraín imagines entering his paradise in the place of the flowers that he desired, María's desire is made manifest in the scene and carries the same twining, lascivious weight as the curls of the subject of "Boca Baciata."

The narrative weight of this kiss is further augmented by its fulfillment of a desire that is assumed impossible when María takes ill earlier in the novel. When María's illness threatens her with death, and the lovers finalize their engagement, Efraín's response to his love's potentially mortal illness is focused on her hair: "Ya no podría yo volver a oír la aquellas confidencias hechas con voz conmovida; mis labios no podrían tocar ni siquiera

al extremo de una de sus trenzas. Mía o de la muerte” (42). While Efraín does finally feel her braids beneath his lips, the implied dichotomy in this lament is also realized: he never possesses her in the way that such an ultimatum suggests, but rather loses all of her but the materiality that is the metaphoric construction of their relationship.

Just as the flowers in the novel are both metonymic for the characters, allowing for the physical expression of passion, and used as tokens in an emotional economy, so too is hair used as a token of love, turning emotion into a commodity. Indeed, the exchange of locks of hair as a love token is one of the main stages of the development of the romance:

Con una rápida mirada me mostró entre los cabellos de Juan el bucle de los que me tenía prometidos; ya me apresuraba yo a tomarlos, cuando ella, reteniéndolos, me dijo:
 —¿Y para mí?... tal vez sea malo exigírtelo.
 —¿Los míos? —le pregunté. Significóme que sí, agregando:
 —¿No quedarán bien en el mismo guardapelo en que tengo los de mi madre? (116)

This exchange of hair, beyond creating a commitment in the physical world, as opposed to the more metaphoric world of the flowers, begins to move the textual import of hair away from solely a sexual connotation, and towards a symbolic effigy or memorial of a love (not yet) lost. While it was not uncommon to layer or mix the hair of multiple generations in a piece of jewelry, and while keeping the hair of a loved one is an easy way to evoke the wholeness of that person in their absence, the habit of keeping hair, and particularly of creating jewelry from it, was predominantly a mourning ritual (Hallam and Hockey 139-40). In the eighteenth century, hair jewelry and hair mementos were widely popular (Holm 139). As Christiane Holm discusses in her article “Sentimental Cuts,” the perfection of hair in the context of a relic lies in the new status that it is granted by the necessary act of cutting it off of a body, which leaves it a static and unchanging representation of a constantly changing organism: “The cut edge of the hair in the material medium of remembrance marks the act of remembrance as the very moment when its natural status was transformed into a cultural status, and when the present presence of the body is anticipated as a future absence” (140). Therefore, the exchange of hair is both a concrete act of romance, but also the marking of a temporal referent for mourning.

This mixing of the two functions of hair tokens is clear in this 1818 English poem “The Lock of Hair,” published under the initials JR:

When night’s sweet sable mantle o’er Nature is cast,
 I heed not the sort, I regard not the blast,
 To her grave as I nightly repair:
 With silent affection I gaze on the urn,
 Which speaks of those pleasures that ne’er will return,
 And kiss the sweet lock of her hair.
 A memento of Friendship that claims the fond tear,
 A memento of her whom I ever hold dear. (JR 1-8)

The mention of the urn in this poem, a common placeholder for the less hygienic skeleton, as the object of vision only increases the potency of the lock of the beloved's hair, because there is no other relic nor image of her present in the scene. Furthermore, it illustrates the connection between the hair token as a social and socio-sexual entity, and death.

The use of hair as this indicator of both passion and loss is perhaps yet more powerful than the use of flowers, as no objects are more imbued with metaphysical weight, with "the special 'thingness' that the material culturalist studies" (Lutz 5) than the relic, that is an object that is either directly of the body as in bone, teeth, hair (that being a primary relic), or has been directly influenced and impacted by the effluvia of the body: ie. blood, sweat, tears (that being a secondary relic), or so argues Deborah Lutz in *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Relics function as "memory forms that were simultaneously persons and things" (Hallam and Hockey 134), where a material object sustains the memory of its origin, allowing the survivor of a loss to use the relic as a surrogate for a missing or dead person (26).

This mediation of memory through the relic that is the hair of the beloved is apparent in a piece in Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* dedicated to "La Chevelure" or the tresses of the beloved, that allows hair the power to "wake sleeping memories, waft them through the air" (3), and that, while the poem suggests a present day sexual encounter, acknowledges the commemorative, post-mortem function of hair as a memory creator:

Forever! Let me strew that fleece, in turn—
That mane! — with ruby, pearl, and sapphire fine!
Then never will you scoff my passion, spurn
My love! You, dream-oasis? You, the urn
Whence I quaff deep the draughts of memory's wine? (31-35)

Again, we have the funerary reference to the urn, and the location of this reference to memory's passion, at the end of a poem of sexual metaphors for struggle, suggests that *only* in death and memory can the poetic voice expect complete acquiescence to his desires.

