

Unfortunate Mottos, an erasure poem
from *Floral Emblems*, Henry Phillips, 1825

I.

But to express ourselves more readily by floral emblems, it is necessary that we should lay down grammatical rules for the government of **this silent language** before we proceed to the dictionary of emblems.

The first principle is to **observe** that the pronoun *I*, or *me*, is expressed by inclining **the flower** to the left, and the pronoun *thou*, or *thee*, by **sloping** it to the right, but when represented by drawings on paper, these positions should be reversed, as the flower should lean **to the heart** of the person whom it is to signify. The articles *a*, *an*, and *the*, may be expressed by a tendril, the first by a single line, the second by a double tendril, and the third by one with three branches.

The second rule is, that if a flower presented upright expresses a particular sentiment, when reversed it has a contrary meaning. Thus, for example, a rose bud upright **with its thorns** and its leaves means, "I fear, but I hope;" if the same bud is returned held downwards, it signifies, "you must **neither hope nor fear**;" but if the thorns be stripped off, it expresses, "there is every thing to hope;" deprived of its leaves, it signifies, "there is every thing to fear." Thus the expression may be varied of almost all the flowers by **changing** their position. The flower of the marigold, for example, placed on the head, signifies "**trouble** of spirits;" on the heart, "trouble of love;" on the bosom, "weariness." The pansy held upright denotes "hearts' ease;" reversed it speaks the contrary; when presented upright it is understood **to say**, "think of me;" but when offered pendant, it means "forget me." And thus the amaryllis, which is the emblem of **pride**, may be made to express "my pride is humbled," or "your pride is checked," by holding it downwards either to the left or the right, as the sense requires. In the same manner the wallflower, which is made the emblem of **fidelity** in misfortune, if presented with the stalk upwards, would insinuate that the person was considered no friend **to the unfortunate**. Thus various sentiments may be expressed by all the flowers noticed in these emblems, but which are principally intended as floral **mottos**.

II.

lay down

this silent language

observe

the flower

sloping

to the heart

with thorns

neither hope nor fear

changing

trouble

to pride

fidelity

to unfortunate

mottos

ABOUT THE POEM

“Unfortunate Mottos, an erasure poem” was created from *Floral Emblems* by Henry Phillips (1825). About the poem and the process of composing it, Lynn Pattison writes:

The Victorians took flowers seriously. Each flower and herb assigned a meaning, each bouquet read as carefully as the Tarot. Messages of love, dismay, or outright rejection could be conveyed without uttering or writing a word. Intrigued by all that was written about what flowers symbolized, and curious about how the old meanings could be modernized, I wrote my own series of poems, *The Meaning of Flowers*. I browsed old bookstores and collections preserved on the web, fascinated by the importance of flower communications and interpretations. I’m convinced that learning the old flower-language would have been as challenging as achieving fluency in French or German!

I found tomes related to every facet of flower information: how to make wax flowers, preserve natural flowers (embalming!), macerate and prepare skeletal leaves, and much more. I tried my hand at erasure poems with some of the texts, and “Unfortunate Mottos” resulted from those efforts.

