

The Genus *Narcissus* edited by Gordon R. Hanks

Running Head: Folklore of *Narcissus*

2. THE FOLKLORE OF THE NARCISSUS

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INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth probably did more for the daffodil than any other in his enchanting verse:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of the bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

John Gerard sets the scene ideally for this chapter. The fair Lady Europa, entering with her Nymphs into the meadows, did gather the sweet smelling daffodils:

But when the Girles were come into
The medowes flouring all in sight,
That Wench with these, this Wench with those
Trim floures, themselves did all delight:
She with the Narcisse good in sent,
And she with Hyacinths content.

Gerard in his *Herbal* (Woodward, 1990) says "It is not greatly to our purpose, particularly to seek out their places of growing wild, seeing we have them all and every one of them in our London gardens, in great abundance. The common wild Daffodil groweth wild in fields and sides of woods in the West parts of England."

Today, the daffodil or narcissus is a very popular garden plant and an important commercial crop, with a large number of species, hybrids and varieties in cultivation. Gerard's *Herbal* lists 37 different types that were already in cultivation by the end of the 16th century, which demonstrates the popularity of the plant from the early days of

horticulture. Many different daffodils are now found naturalised in grassland, hedge-banks, woodland margins, roadsides and waste ground throughout the British Isles, especially in the south.

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

In the Middle Ages, when the art of reading and writing was known only by a privileged few, there grew up a tradition of the language of flowers, whereby every flower had a meaning. It was a tradition that was revived by the early Victorians, who took great delight in this fanciful idea and collected together much of the information that survives to this day. The example that most of us would recognise is the giving of red roses as a sign of love. In this tradition, the daffodil is for rebuttal in domestic situations: “I do not share your feelings”. However, in battle emblems the daffodil is for regard and chivalry (Greenaway and Marsh, 1978; Pickles, 1990).

DERIVATION OF THE NAME DAFFODIL

There are a number of thoughts on how the name daffodil came into being. The popular English names daffodowndilly, daffodily and affodily may be corruptions of asphodel, since the daffodil was thought to be identical with the blossoms mentioned by the ancient Greeks. Another school of thought is that the name comes from the Mediaeval Latin *affodilus*, Latin *asphodilus*, or Greek *asphodelus*, which was the name of that plant which grew across the meadows of the underworld and belonged to Persephone, the Queen of Hell (Grigson, 1996).

Pliny describes the narcissus as “*narce narcissum dictum, non a fabuloso puero*”, which translated means “named narcissus from *narce*, not from the fabulous boy”. The Greek *narkao*, meaning to be numb, originates in the narcotic properties of the plant (Genders, 1985).

The popularity of the daffodil in the British Isles is attested by the large number of common names used in various parts of the country (Dony *et al.*, 1986; Grigson, 1996; Grieve, 1998). These include:

Popular name	Place
Affodil, Affrodil	Cheshire
Bell-Flowers	Dorset and Somerset
Bell-Rose	Somerset
Butter and Eggs	Devon, Somerset and Northampton
Churn	Lancashire
Cowslip	Devon
Cuckoo-Rose	Devon and Somerset
Daffodil	England, Scotland, Ireland
Daffydowndilly	Somerset
Daffy-down-dilly	Somerset
Daffydilly	Northamptonshire
Dillydaffs	Somerset

Easter Lily	Devon and Somerset
Easter Rose	Somerset
Fairy Bells	Dorset
False Narcissus	Devon
Fleur de Coucou	Devon
Garden Narcissus	Devon
Giggary	Devon
Gylfinog	Wales
Gold Bells	Wiltshire
Golden Trumpets	Somerset
Gooseflop	Somerset
Goose-Leek	Isle of Man
Gracie Daisies	Devon and Somerset
Gracie Day	Devon
Hen and Chickens	Devon
Hoop Petticoats	Dorset
Jonquil	Hertfordshire
Julians	Hertfordshire
King's Spear	Somerset
Lady's Ruffles	Wiltshire
Lent-Cocks	Devon and Somerset
	Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Isle of Wight, Gloucestershire, Sussex, Kent, Surrey, Suffolk, Warwickshire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Westmoreland
Lent Pitchers	Devon and Somerset
Lent-Rosen	Devon and Somerset
Lents	Cornwall, Devon, Lancashire
Lenty Cups	Somerset
Lent Lily	Cornwall
Lily	Scotland
Narcissus	Norfolk
Porillon	Norfolk
Queen Anne's Flowers	Norfolk
St Peter's Bell	Wales
Sun-Sonnets	Somerset
Whit Sunday	Devon
Wild Daffodil	Yorkshire
Wild Jonquil	Yorkshire
Yellow Maidens	Somerset
Fleur d'asphodèle	France
Pauvres filles de Sainte Claire	France

MYTHOLOGY AND LEGEND

According to Culpeper's Herbal (Potterton, 1983), yellow daffodils are under the dominion of Mars.

