The ritual significance of yellow among the Romans

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INTRODUCTION

The conventional significance of color occupies an important and little-understood position in the human thought of all ages, but it is only within recent years that any detailed study has been made of individual colors as being religiously symbolic. Among the ancient Romans, religion was almost entirely a matter of convention, and we should therefore expect to find that their religious rites were, in a large degree, fettered by a formalism which tended to produce an intricate system of symbolism. Such being the case, it has been for centuries the task of scholars to attempt to discover the meaning of certain religious rites, a meaning which the Romans themselves were far from understanding. In all these researches, however, there is but little mention of the significance of color, and it is the aim of this study to examine a part of this phase of Roman religion.

A recent study by Dr. M. E. Armstrong, of Goucher College, has accounted most satisfactorily for the use of scarlet, purple, black and white, and gold in Roman ritual, but no study has been made of the use of yellow, which is important particularly in the marriage ceremony. Of what natural phenomena was yellow the visible sign or representation, and what was the underlying idea which the Romans wished to express by its use? These are the questions which must be confronted in an investigation of this kind. In this connection the words found to be of the greatest importance are luteus and croceus. First of all, therefore, we have tried to collect, as nearly as possible, all the passages in which they occur, in order to decide the difference, if any, in their color denotation. Though it has been impossible to make separate mention of all the references collected for this purpose, those have been quoted which seem to bear especially upon the final decision.

A brief study of the word flavus revealed the fact that, with perhaps one exception, it has apparently no symbolical significance; therefore references to its use are few, and the discussion is confined for the most part to passages in which luteus or croceus occurs.
In an effort to discover the fundamental idea which the Romans wished to express by their use of yellow, it has been found necessary to introduce discussions of some length explanatory of several of the most important conceptions associated with Roman religion and private life.

Greek literature has been drawn upon only so far as it bears directly upon our discussion, and no exhaustive collection of material has been attempted in that field.
THE RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF YELLOW AMONG THE ROMANS

COMPARISON OF COLOR TERMS

The word yellow, like all other general terms denoting one color or another in the English language, may be understood to indicate any one of a number of shades. Similarly in Latin, a somewhat wide range of tint variation must be given to such a general term as luteus, croceus, or flavus. Professor Price finds in the color system of Vergil forty-two pigments, and calculates that "each color term must cover on an average, the expression of twenty-six closely allied tints." It is fair to draw the conclusion then that by a like study of other Latin authors somewhat the same result would be obtained, and that "for each color term, therefore, we must seek to find one color as the norm or axis of its chromatic power."

A study and comparison of the words luteus and croceus is interesting chiefly because of the similarity rather than the dissimilarity of the objects to which they are applied. Flowers, flower seeds, violets, the aurora, pallor of countenance, the yolk of egg, parchment, flickering light, are indifferently spoken of as luteus or croceus. Professor McCrea arrives at the conclusion that Ovid's standard in nature for luteus is sulphur, judging from the line "luteave exiguis ardescent sulphura

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4 Colum. 9.4.4; Plin. N. H. 21.131; Copa 13. There is manuscript authority for the reading "et Coecropio" for "etiam croceo" in the last passage, a reading which would make the reference of no value here.
6 Prud. Cath. 8.26–7; Tib. 1.8.52; Hor. Epod. 10.16; Pers. 3.95; Cass. Fel. 49, p. 128.9 (ed. Rose); Paul. Petric. Mart. 3.199.
8 Juv. 7.23; Tib. 3.1.9.
9 Sol. 2.43; Apul. Met. 11.3.
10 N. G. McCrea, Ovid's Use of Colour and Colour Terms, Classical Studies in Honour of Henry Drisler, p. 188.
fumis." He argues therefore that luteus is a greenish yellow, showing also that in Ovid's other three uses of the word the application would be scientifically accurate. Of Ovid this is perhaps true, as would also be suggested by such word combinations as: "(folia) colore in luteum languescente,"13 "(cucumis) mades-
cit luteus,"14 "luteis ramulis,"15 "luteola oliva,"16 and "folia
eius (dodecatheoni) exeunt a lutea radice."17 Following Pro-
fessor McCrea's interpretation we might also accurately de-
scribe the color effects of the aurora by luteus. Pallor of
countenance too, as everyone probably can attest from personal observation,19 properly comes under the same designation. But
in uncritical passages such as those extant in Latin literature,
it seems unlikely that the greenish tint would be emphasized in referring to parchment, the yolk of egg, flowers and flower
stamens,20 though any one of these is capable of great variation of
color. It is the brilliant yellow of the marigold21 which Vergil
wishes to impress upon the mind of his reader and not the
greenish hue of a rare variety.

But primitive man was notoriously awkward and unobserving
in devising terms for color, and the ancient Romans them-
selves without doubt confused the two words, and in many
passages are found actually to have identified them. Isidore22
says: "luteus color rubicundus, quod est croceus. Nam cro-
ceum lutei coloris est, ut (Verg. Ecl. 4. 44): 'croceo mutavit

11 Met. 15.351. H. Blümmer, Die Farbenbezeichnungen bei den römischen
Dichtern, Berliner Studien, vol. XIII, p. 128, maintains that in this case the
word "bedeutet einfach gelb."
12 Met. 7.703; 13.579 f.; Fast. 4.714.
13 Plin. N. H. 27.133.
14 Colum. 10.398.
16 Colum. 12.49.9.
18 O. Rood, Modern Chromatics, p. 245.
19 Cf. Macbeth 1.7: 37-8: "And wakes it now, to look so pale and green,
At what it did so freely?"
21 Verg. Ecl. 2.50.
Et est hypallage pro 'croceo luteo,' nam crocem lutei coloris est." Non. p.
549 M: "Luteus color proprie crocinus est." Isid. Orig. 18.41.2: "luteos,
id est croceos." Claud. 10.211.
vellera luto.’” Gellius\textsuperscript{23} classes luteus as “rufus color,” associating it with rubidus, rutulus, and poeniceus, but perhaps no more credence can be given to this classification than to his accompanying etymology: “luteus contra rufus color est dilutior; inde ei nomen quoque esse factum videtur.” It is strange that Latin writers persistently class luteus with the shades of red when no passage of literature, with one possible exception,\textsuperscript{24} forces us to interpret the word thus. But it is constantly difficult for us to draw the line between the shades of red and those of yellow, and luteus and croceus, like our scarlet, may denote shades tinged either with yellow or with orange.

