

A FLORAL SURVEY OF SHAKESPEARE

PREZENȚA FLORILOR ÎN OPERA LUI SHAKESPEARE

MIHALACHE Roxana

University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iasi, Romania

Abstract. *Though not as a botanist, but as a poet and dramatist, William Shakespeare wrote many memorable lines about flowering plants. These have inspired artists over the ages, such as Keats and Shelley. It was natural for Shakespeare to include the familiar flowers and plants of his childhood in his writings, from buttercups to daisies, lilies, cowslips and acorn cups. And, of course, no proper garden would be complete without roses, which are mentioned at least seventy times in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. In the present study we put forward the main flowers that are recurrent in William Shakespeare's works and submit the meaning of some flowers as they were perceived during the Renaissance. For example, all the flowers played a major role in Midsummer's Eve celebrations as it was the custom to deck out the houses with white lilies, birch or fennel in order to repel evil. Some flowers symbolize love, remembrance, while others insincerity or everlasting suffering.*

Key words: Shakespeare, literary work, flower names, comparison, rose

Rezumat. *Deși nu ca botanist, ci ca poet și dramaturg, William Shakespeare a scris multe versuri memorabile despre flori. Acestea au inspirat mulți scriitori de-a lungul deceniilor, printre care Keats și Shelley. Era firesc pentru Shakespeare să includă în scrieri florile și plantele familiare copilăriei lui, de la pîntenul cocoșului la margarete, crini, ciuboșica-cucului și ghinde. Și, bine înțeles, nici o grădină adevărată nu ar fi completă fără trandafiri, care sunt menționați de cel puțin șaptezeci de ori în piesele și sonetele lui. În acest studiu prezentăm florile cele mai importante ce sunt frecvente în opera lui William Shakespeare și semnificația unor flori așa cum era percepută în timpul Renașterii. De exemplu, toate florile aveau un rol important în sărbătorile Solstițiului de vară, când exista obiceiul împodobirii caselor cu crini albi, mesteacăn sau chimen-dulce pentru a îndepărta răul. Unele flori simbolizează iubirea, amintirea, pe când altele fățărnicia sau suferința continuă.*

Cuvinte cheie: Shakespeare, operă literară, denumire de flori, trandafir, comparație

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The basic materials for the research consisted in the writings of William Shakespeare, with special interest in Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream. The working methods we used were the selection of texts, the structure as well as the interpretation of the works under study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Shakespeare's images have constantly been picked out and drawn upon in order to illustrate one aspect or another of the poet's thought or mind. The images form a world in themselves for they mirror a very rich experience and a very

profound and soaring imagination. He visualizes human beings as plants and trees either choked with weeds or well trained and bearing ripe fruits, sweet smelling as a rose or noxious as a weed.

Innumerable passages from Shakespeare provide evidence of his love and knowledge of plants and herbs. His knowledge of flowers was not that of a botanist, but rather of a countryman gifted with a keen sense of observation which noted the colour, the form and the smell of particular flowers and plants. We do know that he spent his childhood in the English countryside, surrounded by meadows of wild flowers and simple house gardens as well as masterpieces of horticultural design and beauty. He also had a charming garden at his residence in Stratford, where he spent his last years and where he wrote *The Winter's Tale* which includes many garden references.

It was but natural for Shakespeare to include the familiar flowers and plants of his childhood in his writings. If we consider an alphabetical list we find plants from "aconitum", a member of the buttercup family to "yew" save for plants representing "q" and "z". More than 180 different species are mentioned in Shakespeare's works which sometimes make us believe we read a horticultural text. There is a great amount of flowery adjectives while each plant has a specific purpose in his prose or poetry. Some became backdrops, others metaphors, while some even played the roles of minor protagonists in his literature. Many plants mentioned, such as carnations, roses, daisies, daffodils and rosemary are familiar to gardeners, while others like oxlips, elderberries, stonecrop are lesser-known native of the writer's home country.

Shakespeare mentions roses more frequently than any other flower, particularly the red and white ones, emblems of the Houses of York and Lancaster. He also makes reference to the Tudor rose which resulted when the two roses were united to create this rose.

The rose is mentioned at least 70 times in his plays and sonnets. It is considered one of nature's most beautiful creations. He wrote about the musk-rose, the Provençal cabbage rose and the englantine or sweet-brier rose in particular. Shakespeare compares Romeo to a flower that smells sweet to the sense just as he does to her. Juliet knows that he is as sweet as a flower. Unfortunately, his name is not so sweet and she says that if a rose were called by another name, it would still be a rose. So, no matter what Romeo's name may be, he would be the same beloved and sweet person. It is the most familiar quote about roses:

"What's in a name? what which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

Lady Capulet compares Paris with a flower that is so beautiful that even summer cannot offer up a flower that is so beautiful. Shakespeare brilliantly uses the flower and the rose as symbols for the two suitors for Juliet's hand. Romeo is given the symbol of a specific flower and Paris just a flower. It means that Juliet sees Paris as just one flower in the garden, while Romeo is the rose for her.

After the famous balcony scene, Juliet compares her affection for Romeo to a “bud of love” which the next time they meet will be a “beauteous flower”. This shows that Juliet understands that their love is in its infancy but it may blossom into fully developed love.

Shakespeare used flowers and plants as images to illustrate his ideas. For instance Ophelia used flowers as symbols of her deep sorrow and grief. Being very upset because her father, the King’s Lord Chamberlain had just been killed, she expressed herself by passing out flowers to the court in her seeming state of mind: rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbines, rue (herb of grace), daisies and violets. By doing this, she accused the king and the queen of the guilt in an indirect way which was safer than stating her opinions directly.

