

Article title: *The Horror of the Woman Flower: Fetish and Florals in the Work of Richard Quinn*

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Abstract

Since the start of his career, British fashion designer Richard Quinn has juxtaposed highly fetishistic imagery with bourgeois floral prints in his runway presentations. The interplay of Quinn's masks, latex and whips with his choice of bold and bright florals is informed by the various and complex symbolic associations with flowers, which communicates both a delicate femininity and sexual danger. At the core of this is the idea of the hybridized image of the woman-as-flower, who embodies a beguiling combination of exaggerated feminine beauty and uncanny horror. To contextualize why Quinn's fetish-chic fashion is so impactful, this article explores the fashionable representations of the 'woman-flower' through history and how Quinn co-opts imagery of BDSM and fetishwear to evoke the complex associations found within floral symbolism, its links to eroticism and sexuality, and how this is enacted on the runway within the discourses of plant horror and the monstrous-feminine.

Keywords

Fashion, fetish, masks, latex, floral symbolism, plant horror

Introduction

A woman wearing a floral ballgown and a gimp-mask is a bizarre spectacle. It is an image that juxtaposes hyper-femininity with one of the most extreme examples of fetish iconography. Yet, this has become the signature aesthetic of British fashion designer Richard Quinn, who has combined 'kinky' fetishwear and traditional floral prints in every one of his collections since his debut in 2016. Quinn routinely uses some of the most recognisable elements of fetishwear in his designs, creating a striking contrast between the familiar, vintage-inspired floral prints of the dresses in his collection, and the masked, dominatrix-like women who wear them down the runway. His Autumn/Winter 2021 collection, informally referred to by the designer as his 'BDSM Floral Fetish Fantasy' (Quinn 2021), was arguably the clearest example of this to date, featuring leather-clad catwomen wielding whips, latex-masked ballerinas, models in bondage harnesses and evening dresses peering out of neon-lit shop windows, and a kaleidoscopic array of voluminous rose-printed gowns and floral face coverings. But more than just a shocking statement on the runway, Quinn's use of BDSM imagery also contributes to how the traditional florals that adorn his designs can be viewed and interpreted. What should be a multifaceted statement of female submissiveness – hooded, gagged and bound in both bondage gear and the voluminous skirts of fairy-tale fashion – instead is subverted, utilizing the image of fetish to communicate the transgressive sexual power at the centre of floral-feminine imagery. By introducing latex, bondage garments and masks alongside florals, Quinn uses fetishwear as a tactic to heighten the erotic and transgressive impact of his runways.

In an interview about his first collection, Quinn commented that his aim in covering his models entirely with rose-printed fabric was to create a woman that could be perceived as 'something otherworldly and dark, quite unhinged' (Little 2016). Western fashion history is full of female-floral representations, but when a model is entirely encased in such a print, flowers blooming where her face should be, or wearing a head-to-toe latex bodysuit beneath a demure floral ballgown to create the illusion of an oil-slick second skin beneath

the folds of her skirt, this figure becomes something provocative and taboo. This is an image that merges elements of BDSM culture and Western floral iconography to create new hybrid forms of fetish-fashion. As Quinn's gimp masks are often constructed entirely from floral-printed fabric, creating the sense of a chimeric woman with floral skin and no human features, this is also an idea informed by themes of horror and the monstrous-feminine. The ambivalent and borderless nature of plants is enough to render them a site of horror generally, but the dual plant-human nature of the woman-flower is permeated by Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject (1984), lending the hybrid-floral body an uncanny monstrosity. By crafting a facsimile of the dominatrix costume from conventional floral prints, Quinn uses a culturally constructed understanding of fetish and BDSM to bring the more sinister and sexualized symbolism associated with flowers to the runway.

Focussing on Quinn's combination of florals and fetishwear, this essay will discuss how fashion uses and exploits the visual codes of fetishism to add layers of danger, eroticism and power to otherwise conventional sartorial imagery. To examine the interplay of this imagery, the following sections will explore the construction of the 'woman-flower' in Western fashion history, how the visual culture of the nineteenth century initially corrupted the sensuality of flowers, and how the filmic and literary subgenre of plant horror, which draws on the sense of Western civilization's vulnerability to nature, helps elevate the catwalk image of a latex-clad dominatrix in a floral gown to one of a fantastical hybrid-feminine monster presenting an abject and erotic threat.

