

Ovid Imagining Flora  
John F. Miller (University of Virginia)

This paper discusses the remarkable degree to which Ovid in his *Fasti* defines Flora—and the speaking goddess defines herself—in comparison and contradistinction to other female divinities. The phenomenon illustrates the problem of constructing a history for a goddess with little (if any) prior mythology, even while Ovid establishes parallels and lays bare tensions between the Floralia and other feasts in the Augustan calendar, and allows a minor deity whose festal honors included controversial entertainments (e.g. striptease) to assert her self-importance and validate his own calendrical elegy (on the last see Newlands, *Playing with Time*). I focus on three comparandae.

1. Recent scholarship (Barchiesi, Fantham, Pasco-Pranger) has drawn attention to the gap opened up between the new, solemn Augustan anniversary of Palatine **Vesta** on April 28 and the traditional start of the jocund Floralia that day. The poet postpones the latter until the next month in order to meet the challenge of the *grandius . . . opus* (4.948) that Vesta's feast presents. One may add that Ovid's celebration of Flora in May keeps us very much in mind of the 'displacement.' The poet emphatically acknowledges his postponement to Flora at the start and attributes to her the somewhat dubious honor of owning the "borderland" between the two months. The opening collocation *Mater, ades* (5.183) recurs from 4.828 (only in these two verses), where it is addressed to Vesta (4.828), thereby, in effect, repairing the earlier slight to Flora even as it recalls it.
2. In the same verse, the appellation *Mater . . . florum* surely conjures up Flora's first appearance in extant Latin poetry at Lucretius 5.739, where in procession *Flora . . . mater* (again the first 'half' of the hexameter) strews the ground with multicolored flowers in advance of Cupid, Spring, and—most important of all (note the repeated name)—**Venus**. When Ovid's Flora at some length explains her identity to the inquisitive Ovid, she pointedly resembles Venus in some respects. While she reigns over the blooming of all plants (both in *Fasti* and elsewhere), Flora locates herself especially within the ornamental garden, traditionally under Venus' care (e.g. Varr. *RR* 1.1.6). Likewise a la Venus her sphere is expanded to include the 'bloom' of human youth (only here). In noting that conspicuous members of Venus' usual entourage, the Horae and Charites, approach in springtime to gather and bind into garlands "my gifts," Flora once again imitates or rivals the great goddess of spring (and of Ovid's April—cf. too Lucretius' proem, e.g. *tibi suavis daedala tellus / summittit flores*). The poet himself appeals to Flora for inspiration (5.190) and fame (5.377–78), in the latter case by asking for the 'scattering' of her gifts upon him (*sparge*; cf. *praespargens* in Lucr.); Venus is the only other deity addressed in such terms in *Fasti* (4 init.), as an inspirational divinity of Ovidian elegy.
3. Boyd notes that Ovid's Flora "creates a past for herself, building a history out of analogies with long-familiar stories." She does not mention the most important of these, the myth of **Ceres** and Proserpina, featured in Book 4 at the Cerialia: cf. Flora's catalogue of the flowers she created with those itemized as they are picked by Persephone and her friends; the boast that her beauty won her mother a *generum . . . deum* as lead-in to Zephyrus' rape of her recalls Jupiter laying out the advantage of Pluto as a *nec gener . . . pudendus* for the raped Persephone. Such narrative echoes underscore the ancient cultic connections between Ceres and Flora. Others resonate in terms of the Ovidian Flora's self-assertive personality. She compares her punishment of the neglectful Romans with that by other deities (Jupiter and Diana are named); the penalty of withering plants resembles nothing so much as Ceres' cataclysmic measure after her daughter's loss. The itemization of blasted blossoms may be read as *aemulatio* of Ceres' retribution—not just grain but vines, olive-trees, and garden flowers are destroyed.