THE POET AS BOTANIST

For centuries, poets have been ensnared – as one of their number, Andrew Marvell, put it – by the beauty of flowers. Then, from the middle of the eighteenth century onward, that enjoyment was enriched by a surge of popular interest in botany. Besides exploring the relationship between poetic and scientific responses to the green world within the context of humanity’s changing concepts of its own place in the ecosphere, Molly Mahood considers the part that flowering plants played in the daily lives, and therefore in the literary work, of a number of writers who could all be called poet–botanists: Erasmus Darwin, George Crabbe, John Clare, John Ruskin and D. H. Lawrence. A concluding chapter looks closely at the meanings, old or new, that plants retained or obtained in the violent twentieth century.

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in memoriam
Kathleen Esther Wallace, née Mahood
(1908–2006)
who first showed me Sussex hedgerows in spring
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1 Primrose, drawn and engraved by William Kilburn for William Curtis’s *Flora Londinensis* (1777–8).  
3 Tape-grass: engraving from Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* (1789).  
4 Suffocated clover: Crabbe’s dried specimen of an unidentified clover (*Trifolium suffocatum*), with sketch and description attached.  
5 Early purple orchid (*Orchis mascula*), photographed in Rice Wood near Clare’s village of Helpston.  
6 Ivy-leaved toadflax (*Cymbalaria muralis*), drawing by Ruskin.  
7 *Paramecium caudatum*, photograph and drawing.  
8 Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) by Yasuhiro Ishimoto.
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A note on quotations

In quotations from works written before 1850, spelling, use of capital letters and italics, and to a lesser degree punctuation, have all been brought into conformity with modern practice. The few quotations taken directly from manuscripts are, however, given in their original form. Two writers have presented special problems. Erasmus Darwin distinguishes the topic words of his verse paragraphs by small capitals, and these I have kept. John Clare’s idiosyncrasies of spelling and punctuation are preserved by his Oxford editors, but since I share Jonathan Bate’s belief that Clare expected his publishers to normalise his spelling and punctuation, I have done the same with what I hope has been a light hand, and without any interference with the poet’s grammar or wording.