The Invention of the Woman-Flower

Although flowers have been important to Western fashion since antiquity, the 'woman-flower' was a Victorian-era creation. With the import and cultivation of exotic blooms from around the world and hothouses that allowed flowers to be accessible all the year round, flowers took on a mounting prominence in nineteenth century upper and middle-class fashions in Europe and North America. Floral decoration and scents became increasingly popular, and the flower garden moved indoors to embellish dinner tables, fill bouquets, and garland items of dress. Fresh cut flowers were generally preferred, but the manufacture of artificial blooms increased exponentially to fulfil demand; by the 1890s, Paris alone had over 24,000 artificial flower-makers (De la Haye 2020). There were many fashionable ways to wear flowers; a well-dressed woman would pin large bunches of blooms to her bodice or skirt, and might complete the ensemble by using yet more flowers as a corsage or to ornament her hair. By 1896, *Vogue* was reporting that flowers could be seen decorating nearly every item of women's dress, and it was acceptable to wear them at any time of day, whether on 'evening dresses [...] street costumes, driving toilettes, riding habits, hunting suits, morning gowns, tea robes [...] even underwear' (1896: 248). From the beginning of the nineteenth century, as flowers became more abundant, floral imagery also began to be explicitly gendered feminine. Flowers quickly became associated with a stereotypical ideal of femininity, defined by beauty, innocence, sentimentality and domesticity.

Etiquette books from the 1840s onwards instructed women to hold up the image of the delicate and graceful flower as something to aspire towards (De la Haye 2020). Women were directed not just to wear flowers and use floral perfumes, but also to behave, move and embody the ideals of flowers. Flowers were silent, gentle, passive and decorative, and were thereby symbolically associated with a respectable and conservative womanhood. As Annette Stott notes in her study of floral depictions of femininity in Western painting, the fashionable dress of the time assisted in personifying these edicts, as 'corsets helped ensure erect posture, and long, voluminous skirts restricted movement to graceful swaying motions, like hollyhock plants waving in the breeze' (1992:72). The shape of the corsets and long billowing skirts were also suggestive of a delicate upside-down bloom emerging from a stem, and this image appeared frequently in artistic and fashionable representations of women from the period, to the point where the women in these paintings began to mutate into human-flower hybrids, sometimes called *femme-fleurs*. French weekly magazine *La Vie Parisienne* frequently published images that portrayed women as anthropomorphic flowers, including a lavishly illustrated centrefold from March 1883 entitled 'Bouquet de femmes', where women emerged languidly from the centres of flowers, dressed only in their petals (Desmarais 2018: 160), and an 1879 *Punch* cartoon satirized fashionable gowns from the House of Worth by depicting a woman with an

enormous rose blooming directly from her head and rosebuds sprouting from her shoulders (De La Haye 2020: 137). Although etiquette books emphasized a softness and daintiness, frequently the fashion for flowers was taken to extremes; *Harper's Bazaar* notes that it was a common sight to see a young lady 'carrying a bouquet considerably larger than her head' (1884a: 242) and fashionable 'shower' bouquets carried at balls could be half the length of a woman's gown and were incredibly heavy and difficult to manoeuvre. Flowers would also be affixed plentifully to dresses and hats, with some women adorning almost every inch of themselves with real and artificial blooms, sometimes with tendrils draping from their bustles like climbing plants. A report from 1886 mentions an American woman who had a dress made for her in Paris comprised entirely of flowers: 'the skirt is made of 800 roses of different hues, and rosebuds compose the bodice, while a veil of tulle, spotted with crystal is thrown over the dress to imitate the morning dew' (*The Telegraph* 1886: 61). Meanwhile, *Vogue* declared it fashionable that 'whole bodices are made of roses, gardenias, geraniums or bouquets of Neapolitan violets' (1896: 249), *Harper's Bazaar* observed that 'huge bunches of double roses, tulips, carnations, or lilies are worn as a sort of stomach plaster' (1884b: 370) and *La Vie Parisienne* commended a designer for dressing women 'with such exquisite coquetry that she turns her into a human flower' (1880: 609). Dressing to resemble a flower became a prevalent costume at fancy dress balls; the 1896 edition of Arden Holt's popular fancy dress guide includes advice on how to dress up as a bluebell, a carnation, a daffodil, a dahlia, a hyacinth, a pansy, a poppy, a primrose, a rose garden, a sunflower and a bunch of sweet peas. Submerged in petals of all kinds, women of fashion were transforming into human flowers.