From the first pages of *María*, there is a clear recognition of the funereal cast of the exchange, or taking of hair, and the power of the lock of hair as a relic:

En la noche de la víspera de mi viaje [...] entré en mi cuarto una de mis hermanas, y sin decirme una sola palabra cariñosa, porque los sollozos le embargaban la voz, cortó de mi cabeza unos cabellos. [...] Esos cabellos quitados de una cabeza infantil, esa precaución del amor contra la muerte delante de tanta vida, hicieron que durante mi sueño vagase mi alma por todos aquellos sitios donde yo había pasado, sin comprenderlo, las horas más felices de mi existencia. (Isaacs 9)

This early reference to the morbid aspect of the habit of keeping the hair of loved ones, like the presupposition of María's death that turns every flower into one on her grave,

especially when coupled with María's adding of Efraín's hair to her dead mother's, makes all of the talk of hair, even the overtly sexual references where it is still attached to her, into the evocation of a relic. The hair that they exchange, then, is both sex and death.

After María dies, this relic-power in the hair only increases. It forms a bridge between the deceased and the living; it instantiates mourning in a living present, and bridges the time between María's death and Efraín's return to her, as objects that belonged to a lost loved one "serve as a material bridge to a lost body" (Tanner 177). The final interaction with María's hair, like the kiss where it rolled itself across his knee, is dependent on this ability to bridge time, but also the potential that the relic has to continue the social (and in this case sexual) life of a person beyond the point of their death, through interaction with material objects that are extensions of the body, and by extension of the body's social identity (Hallam and Hockey 43). After María's death, her hair performs in just such a way, allowing the lovers one final connection. Before she dies, María entrusts Efraín's sister with delivering to him her dying bequest: her braids. María's hair, this intense primary relic, waits for Efraín couched in a shrine to her, and his approach to it occurs in three steps, in each of which, the restant ephemera of her life, coded in terms of their sensorial impact, evoke a life that no longer exists.

The first stage, the room where the braids lie, visually indicates her death: "El crucifijo aún sobre la mesa, las flores marchitas sobre su peana; el lecho donde había muerto, desmantelado ya; teñidas todavía algunas copas con la últimas pociones que le habían dado" (Isaacs 225). The partial deconstruction of the tableau of her death does not weaken the immediacy of presence that is suggested by the objects that remain. Indeed, the space, in this visual and tactile representation of her life, as well as olfactory reminiscences, suggests that her presence lingers: "Algo de sus perfumes había allí. Velando las últimas prendas de su amor, su espíritu debía de estarme esperando" (255). Both the importance of scent and the sense of presence increase when Efraín comes to the closet that holds the box holding her hair: "todos los aromas de los días de nuestro amor se exhalaban combinados de [el armario]. Mis manos y mis labios palpaban aquellos vestidos tan conocidos para mí" (255). This second step in drawing closer to the dead gives the evocation not only of María's spirit, but breath—breath that conjures all of the memories of their love. The final reveal creates a reciprocation of perception, through the reliquary charge of the braids: "Un grito se escapó de mi pecho, y una sombra me cubrió los ojos al desenrollarse entre mis manos aquellas trenzas que parecían sensibles a mis besos" (255). This repetition of the same, sexually charged verb "desenrollarse," by the reflexive construction that offers agency and the expression of will to the braids, brings the reader back to the other moment when Efraín kissed María's hair. Within the world of the novel, the weight and tangible presence of the braids perform the same function for Efraín.

Just as Baudelaire is carried into a sexual fantasy by the tresses of his beloved, Efraín is transported by this contact with the almost living braids of his dead love. However, his fantasy is not a sexual one: "Soñé que María era ya mi esposa; este castísimo delirio había sido y debía continuar siendo el único deleite de mi alma" (256). The focus on the chasteness of their relationship in this description is an echo of one of Efraín's first descriptions of her, one that also built her as a flower and focused on her hair:

Nunca las auroras de julio en el Cauca fueron tan bellas como María cuando se me presentó al día siguiente, momentos después de salir del baño, la cabellera de carey sombreado suelta y a medio rizar, las mejillas de color de rosa suavemente desvanecido, pero en algunos momentos avivado por el rubor; y jugando en sus labios cariñosos aquella sonrisa castísima que revela en las mujeres como María una felicidad que no les es posible ocultar. (29)

The correlation between chastity and happiness, evoked in Efraín's vision after María's death, ties the novel's erotic frustration to its well-explored political message. When he dreams of them as married, even in the absence of any possibility of the fruition of that dream, the physical and sexual aspect of his desired future is thwarted: "[M]enos temerosa ya de mi engaño, dejóme aspirar un momento su aliento tibio y fragante; pero entonces esperé inútilmente que oprimiera mis labios con los suyos" (256). Though this vision is the closest to fruition that the relationship ever comes, apart perhaps from when he kisses her hair, even in fantasy, the relationship maintains a chasteness that preserves the erotic tension of their mortal frustration. This keeps the text from being a text of desire, as Barthes would call it (58), and allows the reader's pleasure to continue even in the face of death because the release and catharsis of fruition is never achieved.

