

Captain Frederick Marryat and the floral telegraph; or, a forgotten coder and his floral code

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Abstract-

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES THE FLORAL TELEGRAPH; A New Mode of Communication by Floral Signals, a rare Victorian novel published anonymously in 1836 and reprinted in 1850 with a new tagline — The Floral Telegraph; Or, Affection's Signals. The reprint includes an ascription to Captain Frederick Marryat, Royal Navy (1792–1848) (See Figure 5). The majority of Marryat's biographers, scholars, and archivists have doubted the posthumous ascription. Here, I challenge the critical consensus and argue that Marryat did indeed write The Floral Telegraph; published in 1836 and that the attribution of 1850 is correct. I begin with a biographical sketch of Marryat, a brief synopsis of the novel, and a review of its scant, mostly skeptical reception. I then argue that the “floral code” presented in the text resembles (albeit through parody) Marryat's famous codebook for maritime flag signals and that the Captain's acknowledged interest in botany and horticulture gave him the fluency necessary to create the Table of Flowers (See Figure 6). In addition, Marryat had a strong relationship with the novel's publisher, Saunders and Otley, and he was the editor of the Metropolitan, a literary magazine which ran a favorable review shortly after The Floral Telegraph; was first published. The narrative also reflects Marryat's stylistic tendency to satire and parody and his ideas about literacy and widespread publication seem to be inversely reflected in the ironic digressions of the unreliable narrator, Horace Honeycomb, and the diatribe against the “cursed and abominable art of Printing” (117) offered by the inventor of the floral code, Floribel. I conclude my essay by viewing The Floral Telegraph; as representative of early Victorian issues of literacy, affect, and disembodied, long-distance communication in the age immediately preceding the advent of the electromagnetic telegraph.

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