While the fashion for transforming women into flowers would wane in popularity during the first half of the twentieth century, the woman-flower would re-emerge in the 'New Look' fashions pioneered by Christian Dior. Dior famously stated he designed clothes for 'flower-like women' (Dior 2007: 22) and titled his 1947 collection the 'Corolla', a botanical term that refers to the petals of a flower. Dior's designs, heavily influenced by demure nineteenth century femininity, used corseted waists and voluminous skirts propped open with yards of tulle to simulate a colossal opening bloom. Even though the fashion press would instead refer to this collection as the 'New Look', the floral reference did not go unnoticed – one 1948 window display in the Myer store in Australia even displayed the mannequins in their Dior gowns as exotic flowers inside a glass hothouse (Maynard 1995: 51). Richard Quinn's designs are often purposefully evocative of the 'New Look' shape, featuring expansive ball gowns, nipped waists and balloon hems reminiscent of archetypal 1950s designs and immediately suggestive of a burst of petals in full bloom, even viewed without his signature floral prints. Quinn briefly worked for Christian Dior Couture as a design studio assistant in 2012, and he will certainly have been aware of the flower-derived inspiration to these silhouettes and Dior's reputation as fashion's horticulturalist. When combined with his use of floral prints, Quinn's designs inflate the flower-like woman to new and bizarre proportions, but are nevertheless still situated in a long history of women using fashion to allude to a feminine and flower-like beauty. However, the multiple and variable meanings associated with flowers has also meant that this imagery conceals something darker.

Fetish and the Fleur Fatale

As much as she was beautiful, since her inception in the nineteenth century there has always been something unsettling about the woman-flower. While some flowers symbolize innocence and purity, others developed more disreputable associations. The idea of a woman 'blossoming' or being 'in bloom' has an inevitable sexual connotation. Sexual desire is metaphorically figured in the phallic stems and stamens concealed beneath the petals of all flowers, defiling its exterior beauty. The use of the term 'deflower' to refer to the taking of a woman's virginity has thirteenth century origins, but it was not until the eighteenth century that naturalists would define the stamen as the phallic male and the flower as womb-like and female. From this point on, florals became firmly associated with human sexuality, and flowers would take on metaphoric implications of sensuality, licentiousness and vice. The image of the rosebud is frequently utilized to describe the nipples, lips and clitoris (De La Haye 2020: 19), and floral fragrances, which plants used to seductively lure insects to their pollen-filled centres, took on erotic symbolism despite being popular perfumes for bourgeois women (Bradstreet 2007). Marriageable women throughout Victorian literature would be depicted as giving off a floral fragrance, a discreet suggestion of their fertility and sexuality (Carlisle 2004). The French philosopher Georges Bataille, would exemplify the inherent sexual nature of flowers in his

seminal 1929 essay *The Language of the Flowers*. In discussing the unseemly nature of flowers, with their deceptive petals shielding their primary purpose as reproductive organisms, he emphasizes their inherent vulgarity, stating 'even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled at their centers by hairy sexual organs' (Bataille 1985: 12) – if you tear off all their petals 'all that remains is rather sordid tuft' (Bataille 1985: 12). That their beauty is also ephemeral and will soon decay is part of the disgust Bataille has for flowers; their fleeting and all too fragile bloom only briefly masks the underlying squalor and obscenity. Bataille concludes that 'love smells like death' (Bataille 1985: 12) – the intoxicating, erotic and aphrodisiac perfume of flowers is actually the scent of rot and poison. As flowers are prone to wilt, it is impossible for them to conceal the sexual organs hidden beneath their pretty petals forever; the sexuality of the woman-flower will inevitably be uncovered.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, even while symbolizing a chaste femininity, flowers took on increasingly provocative and sexualized associations. Throughout the Victorian period, in the process of defining men and masculinity as existing alongside the categories of science, the mind and the ordered and categorized world, women and femininity became defined in opposition, and associated with nature, plants and the untamed wilderness (Gates 1998:3), which thus gave rise to the sexualisation of women *as* flowers. After Charles Baudelaire published *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857, a new version of the woman-flower would emerge in Victorian literature and art, who was linked to decadence, eroticism and moral corruption. Throughout the 1890s, French art nouveau artist Georges de Feure would paint a number of evil woman-flower hybrids, their bodies melting into leaves and petals, no longer fully human, and Belgian artist Félicien Rops depicted seductresses bursting from lily flowers in his irreverently titled drawing 'La Fleur Lascive'. Often linked to their erotic power were the harmful poisons, asphyxiating scents and deadly thorns harboured by some flowers. Belladonna flowers, with their deadly poison, were anthropomorphized as witches or whores (Campbell 2009: 117), while the tuberose was associated with harlotry and immorality due to its pungent, seductive fragrance (Desmarais 2018: 113). Even artificial flowers were known to have hidden ruin for the women associated with them; flower-makers were poisoned by the noxious lead-based red dyes and arsenic-based green dyes used to stain the petals and foliage (De La Haye 2020: 104). Overt suggestions of a dangerous sexuality inform floral imagery, and the woman-flower is therefore expressive of something evil and destructive, and designed to disturb her audience. The *femme-fleur* becomes the *fleur fatale*.