On the other hand, Gellius\textsuperscript{26} speaks of croceus as “rufus color,” associating it at the same time with igneus, flammeus, sanguineus, ostrinus, and aureus. There is probably more reason for considering croceus as being of a reddish hue\textsuperscript{27} than luteus, because of several passages in which the former is used of blood.\textsuperscript{28} The sunset,\textsuperscript{29} and the rainbow,\textsuperscript{30} of which the most noticeable hues are perhaps those of red, are also called croceus. A number of other word combinations would further suggest the reddish color.\textsuperscript{31} Except in these few passages the usage of the word does not seem to differ from that of luteus, and so we may conclude that the norm of each color scale is a pure yellow, tending to shade, in the case of luteus, toward green, in the case of croceus, toward red.

Little need be said of flavus, since it is of less distinctive importance to our study and shows fewer variations in hue. Its general standards in nature are the waters and sands of the Tiber,\textsuperscript{32} the arena,\textsuperscript{33} the shore,\textsuperscript{34} and especially the golden

\textsuperscript{23} 2.26.8, 15.
\textsuperscript{24} Nemes. Cyn. 319: “rubescere luto.”
\textsuperscript{25} 2.26.5.
\textsuperscript{26} Price, op. cit. p. 14.
\textsuperscript{27} Chiron 169: “eucunque sanguilentus unor per nares profuet et croceus.”
\textsuperscript{28} Perhaps also Cypr. Gall. Lev. 112; Veg. Mulom. 1.3; Potam. Tract. 2 p. 1416\textsuperscript{a}; Lucr. 6.1188.
\textsuperscript{29} Prud. c. Symm. 2 praef. 4; Cypr. Gall. Exod. 615.
\textsuperscript{30} Cypr. Gall. Gen. 335; Verg. Aen. 4.700.
\textsuperscript{32} Ov. Fast. 5.318.
\textsuperscript{33} Ov. Met. 14.448; Trist. 5.1.31.
\textsuperscript{34} Ov. Ibis 47.
\textsuperscript{35} Ov. Met. 15.722.
yellow hair\textsuperscript{34} which the Romans valued so highly. Schmidt\textsuperscript{35} describes \textit{flavus} as “nur gelb oder blond.” It is used especially of Ceres\textsuperscript{36} and seems to have become a fixed poetic epithet descriptive of the ripened grain.

\textbf{YELLOW IN THE FLAMMEUM}

No mention has as yet been made here of these words as used in certain connections which would be of no consequence in determining their color denotation, but which nevertheless are of great importance to the study of Roman life and thought.

The most important use of yellow in Roman ritual was in the bridal veil, the \textit{flammeum}, “quo se cooperiunt mulieres die nuptiarum.”\textsuperscript{37} I speak of it as “yellow” in spite of a number of German critics, notably Samter,\textsuperscript{38} who mention it as being “von roter Farbe.” The bridal veil was, however, \textit{luteus},\textsuperscript{39} and \textit{luteus}, as has been shown, can scarcely be considered red.\textsuperscript{40} So important were the rite and the color of the veil, that there were dyers at Rome who devoted themselves wholly to the coloring of marriage veils, “flammeari, infectores flammei coloris,” says Festus.\textsuperscript{41} The custom of veiling the bride seems never to have been departed from; the very expressions: “mulier nubit,”\textsuperscript{42} “flammae sumit,”\textsuperscript{43} were in themselves indicative of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Lucan. 4.412; Tib. 1.1.15; Verg. \textit{Georg.} 1.96; Ov. \textit{Am.} 3.10.3, 43; \textit{Met.} 6.118; \textit{Fast.} 4.424.
\item Schol. ad Juv. 6.225.
\item Ernst Samter, \textit{Familienfeste}, pp. 47 ff.
\item Claud. 10.211; Plin. \textit{N. H.} 21.46; Lucan. 2.361. A. Rich (\textit{Wörterbuch der röm. Alt., }s. v. \textit{flammeum}) says: “Es (the veil) war von tiefer und glänzender gelbe Farbe, wie eine Flamme, daher sein Name.”
\item Blümner, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 126, n. 1: “blutrot war die Farbe des Flammeums auf keinen Fall.” A. Walde, \textit{Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch}, \textit{s. v. lutum}, translates \textit{luteus} as “goldgelb.” Schol. ad Juv. 6.225, calls it “sanguineum.”
\item Festus p. 89 M.
\item Orthographia Capri, \textit{Gram. Lat.} VII, p. 103.14-15, Kell. Cf. Martial’s use of \textit{nubere}: 5.17.4; 4.13.1; 6.45.3; and many other instances.
\item Juv. 2.124 (here in derision for effeminacy); \textit{Stat. Theb.} 2.341. Cf. also Apul. \textit{Apol.} 76: “flammeo absoluto”; Juv. 6.225: “flammae conerit”; and Schol. on this line.
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