Not only are Efraín's desires thwarted even in this fantasy, the coldness of reality is quick to draw him back from the dream:

Un grito, grito mío, interrumpió aquel sueño; la realidad lo turbaba celosa, como si aquel instante hubiese sido un siglo de dicha. La lámpara se había consumido: por la ventana penetraba el viento frío de la madrugada; mis manos estaban yertas y oprimían aquellas trenzas, único despojo de su belleza, única verdad de mi sueño. (Isaacs 257)

In this awakening, reality takes on the linguistic trappings of the lover, penetrating the body of the house as the flame of passion consumes itself. Such a sensual description of the rupture of the connection between the living and the dead here, leaving only the physical manifestation of a lost passion, is the final instantiation of the conflation of sex and death in the construction of love and sexuality in the novel. The placement of this imagined marital interlude after the death of the heroine echoes, and is reinforced by, the novel's construction as a foreshadowed eulogy. As the entirety of the novel's romance is coded in the ephemera of mourning, Efraín's vision becomes a post mortem attempt at a realization of his passion.

Isaacs's creation of a concrete metaphysics for a love never consummated, in the flower that may be picked at will, and the braids that evoke a perfected version of the lost one, add to the morbidity of the leitmotif of stillness and passivity in María's character. Her characterization becomes a eulogy in viva: a long drawn out death for a beautiful corpse. In a longer format, this essay could enter into the aesthetics of morbidity that are applied to María—stillness, pallor, silence—but the novel's construction of love as an effigy through material culture leads just as strongly to the possibility of a very dark undercurrent in even the most syrupy parts of what is considered merely a sentimental

romance. The construction of character in the concrete representations of passion and mourning, the heroine's illness, and the post-mortem retrospective format that the novel carries combine to make María *always* a corpse, from the very start. If that is so, as this essay has striven to show, then the desire that traces the narrative of the novel, culminating with a post-mortem fantasy of intimacy, conjures up an ethos of necrophilia that gives a distinctly dark cast to the narrative. That the novel's love is built on effigies of a love already lost and that its erotic tension is carried forward by this morbid underpinning, belies a reading of the novel as strictly an exploration of sentimentality, and suggests an overlooked gothic thread in Isaacs's literary milieu.

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Notes

- ¹ The other clear symbol of a prefigured death in María is the black bird that haunts the text. However, as its metaphysical weight falls outside of the construction and course of the novel's primary romance, it will not enter into this essay. For some discussion of this element, see Sommer 443, and Anderson Imbert 98.
- ² For discussion of the potential relationship between *María*, *Atala*, and *Paul et Virginie*, see Karsen and Vinciguerra.
- ³ For a discussion that bases this contradiction between purity and sensuality in terms of María's mixed religious background, see Sommer.
- ⁴ These very roses that María says will bloom at the level of their commitment and constancy are last seen not withered and lifeless as their mistress, but sheltering a new love, and a new life. Tránsito and Braulio, the young couple for whom María and Efraín act as godparents, reap the rewards of the cultivation of these roses. They are the ones who will carry on in the environs of "El paraíso," and who attain the domestic happiness that is denied to Efraín and María. While this continued life in the flowers is key in an analysis of the novel in terms of its social message, it falls outside the scope of this essay.
- ⁵ I use the descriptor "dark" here, as María's hair is first described in the novel as "castaño oscuro" (12). However, the color varies substantially throughout the piece. Of the more than 40 descriptions of her hair, two use "castaño oscuro" (12, 208), one "castaño claro" (21), one "castaño luciente" (26), and one described its color as "carey" (29). The others focus on abundance, style, or interactivity rather than color.
- ⁶ For an exploration of this dialogue between pre-Raphaelite painters and British Romantic authors as influential in the construction of female aesthetics of death in the context of *fin-de-siècle* Latin American poetry, see Peluffo.
- ⁷ For another metaphoric representation of Rossetti's woman as flower, and therefore flower as woman, see "Monna Rosa" (1862: Pencil. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), where the model's spilling curls form the petals that frame her face, mirroring the single rose that she holds.

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