In Richard Quinn's designs, we see a revitalisation of the *fleur fatale*, reimagined as a floral-clad dominatrix. Equipped with latex bodysuits, masks, whips and other items of bondage gear, she is as immediately visually suggestive of eroticism as the sexualized flower. The links between flowers and fetishwear may seem nebulous, but they both share a common function. As the primary purpose of flowers is sexual reproduction, fetish and bondage clothing are also designed for sexual gratification. Fetish fashion is often perceived as being particularly disturbing and perverse because seduction, control and power are its only purpose. And so it is with flowers, whose beauty and fragrance are meant principally to entice and ensnare. Quinn first started using black latex gloves, stockings, masks and body coverings underneath his floral dresses in his Autumn/Winter 2019 collection and this has since become a core feature of his aesthetic. Latex, and other similarly constrictive materials such as leather, have long been thought of as sexually suggestive and are textiles frequently used in the visual language of fetishwear. When Quinn uses them, the shiny, skin-tight material deliberately sits in sharp contrast against the frothy tulle and silk of the skirts that lie atop. Quinn's aesthetic profits from the deviance associated with these items, ensuring that his floral gowns are perceived in conjunction with ideas of fetish, bondage and sexual kink.

'Fetish' is characterized by sexual arousal to an inanimate object, such as shoes, corsets or certain textiles (Moser and Kleinplatz 2007). That many notable objects of fetishistic desire are items of fashion has led to an established aesthetic of fetishwear, typified by spiked high heels, cinched corsets, harnesses, hoods and masks, all typically made from leather or latex. While the objects themselves may inspire desire as items associated with sex and sexuality, they also form a common costume amongst practitioners of BDSM and those who identify as kinky. 'Kink' is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of 'non-normative' erotic or sexual desires (Sprott et al 2021), which encompasses an enormous variety of interests and behaviours, including fetishes. It is a broader category than BDSM, which describes a set of consensual

practices that involve an erotic exchange of power (Turley and Butt 2015); practices of kink and BDSM do not necessarily intersect, although the two terms are often used interchangeably within the BDSM community (Simula 2019) and BDSM practices can encompass a wide range of sexual practices that are generally referred to as 'kinky'. Because of the heightened sexual associations with these items of clothing and textile, it is common to see fetishwear adopted by both the dominant and submissive partners as a part of BDSM play. Latex particularly forms part of the core aesthetic of the dominatrix costume; a study conducted by Lindemann (2012), found that a preference for latex was amongst the highest noted fetishes expressed amongst clients of dominatrices. Within the fetish community, a uniform of head-to-toe latex or leather works as a visual signifier of dominance. In her ground-breaking study of fetish fashion, Valerie Steele comments that 'rubber is power and sex' (1996: 143). Although latex is often used to restrict movement, the way in which the shiny fabric tightly clings to the wearer, emphasizing and exaggerating the shape of the body underneath and drawing attention to its most sexual characteristics, means it is an intensely eroticized material. Although it is significant that the latex and leather used for these garments is black - Steele remarks that the colour black is 'perversely erotic' (1996: 191), has semiotic associations with death, evil, and perversion, and is also the colour of power (2001: 77) - it is the shininess of the fabric that is most tantalising. Vaughan comments that the shiny body, whether covered in latex or slick with oil, is implicitly more sexual and more enticing, to the point that 'the kinky aesthetic revolves around the shiny object' (2021: 86). The attraction to shiny surfaces is ingrained in broad cultural understandings of attractiveness and allure (Diepeveen and Van Laar 2021), with some researchers suggesting that our desire for glossy surfaces is psychologically linked to our human need for water (Meert et al. 2014). With desires driven unconscious factors, a body wrapped in a layer of glistening latex can be transformed into an object of fetish.

