

Lecture 37

Horticulture and Literature: Shakespeare

Shakespeare, the greatest writer in English—if not the greatest in any tongue, is also a rich source of horticultural information of the Elizabethan period (1533–1603). The renaissance came late to England but it flowered with a brilliance that still interests humanists and scientists alike.

Shakespeare writes about the human condition in a way that still, despite changes in the language, comes across fresh and pungent. In fact, many of Shakespeare's horticultural expressions have become clichés.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. Hamlet 1.04.90

There's small choice in rotten apples. Taming of the Shrew 1.01.135

Shakespeare uses the world of imagery—simile, metaphor, analogy to paint his verbal pictures. It is through an analysis of this imagery that Caroline Spurgeon (1931) has found one key to understand Shakespeare the man.

The bulk of Shakespeare's imagery is drawn from everyday things, seen and unseen. There are some bookish facts, some from the imagination, but the main body derives from the real world of nature, from everyday life, from sports. And of all nature's images, the greatest number is devoted to horticulture. The Bard displays an intimate knowledge, borne undoubtedly from personal observation, about plant growth, propagation, grafting, pruning, manuring, weeding, ripeness, and decay. Almost 200 plants are referred to and there is almost always more keen references to horticulture than, for example, general farming. These allusions to gardens, gardening, botany and plant lore are so abundant that it seems obvious that Shakespeare was, at the least, an expert gardener. A study of horticultural imagery in Shakespeare will lead one to both an appreciation of Shakespeare and an understanding of horticulture in the Elizabethan period as well as of today.

Horticultural Plants

O, had the monster seen those lily hands

Tremble, like aspen leaves upon a lute

Titus Andronicus, II(4)44

Mine eyes smell Onions, I shall weep anon:

Good Tom Drum, lend me a handkercher.

All's Well that Ends Well, V(3) 321

*And most dear actors, eat no Onions nor
Garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath.*

Midsummer Night's Dream, IV(2) 42

So we grew together,

Like to a double Cherry, seeming parted,

But yet a union in partition;

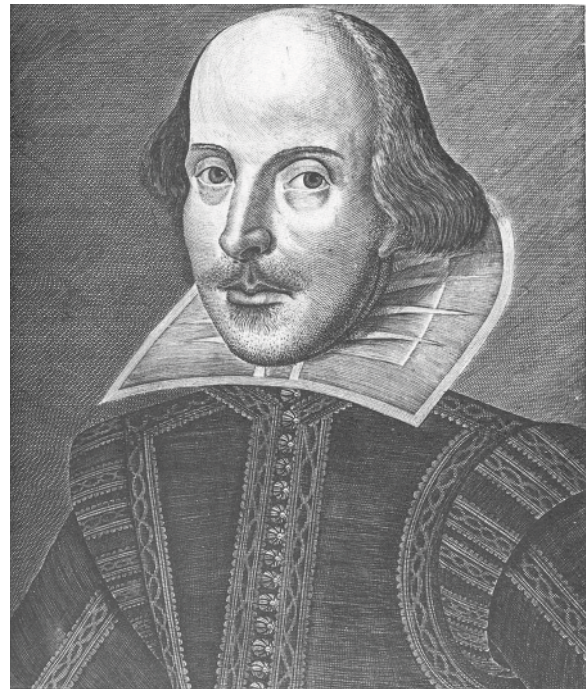
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem.

Midsummer Night's Dream, III(2)139

Medicinals

Not Poppy or Mandragora,

Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,



William Shakespeare

*Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ownedst yesterday*
Othello, III,(3)330

Roots of Hemlok digg'd I' the dark.
Macbeth, IV(1)25

*I have conveyed aboard, and I have brought
The oil, the Balsamum, and aqua vitae.*
Comedy of Errors, IV(1)187

Flowers and Flowering

*When I have plucked the Rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It needs must wither. I'll smell it on the tree*
Othello,V(2)86.

*Though other things grow fair against the sun,
Yet fruits that blossom first will first be ripe*
Othello, II(3) 382

*The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die;
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*
Venus and Adonis, (1079)

Gardens and Gardeners

'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant Nettles or sow Lettuce, set Hyssop, and weed up Thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness, or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.
Othello, I(3)322

Come my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's profession.
Hamlet, V(1)34.

Pruning

*But, poor old man, thou prunest a rotten tree,
That cannot so much as a blossom yield
In lie of all thy pains and industry.*
As You Like It, II(3)63
*Go bind thou up young dangling apricocks,
Which like unruly children make their sire
Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight*

*Give some supportance to the bending twigs.
Go thou, and like an executioner
Cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays,
That look too lofty in our commonwealth:
All must be even in our government*
Richard II, III(4)

*Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart,
Unpruned dies; her hedges even-pleach'd,
Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair,
Put forth disorder'd twigs...
And all our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness
Even so our houses, and ourselves, and children,
Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
The sciences that should become our country...
Henry V, V(2)*

Manuring

*As gardeners do with ordure (dung) hide those roots
That shall first spring and be most delicate.*
Henry V, II(2), 4

Grafting

Her royal stock graft with ignoble plants
Richard III, III(7) 127

*Noble stock
Was graft with Crab-tree slip.*
2nd Henry VI, III(2Z)213

*Nay, you shall see my orchard, where, in an arbour we will eat a last year's Pippin of my own
grafting, with a dish of Caraways and so forth.*
2nd Henry IV, V(3).

*You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentle scion to the wildest stock,
and make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race: this is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.*
Winter's Tale. IV(4)81.

Weeds and Insects

*How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fye on it, ah fye! 'tis an unweeded garden*

*That grows to seed; thinks rank and gross in nature
O possess it merely.*

Hamlet, I(3)133

*Now 'tis the spring, and weeds are shallow-rooted;
Suffer them now, and they'll o'ergrow the garden,
And choke the herbs for want of husbandry.*

2nd Henry VI, II(3)31

*These are my blossoms blasted in the bud,
And caterpillars eat my leaves away.*

2nd Henry VI, III(1)89

*She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek.*

Twelfth Night, II (4)113

Frost

*Death lies on her like an untimely frost
Upon the sweetest flower of the field.*

Romeo and Juliet, IV(1)58

*This is the state of man: today he puts forth
The tender leaves of hopes, to-morrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honours thick upon him:
And third day comes a frost, a killing frost,
And, when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,
And then he falls, as I do*

Henry VIII, III(4,70)

Horticultural Seasons

*For never-resting time leads summer on
To hideous winter, and confounds him there;
Sap check'd with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
Beauty o'ersnow'd, and bareness everywhere;
Then, were not summer's distillation left,
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was;
But flowers distill'd, though they with winter meet,
Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet.*

Sonnet 5

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,*

*And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,
By chance or natures's changing course untrimm'd*
Sonnet 18

Marketing

I cannot do't without compters. Let me see what am I to buy for our sheep-shearing feast? Three pound of sugar, five pound of currants, rice—what will this sister of mine do with rice?....She hath made me four and twenty nosegays for the shearers....I must have saffron to color the warden pies; made; dates, none—that's out of my note; nutmegs, seve; a race or two of ginger, but that I may beg; four pounds of prunes, and as many of raisins o'th'sun.

The Winter's Tale, IV(3)

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