Daffodil flowers, though beautiful to the sight, leave a feeling of sadness when the history and folklore of the plant is examined. In classical mythology there was a handsome Greek shepherd boy named Narcissus. Though he was loved by all the wood nymphs, there was one called Echo who loved him more than the rest. Unfortunately she could not tell him of her love, because she was only able to repeat his last words. It comes as no surprise to learn that Narcissus was totally unaware of Echo's love and adoration for him. He was equally unaware of the pain and suffering that his ignorance of her love was causing her. Echo became thinner and thinner as her love robbed her of her appetite, until she slowly pined away to nothing more than a spirit who took sanctuary in the mountains. Only her soft voice remained. Venus, the goddess of love, came to hear of Echo's hopeless devotion and immediately assigned the blame for her condition on Narcissus, who she decided should be punished. One day Narcissus was hunting in the forest. Little did he know that Venus had arranged with Cupid to set a magic spell on him so that he would fall in love with the first person that he saw. Coming to a crystal clear pool he stopped for a cooling drink to assuage his thirst and there in the water he saw another face rise up to meet his own as he leant over. Narcissus immediately succumbed to Cupid's spell and fell in love. Again and again he tried to catch the face of the spirit who appeared to live in the water. In vain he called out to this vision, but all that could be heard was the faint and sad echo coming from the mountains. Narcissus had fallen in love with his own reflection. Every day he returned to the pool in the hope of capturing the face that he saw there, and every day his tears added to the water in the pool. Slowly, like Echo, he began to waste away with unrequited love. The Immortals were not totally heartless and turned him into a delicate white papery flower, which would grow forever by the pool in memory of the egotistical youth. Another story continues by saying that when the nymphs came to look for him, they only found "A rising stalk with yellow blossoms crown'd", and that the cup in the flower's centre of all varieties contains the tears of Narcissus (Pickles, 1990).

This story has led to the name being used as the term 'narcissism' or 'narcissistic personality disorder', in which people described by this condition have a grandiose view of their own uniqueness and abilities; they are preoccupied with fantasies of great success. To say they are self-centred is an understatement (Davison and Neale, 1998). These characteristics have been validated in empirical studies (Ronnington and Gunderson, 1990) and are often a factor with borderline personality disorders (Morey, 1988). Such people are constantly seeking attention and adulation, and are, underneath, extremely sensitive to criticism and have a deep fear of failure. Many of the contemporary studies have been carried out by Heinz Kohut (Kohut, 1971; Kohut, 1977; Kohut and Wolf, 1978).

The flower has another legend, which is even more gruesome than the former! Earth first put forth the flowers to lure the lovely Prosperine for Pluto, god of the underworld. The maid was so taken with the beauty of the daffodil that she stopped to admire it and as she stooped to pick it, the very worst happened. Pluto looking out from his hiding place took advantage of this momentary lack of attention and pounced out from his lair and seized her. It was, therefore, quite understandable why the ancients labelled the narcissus the flower of deceit. It was also the flower of imminent death, since it was the last bloom she plucked (MacFadyen, 1992).

Another version of this story is told by Perdita in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, where it was Proserpina who was picking lilies and was subsequently captured by Pluto. However, in this story, as she dropped the lilies in her fear, they turned into daffodils as they touched the ground.

FOLKLORE AND RELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS

Narcissus tazetta, which grows on the Plain of Sharon, Israel, may be the plant referred to in the biblical reference "...The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose..." (Isaiah 35 v.1). The Hebrew word here translated 'rose' may indicate a bulbous plant, rather than a rose (Tenney, 1967).

Daffodils are considered by many to be unlucky, and they will not have the flowers in their house because they hang their heads, bringing tears and unhappiness. The sweet-scented old fashioned white narcissus, also called scented lily or white lily, is also known as grave floers and unlucky to take indoors (Vickery, 1995).

In the Isle of Man it is unlucky to have the plant in the house till the goslings have hatched. The Manx name is *lus-ny-guiy* or goose herb. In common with primroses, daffodils were sometimes banned from the house by poultry-keepers, and, in Herefordshire, if daffodils are brought in when the hens are sitting, they say there will be no chickens. However in Devon, the number of goslings hatched and reared is said to be governed by the number of wild daffodils in the first bunch of the season brought into the house (Vickery, 1995).

Robert Herrick alludes in his *Hesperides* to the daffodil as a portent of death, probably connecting the flower with the asphodel, which the ancient Greeks planted near tombs. Despite this he writes "Fair daffodils, we weep to see / You haste away too soon..."