When fetishwear is translated onto the runway, it exploits and capitalises on these associations with deviance and desire. To the general public, BDSM is widely viewed as an 'alternative' sexual practice, and commonly perceived as aberrant and in contrast to accepted social mores (Herman 2007). BDSM and fetish as practices are presented as 'other' within a mainstream discourse that marginalizes anything deemed threatening to conventional societal values. Because of this, fetishwear and items associated with bondage are frequently co-opted as fashion items by subcultures such as goth and punk (although some members of these communities may also be BDSM practitioners), to shock, disturb and stand in defiance of socio-political norms (Weinstock 2007), offering a de facto uniform of rebellion against normative respectability. Therefore, when latex and other sartorial fetish objects are seen on the catwalk, they work to gesture flirtatiously towards the aesthetic of deviant sexuality, aiming to entice, scandalize and titillate spectators without stepping too far into more obscene, pornographic and socially unacceptable representations of bondage and domination. Linda Williams defines the term 'obscenity' as being 'given to those sexually explicit acts that once seemed unspeakable, and were thus permanently kept off-scene' (2004: 4). While fashion is frequently known to infringe on the boundaries of obscenity, the competing commercial interests of the runway presentation prevents fashion designers from ever putting imagery deemed obscene in direct view. By eschewing fetish imagery that may be deemed too indecent, fashion offers a version of kink made safe and palatable. In doing this, fetish-fashion is often reduced to a series of signifiers that may not accurately reflect the practices of the BDSM community. For example, although the consensual giving and receiving of pain is a relatively small part of BDSM practice (Dunkley et al. 2019), whips have an overly significant role in the cultural and catwalk imagination of fetish. Discussing the image of the gag on the runway, Burton (2016) argues that, when seen modelled in this context, it becomes a fashion accessory emptied of its signifying context and reduced to an erotic sign that merely cites BDSM practices. This is also the case with Quinn's fetish fashion. In Look 16 of Quinn's A/W 2021 collection, a model poses in a rubberized body suit, mask, spiked collar, harness and knee-high boots, holding the leash of another model, knelt before her, whose face is obscured entirely by a black leather mask in the shape of a dog. The image is suggestive of the dominatrix and her client, and of the humiliation and subjugation of kinky sexual play, but stops short of more explicitly sexualized, or overtly pornographic, bondage imagery. The catwalk offers a fantasy space where these limits can be tested, but never transgressed. This brings Quinn's work in line with a long history of high fashion designers who have utilized fetish iconography in their runways, including Thierry Mugler, Jean-Paul Gaultier and Gianni Versace, all of whom were readily embraced by the fashion press; Versace's A/W 1992 'Miss S&M' collection was received as a glamorous, provocative fantasy and was quickly adopted by New York socialites, even while fashion editor Suzy Menkes commented that she found it objectifying (*Vogue*

1992). The fetish imaginary, here, becomes a tool for implying a sense of danger, eroticism and transgression that would otherwise be absent from the sartorial presentation.

It seems significant then that Quinn's use of fetishwear – or, at least the suggestion of fetishwear - is not limited to latex. He also produces masks and full-body coverings in his signature floral prints, submerging and enshrouding the models entirely in textile flowers. Quinn's floral prints have a sentimental quality to them, often produced in pastel shades evoking the English garden, symbolic of highly traditional representations of white, bourgeois femininity. Cotton and silk fabric in pink, yellow and blue shades are not usually associated with sartorial fetish items, but the fully encased body is one of the more extreme images associated with fetish, and these associations are inescapable even when the body covering is produced in colourful floral fabric. Quinn stated in an interview that he found using 'a very reassuring print being used on such a woman adds to how unsettling the image becomes' (Little 2016). From a heteronormative standpoint, the image unsettles because the feminine and sexualized body on the runway is both in the costume of extreme fetishwear and covered entirely with visual symbols of extreme femininity. This is one of the most striking and shocking images on his runways. Steele (2001) associates clothing itself with dominance and nakedness with submissiveness, so the fact that Quinn's women are entirely covered is also a part of the construction of power within the image. On the implicit fetishistic aspects of textile coverings, Hamlyn comments that wrapping commonplace objects gives them 'mystery, vitality, and seductiveness' by inspiring curiosity to what may lie beneath (Hamlyn 2003:11). Tight, form-fitting coverings work to eroticize the body by confining and contorting it, and thereby simultaneously concealing and revealing the feminized form beneath. This effect is implied, no matter what fabric these garments are constructed from. The interplay between what can be seen and what cannot is especially effective in this context, as it works to heighten the sense of femininity associated with both the floral prints and the shape of the body beneath them, whilst also presenting an impression of eroticizing the body that at once reads as naked and sensual, but also clothed and sexually unavailable. It is through this duality that Quinn succeeds in creating fetishwear within the boundaries of social acceptability. Quinn was the recipient of inaugural Queen Elizabeth II Award for British Design after his London Fashion Week debut in 2018, and his designs have been worn on countless red carpets, with celebrity clients including Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez and Celine Dion. Collaborations with luxury retailers Moncler, Liberty and Matches Fashion have followed, as well as diffusion lines for the UK department store Debenhams and fast-fashion retailer H&M. When his designs are worn for red carpet events or re-articulated for diffusion lines, the more overt aspects of fetishwear are frequently absent from the presentation, or are more muted and restrained. Floral fetishwear is seemingly more marketable than latex.

The other main item of fetish iconography frequently employed by Quinn is the mask. Masks are often transgressive garments, and indeed there is an innate horror in the kind of mask that Quinn has chosen. The gimp masks of his designs, whether made of black latex or pink florals, have a menacing aura due to how they efface identity. Unlike masks in costumes or in ceremonial traditions, where masking involves the 'ritual transformation' of the human identity (Tooker 1983: 13), masks in fashion do not engage with expressions of identity – they are an eradication of the self. Fashion masks do not invite speculation as to the character of the wearer, they efface the model's identity in order to present a blank canvas on which the observer may project their fantasy. Fetish masks in fashion go a step further in affecting how the model is perceived on the runway. In his examination of the role of gimp masks within fashion collections, Gary Needham (2014) explains that fetish masks are semiotically tied to horror, perversity and degradation in Western society. Similarly, in her book *Fetish Style*, Frenchy Lunning comments that masks are considered the most subversive and degrading costume used in the fetish community, and viewed by outsiders with the 'most fear and sexual disgust because of the sense of dehumanisation' (Lunning 2012: 100). However, Quinn's masks are not so much an attempt at dehumanisation as suggestive of its entire eradication through botanical mutation, metamorphosis and hybridity. They leave only the merest indication of a human face beneath a floral print. Although in the fetish community it is usually the submissive partner who wears the mask, in popular culture masks are paradoxically associated with dominance, cruelty and aggression, and are depicted as the costume of villains and monsters (Lunning 2012; Needham 2014). This seeming contradiction is explained by Steele as the symbolism of masks being contingent on the context in which they are worn (2001: 75); their anonymity grants their wearer power when worn by the dominant partner, but

dehumanizes the submissive. When seen on the runway, these masks both invite fear and are indicative of sexual depravity, or at least the potential for it. This is the effect we witness on Quinn's runways. Although masks have been included in every runway presentation, frequently appear in magazine editorial shoots, and have been modelled by celebrities such as Cardi B and Karli Kloss, the masks have never appeared for sale. Other high-fashion gimp masks have been the same; a Louis Vuitton monogrammed mask appeared online and Ricardo Tisci's 2011 Spring/Summer men's collection for Givenchy included gimp masks on the runway and in the lookbook, although neither was made available for purchase in store or online (Needham 2014: 155). More recently, Jeremy Scott for Moschino used gimp masks in his Autumn/Winter 2018 collection as a runway accessory, although *Vogue* commented that it was done in such a way to 'avoid an X rating' and to 'keep retailers from getting their knickers in a knot' (Verner 2018). It is understood that while fashion may draw inspiration from fetishwear, the gimp mask is particularly transgressive, to the point where it is not socially acceptable beyond the runway or editorial shoot. The role of Quinn's masks is therefore solely to help create this image of a threatening and dangerous woman-flower, a part of his conceptualisation of fetish and florals, but not his commerce. These masks are solely produced to enact horror and transgression on the runway. And while fetish masks can be used to erase identity, Lunning also notes that they can be used to 'enlarge the potential of human form' (2012: 117). The floral masks and body coverings are typically made from the same print as the dress the model wears, so it is often difficult to tell where the dress ends and the model begins, to the point where the woman's body begins to meld into the shape of her dress. It is a paradoxically powerful image; the woman in a floral gimp mask is silenced and obviated by flowers, however she is also transformed into something beyond the human, a strange hybrid body that is at once a silent, passive flower and an empowered and sexualized dominatrix.

In the popular imagination, the dominatrix is a concentrated symbol of the dangers and hostile erotic powers of women, defined by the male gaze. Indeed, Steele refers to the dominatrix as a 'Phallic Woman' (2001: 78). Yet, while a powerful, latex-clad dominatrix derives her power because she 'stands outside the norms of femininity' (Lunning 2012: 65), Quinn's dominatrices are bedecked in the most feminine of prints and retro floral gowns that belong more to a debutante ball than a dungeon. This contrast of extreme femininity with masculinized sexual power is why the image of the *fleur fatale* is so potent. She offers a fearsome representation of female sexuality, through which the traditional markers of overt feminine dress are made depraved and disconcerting. As we see in nineteenth century iterations of the *fleur fatale*, her pretty petals are merely a fictive surface that veils her underlying erotic power. Although Quinn uses a wide range of floral motifs in his work (daisies, poppies and hibiscus have all featured), the rose is his most frequent choice. Roses, of course, are protected by thorns, offering a conjunction of pleasure and pain. Symbolically associated with both lust and beauty, they are therefore the perfect choice for the fetishistic *fleur fatale*. Like these thorned flowers, whose primary purpose is sexual reproduction, the dominatrix is a threatening and erotically-charged being, a heteronormative fantasy of male subjugation to female power. We see these themes echoed throughout Quinn's work, giving life to a dominatrix who, like flowers themselves, offers intoxication, suffocation, decay and even death.