The occurrence of wild daffodils is sometimes said to indicate the former site of a religious foundation. At Fittlestoke, near Torrington, Devon, it was recorded in 1797 that the people of the village call daffodils by the name Gregories, a name that coincided with the order of a neighbouring monastery - the Canons of St Gregory (Britten and Holland, 1886). In both Hampshire and the Isle of Wight it was generally said that wild daffodils indicated the site of a monastery. St Urian's Copse is well known for its primroses and daffodils. There is a tradition that daffodils grow in profusion on one side of a track running through the copse because a religious building once stood there. The only sizeable population of wild daffodils in the London area is found at Abbey Wood, named after Lesney Abbey (Vickery, 1995).

HISTORICAL TALES

A crusader returned home to Churchill (in Avon, in the west country of England), having spent years fighting the Crusades in the Holy Land. A rich man before his departure, he had returned home poor. His wife was a lover of precious and rare flowers, and so he had carefully brought back with him two bulbs of the Primrose Peerless. The story is a sad one, since when he returned, it was to a wife who had been

buried for four years. In despair he flung the cherished bulbs over the churchyard wall. He is said to have died of a broken heart. However, throughout the centuries the bulbs have grown and flourished and kept his memory alive (Vickery, 1995)

It is told that Australian soldiers were unflatteringly associated with daffodils during the Second World War. The Times (12 January 1993) reported that “Australian war veterans have angrily rejected newly released War Office papers blaming the cowardice of Australian soldiers for the fall of Singapore in 1942. ‘The Australians were known as daffodils, beautiful to look at but yellow all through,’ says one of the documents”.

Both the daffodil and the leek are national symbols of Wales. The daffodil is associated with St David because it is traditionally said to bloom first on his day (1 March). It is an easier emblem to wear than the leek, and many a schoolchild in Wales sports one, real or artificial, on this date (Vickery, 1995)

Since 1990, National Daffodil Day has been promoted by Marie Curie Cancer Care. At about the same time the Irish Cancer Society similarly adopted the daffodil as a symbol. In Australia they also have a national fund raising day for cancer research (Anon., 1997)

On the Isles of Scilly, The Prince of Wales is paid one daffodil annually as rent for the untenanted lands of Scilly - paid by local Environmental Trust. (St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, September 1992). **NEED TO CLARIFY REFERENCE**

HERBAL MEDICINES

Considering that narcissus are a rich source of alkaloids (see Chapter 7, this volume), it is not surprising that the genus has figured in herbal medicine. This has been vindicated by recent developments. The Daily Mail (28 September 1996) carried a headline “Shire says it with snowdrops”. “Flower power could soon be helping sufferers of chronic fatigue syndrome. Shire Pharmaceuticals is testing galanthamine, a compound found in daffodils and snowdrops, on victims of ‘yuppie flu’. The drug already has improved the mental performance of Alzheimer's patients.”

However, narcissus are not recommended for domestic use. A homoeopathic medicine is made from the bulbs and used for respiratory disease, particularly bronchitis and whooping cough. According to Culpeper's Herbal (Potterton, 1983):

The roots boiled and taken in posset drink cause vomiting and are used with good success at the appearance of approaching agues, especially the tertian ague, which is frequently caught in the springtime. A plaster made of the roots with parched barley meal dissolves hard swellings and imposthumes, being applied thereto; the juice mingled with honey, frankincense wine, and myrrh, and dropped into the ears is good against the corrupt and running matter of the ears, the roots made hollow and boiled in oil help raw ribed heels; the juice of the root is good for the morpew and the discolouring of the skin.

Galen saith: That the roots of Narcissus have such wonderfull qualities in drying, that they consound and glew together very great wounds, yea and such gashes or cuts as happen about the veins, sinues, and tendons. They have also a certaine clensing facultie. The root of Narcissus stamped with hony and applied plaisterwise, helpeth them that are burned with fire, and joineth together sinues that are cut in sunder. Being used in manner aforesaid it helpeth the great wrenches of the ancles, the aches and pains of the joints. The same applied with hony and nettle seed helpeth Sun burning. Being stamped with the meale of Darnel and hony, it draweth forth thorns and stubs out of any part of the body.

Narcissus are also referred to in John K'Eogh's Irish Herbal (Scott, 1986). Narcissus was said to have a hot and dry nature. The roots, pounded with honey were good against burns, bruised sinews, dislocations and old aches. They take away freckles and heal abscesses and sores, and they draw out thorns and splinters. A decoction of the roots is a great emetic.