Plant Horror and Floral Monsters

Part of the reason why Quinn's floral-fetish imagery retains its disturbing impact, even while enjoying commercial success, is because it capitalizes on fears deeply associated with the otherness of plants. Plant horror, a literary and cinematic genre that typically sees people consumed by carnivorous flowers, human bodies taken over and inhabited by plants, or else all human civilization overgrown as a deadly vegetal life reasserts itself over the world, is most familiar within pop culture through films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), *Day of the Triffids* (1962) and more recently in *Little Joe* (2019), but is clearly drawn from Western cultural anxieties around the unknowable and untameable nature of the wilderness and the perceived disjunction between nature and civilization. The horror associated with plant life is mostly derived from its strangeness; plants cannot see or speak or feel, but are undeniably alive. Studies on plant horror have attributed this fear to the ways plants transgress the frameworks we use to describe life; plants do not have bodies, but continually grow, uncontrollably and amorphously, beyond the boundaries of their form (Meeker and Szabari 2012: 31), they exist alongside us but are entirely unsympathetic to us (Meeker and Szabari 2019: 7), and are living beings that remain silent and inscrutable

(Keetley 2016: 1). Although plants have always surrounded us, commonplace to the point of invisibility, their familiarity and proximity is made all the more troubling when we are forced to confront their difference and alienness. Laced throughout is the dread of something excessively reproductive, dedicated above all else to growth and the propagation of the species. Plants grow and multiply, a threat of an overpowering wilderness; they cannot be stopped and they cannot be reasoned with. They are indifferent to our attempts to tame them; should we neglect to cut and prune, the garden will quickly be overgrown with tendrils and thorns.

Flowers are often missing from discussions of plant horror, but possess an uncanny terror of their own. They are easy to anthropomorphize because flowers have 'heads' and bear a passing resemblance to an upright human form. The fear of flowers is called anthophobia, and although rare is clinically recognized; it is typically linked to a fear of what might concealed beneath their petals. What flowers hide can be particularly horrifying – they harbour deadly poisons and emit hallucinatory toxins to confound the minds of predators, they are equipped with thorns and barbs and brambles designed to do harm, and their beauty and fragrance is intended to seduce and intoxicate, drawing other creatures to them by awakening their desires solely to get them to propagate the plant further. The fear of flowers may then be read as a veiled fear of women themselves, who are also able to host and propagate life, and of the seductive *femme fatale* who can bend men to her sexual will. Because both women and flowers have been culturally perceived as symbols of beauty, delicacy and passivity, it is all the more disturbing when this imagery turn predatory. As the opening petals of flowers have often been likened to the shape of the female genitalia (Ardenner 1987), and the flower is also a sexual organ, the notion of carnivorous flowers naturally evokes the myth of the 'Vagina Dentata', or toothed vagina. Found in folk tales around the world, the motif of the toothed vagina stems from well-known anxieties around female sexual power and the male fear of castration if a woman is not subdued and de-fanged before sexual intercourse (Raitt 1980). It has served as a parable against female sexual agency, to ensure the continuation of conservative gender hierarchies, but also to instil moral panic surrounding unchecked female desire (Gohr 2013). Some stories suggest that, once the teeth are pulled, the woman will no longer experience carnal lust and be made suitably docile and marriageable (Raitt 1980), comparable to how exotic flowers may be de-thorned to grow tamely in the garden. The sexual connotations of being 'in bloom', discussed previously, in this context then suggest the blossoming of a carnivorous flower that will maim or devour the male phallus, offering a new layer of fear of female sexual dominance.

Plants and flowers, which are supposed to be defined by their rootedness, become terrifying when they start to move. Michael Marder (2011) notes that historically plants have been defined as incomplete beings, absent of thought, desire or a soul. In Aristotelian terms, plants are atelic – they are bereft of interiority, have no agency and their only desire is to grow continuously. To see such a mindless creature begin to walk, or to assume human form, offers a different kind of terror. This is abject horror. In Kristevan terms 'abjection', is that which does not 'respect borders, positions [or] rules', and that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva 1982: 4). The hybridized body of the human-plant chimera signals the breakdown of boundaries that separate the categories of the natural world. Furthermore, as plants are soulless beings, a plant that inhabits (or resembles) a human body is a body without a soul, similar to zombies, vampires and so many monsters of film and literature. As Barbara Creed (1993) observes, bodies that still move despite lacking souls are the most abject. No longer recognisably human, the bodies have become something other, which undercuts secure boundaries and thereby disturbs us through the disruption of the systems we rely on to define and describe humanity. The woman-flower can never be seen as thoroughly beautiful due to how her hybridity disturbs and transgresses cultural categories.

Because, as discussed above, flowers are inherently sexual and associated with a fertile femininity, the woman-flower is a distinctly female monster. Indeed, there is an innate femaleness to plant horror generally. The supposed passivity of plants is mirrored in the supposed passivity of women, and the unencumbered growth of monstrous plants is communicative of a sexualized fecundity and amorous excess. If women are considered to be closer to nature, as they have been since the nineteenth century, then the uncanny fear of plants can also be aligned with the fear of femininity and the monstrous-feminine, as outlined by Barbara Creed (1993). On the subject of the witch, the most recognisable female monster, Creed writes that her connection to nature is meaningful in how she is perceived: 'her evil powers are seen as a part of her

“feminine” nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature.’ (Creed 1993: 76). This is also true of the woman-flower, who was conceived of as a reflection of the feminine aspects of plants and the natural world. The witch, like the Vagina Dentata, is also possessed of castrating powers (Raitt 1980) and the power to control men. Kristeva claims that femininity is seen as ‘synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed’ (1982: 70), and the sense of something grotesque or monstrous about the female body and female sexuality pervades representations of women in film and literature. Her maternal and reproductive functions (menstruation, pregnancy, lactation) are perceived as having an earthiness to them, as ‘natural’ functions of the body, but have also historically been treated with fear and revulsion. As flowers are the sexual organs of plants, the woman-flower is an eerily sexualized being – she has all the hallmarks of a fecund femininity, yet she is capable of asexual reproduction, thereby making her erotic appeal bizarre and inhuman. The woman-flower is a threat due to the way she destabilizes the symbolic order. The horror is not just found when flowers take on human shape, but particularly when they take on female shape; as Laura Mulvey explains, the ‘split between an alluring, cosmetic surface and an abject, concealed but threatening, interior,’ is what is disturbing (Mulvey 2019, 48). Much of the horror here is derived from her apparent femininity, and the abjection encountered when this perception is revealed to be monstrously untrue.

Richard Quinn presents a highly sexualized botanical horror; flowers that walk with the body of women and in the fetishwear of a dominatrix. Quinn said of his first collection that ‘these women are meant to be quite dangerous, unafraid’ (Little 2016), an effect that is achieved through their fetish attire. Her mask, which obliterates all features leaving only a floral face, ensure that she shows no interiority or humanity, while the constrictive garments she wears changes the borders of her body. The silhouettes of Quinn’s gowns reinforce this impression of hybridity, giving her the look of an up-turned bloom moving with a human-like gait. As in other depictions of plant horror, these women are fearsome because they exhibit no fear and no desire. They are erotic and sexualized, but with the implied danger of castration lying beneath their petal-like skirts. Like teeth on carnivorous flowers, their BDSM-inspired accessories only serve to intensify the transgression of boundaries, elevating them from a disorientating image to a threatening spectacle that is underpinned by associations with power, control and monstrosity. Like the cruellest mistress, Quinn’s woman-flower is indifferent to us. He has placed a whip in the hands of a predatory bloom.

Conclusion

Richard Quinn’s work is situated within a long history of contradictory floral symbolism, which has meant that flowers have been used to portray both sweetness and licentiousness, innocence and debauchery. These associations are brought to the fore by the faceless, hybrid botanical bodies that walk the designer’s runways enclothed in an extravagance of printed blooms and latex fetishwear. The designer has frequently commented that his intention in using vintage-inspired floral prints was to twist them into something darker, and since his 2016 debut, Quinn’s floral prints have steadily grown ever more subversive as they have become entwined with the visual representation of fetish. By examining how gimp masks and latex amplify and destabilize the fashionable image of the woman-flower, we see that Quinn’s designs have found mainstream success precisely because of how they work in conjunction with fetishwear. Rather than a statement of fashionable fetish-chic, Quinn consistently incorporates the transgressive qualities of masks and latex to heighten the erotic, monstrous and disturbing aspects of the floral motif. As Quinn’s aesthetic has evolved to incorporate more overt expressions of BDSM, the articulation of his woman-flower as a dominant, hyper-sexualized and terrifying figure becomes clearer. It is a provocative distortion of conservative ideals of womanhood, that both complements and diverges from the use of floral symbolism throughout Western fashion history. Flower-like women are supposed to embody a silent, domestic submissiveness, but the transgressive hybridity of the woman-flower wrapped in latex and brandishing a whip is a direct defiance of such traditional symbolism. Quinn’s woman-flower has become a dominatrix who, precisely because of her exquisite floral beauty, mutates into abject horror.

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