It has also been used as an application to wounds. For hard imposthumes, for strained sinews, stiff or painful joints, and other local ailments. The narcissus was the basis of an ancient ointment called Narcissimum. The powdered flowers have been used as an emetic in place of the bulbs, and in the form of a syrup or infusions for pulmonary catarrh. A decoction of the dried flowers acts as an emetic, and has been considered useful for relieving the congestive bronchial catarrh of children, and also useful for epidemic dysentery. In France, narcissus flowers have been used as an antispasmodic. A spirit has been distilled from the bulb, used as an embrocation and also given as a medicine and a yellow volatile oil, of disagreeable odour and a brown colouring matter has been extracted from the flowers, the pigment being quercetin, also present in the outer scales of the onion. The Arabians commended the oil to be applied for curing baldness and as an aphrodisiac (Grieve, 1998). The influence of daffodil on the nervous system has led to giving its flowers and bulb for hysterical affections and even epilepsy, with benefit. It entered into the books as a purge and a vomitive and a cure for erysipelas and the palsy (Grigson, 1996).

POISONOUS EFFECTS

Socrates called the narcissus the 'Chaplet of the infernal Gods', because of its narcotic effects. An extract of the bulbs, when applied to open wounds, has produced staggering, numbness of the whole nervous system and paralysis of the heart (Grieve, 1998)

There have been cases of poisoning when the bulbs have been eaten in mistake for onions (Culpeper's Herbal; Potterton, 1983). Lycorine or narcissine in warm-blooded animals acts as an emetic, causing eventual collapse and death by paralysis of the central nervous system: cattle, goats and pigs have been poisoned by the plant (Manning, 1965). With cats, narcissine causes nausea and purgation (Grieve, 1998). The poison acted speedily, high temperature did not destroy the toxicity of the poison and only a relatively small amount was needed (Grieve, 1998). Ingestion of narcissus bulbs

produces severe gastroenteritis and nervous symptoms, apparently owing to the phenanthridine alkaloids contained therein (Tyler *et al.*, 1988).

When the bulbs have been mistaken for onions and eaten, either raw or cooked, symptoms including dizziness, stomach pains, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea have developed shortly afterwards. In more severe poisoning there may be trembling, convulsions and paralysis. Vomiting has occurred in children who have eaten a few leaves, and there is also a report of a four-year-old child who died after sucking a narcissus stalk. Recovery, however, is usually complete in a few hours without any treatment being necessary. Those who pick and pack the flowers are liable to develop dermatitis, probably caused partly by the irritant effects of the sap and partly by an allergic reaction. Animals rarely eat these plants, although, during the food shortage in the Netherlands in the Second World War, some cattle died after being given narcissus bulbs to eat. A tortoise which ate four daffodil leaves lost its appetite and became constipated and listless; it died 11 days later. In severe cases it may be necessary to induce vomiting or remove stomach contents. (Cooper and Johnson, 1991). In South Africa, similar problems with toxicity are experienced. The bulbs of daffodil and narcissus are known to have caused death when eaten by mistake. (Moll and Moll, 1989). A case of poisoning by Daffodil bulbs, cooked by mistake in the place of leeks, was reported from Toulouse in 1923. The symptoms were acute abdominal pains and nausea, which yielded to an emetic (Grieve, 1998). The bulbs of *Narcissus poeticus*, the Poet's narcissus, are reported to be more dangerous than those of the garden daffodil, being powerfully emetic and irritant (Grieve, 1998).

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Large garden varieties of daffodils have recently been crossed with many of the small wild species to produce delightfully graceful blossoms. *Narcissus triandrus* and *N. cyclamineus* have been used in breeding for many years. The first species makes small clusters of blooms with very silky petals. *N. cyclamineus* usually gives genes for flowers with backswept petals, a long-waisted trumpet, and early flowering. These types of daffodils are constantly popular and the demand for miniature daffodils far exceeds the supply. Unfortunately the ability to produce new kinds of miniature daffodils is hampered by the disappearance of many of the tiny wild species. *N. calcicola*, a tiny yellow jonquil from Spain and Portugal is considered endangered and *N. watieri*, possibly the most powerful tool for making miniature white daffodils, is already unobtainable (Koopowitz and Kaye, 1990). Occasionally *N. watieri* from North Africa's Atlas Mountains is advertised by unscrupulous bulb merchants who substitute another variety. The exact status of *N. watieri* is unknown. The only hope is that a few plants may still exist on some of the rocky ledges or hillsides where the species once thrived. If so, perhaps it can be introduced once again. More likely, the species has already been destroyed - either over-collected or eaten by goats (Koopowitz and Kaye, 1990).

FOOD USE

On the upper Nile, Grant found a narcissus about 20 cm high, with white flowers having a waxy, yellow corona and with leaves tasting of onions. The leaves, cooked with mashed groundnuts, he reported, make a delicious spinach (Sturtevant, 1972).

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