But Ophelia did not choose the flowers hazardously. They have certain symbolic meanings. Rosemary, *rosemarinus officinalis*, means to remember and faithfulness:

“there’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance;
pray you, love, remember”

She wants her brother, Laertes, to help her discover who killed their father. She tells him:

“remember think back on what’s being going on.” Pansy, *viola tricolour*, is the symbol for thoughts and faithfulness: “and there is pansies, that’s for thoughts”. When we say that someone is pensive we mean that the person is thoughtful and contemplative.



Fennel, *foeniculum vulgare*, stands for marital infidelity, flattery, while columbine, *aquilegia vulgaris*, is the symbol for male adultery and ingratitude being the emblem of deceived lovers. We refer to the point when Ophelia walks to the king and while handing him some fennel, says:

“there’s fennel for you and columbines”.



She knew that the new king loved flattery and this is what she did first but then she accused him of foolish adultery which was a frightening thing at the time if we think of the king’s power who could take someone’s life. Rue, *ruta*



graveolens, means adultery and repentance of all transgressions for women and everlasting suffering. Walking over to the queen Ophelia says:

“there’s rue for you; and here’s some for me”.

So she insults both the queen and king in front of witnesses. The daisy, *bellis perennis*, is often to be found in Shakespearean works. It symbolises innocence. When Ophelia



sees a daisy and says “there’s a daisy”, and picks it up, looks sadly and puts it back, she is actually saying “there is no innocence here”.

Flower symbolism was surely known to Ophelia so she knew exactly what she was doing when she handed out flowers in that scene.

There is a reference to crow flowers nettles and daisies in Hamlet, where the queen informs Laertes of Ophelia’s death:

“Queen: Your sister is drown’d, Laertes

Laertes: Drown’d! O! Where?

Queen: There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
that shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
there with fantastic garlands did she come
crow flowers, nettles, daises, long purples.”

(*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene 7)



The crow flower is also known as crowfoot, a name coming from the resemblance between the leaves of this plant and the crow’s feet. It is *Ranunculus scleratus*, of the buttercup family, *Ranunculaceae* a semi- quatic plant. These flowers must have been picked up from the waterside where Ophelia was roaming about.

Cowslips, which are closely related to primrose is refer to in *Cymbeline* and it is a reference which leads to a tragic end. The flowers are of a golden yellow with an orange patch at the base of each petal.



One of the earliest of flowers in the English literature marshes and damp meadows is the cuckoo flower, so called because it blooms at about the same time as the bird reaches England. Gone mad at the ingratitude of his two elder daughters, King Lear was roaming about in the wild near Dover, while searching for him his youngest daughter Cordelia, who really loved him, describes the King as one wearing a crown of wild flowers:

“Crown’d with rank fumitor and furrow weeds
With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn.”

(*King Lear*, Act IV, scene 4)



Shakespeare seems to have been fascinated by the ancient traditions and customs of the midsummer and solstice celebrations which celebrated love, romance and the fantasy world of the fairy people. He wrote *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* being probably inspired by the magic of the midsummer night, the fairy magic and the special powers of the summer flowers. It is that magical midsummer time of the year, when fairies were “little people” as Shakespeare called them come out to play in the moonbeams of the summer solstice.

We find in this enchanting comedy set in Athens, a magical world of fairies, fantasy and romance where the characters are surrounded with traditional

flowers as well as other popular flowers and plants of the time: wild thyme, oxlips, violets, woodbine, sweet musk-roses, eglantine, pansies and others. Of course, the rose could not have missed from the summer garden. Even the dew from rose petals was highly coveted, especially the dew of Midsummer's day which made the ladies who washed their face in it become more beautiful in the coming year.

We did an analysis of the flowers that are mentioned in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and we could see that there are no less than nine different species of flowers.

Table 1

Flowers mentioned in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Type of flower	Recurrence		Quotation
	No.	%	
Rose	7	39%	"But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd" "How chance the roses there do fade so fast?" "Far in the fresh lap of the crimson rose" "With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine" "Some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds" "Of colour like the red rose on triumphant brier" "And stick musk-roses in thy sleek smooth head"
Cowslips	3	16.7%	"The cowslips tall her pensioners be" "And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear" "These yellow cowslip cheeks"
Eglantine	1	5.5%	"With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine"
Lily	1	5.5%	"Most radiant Pyramus, most lily-white of hue"
Oxlips	1	5.5%	Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows
Primrose	1	5.5%	"Upon faint primrose-beds were wont to lie"
Thyme	1	5.5%	"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows"
Violet	1	5.5%	"Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows"
Woodbine	2	11.3%	"Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine" "So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle"
TOTAL	18	100	

As we could see in the table 1, that the flower that appears most frequently is the rose, with 7 entries (39%) as in all his literary works, followed by the cowslips with 3 entries (16.7%) and woodbine with 2 (11.3%). All the other six flowers appear only once.

The favourite flowers of the fairies were the cowslips, also known as fairy's cups. A wild flower, member of the primrose family, once covered entire meadows throughout Europe in Shakespeare's time. Let us see what the fairy tells Puck. She is the servant of the fairy queen and is on her rounds of service and her duty for the knight was:

"And I serve the fairy Queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green.
The cowslips tall her pensioner's be;
In their gold coats spots you see;
Those be rubies, fairy favours,
In those freckles live their savours."

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 2, Scene 1)

Another flower which was enjoyed by Shakespeare is **Dianthus**, a popular summer plant. Its botanical name is derived from the Greek words *dios*, meaning divine and *anthos* meaning flowers, but it is more commonly known as carnation, pink, or Sweet William. Shakespeare referred to it as gillyflower.

Cupid's flower also known as **heartsease**, **pansy**, and **violet** is *Viola tricolor*, of *Violaceae*. Under the name cupid's flower there is only one reference to this plant in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. With Dian's bud (bud of *Agnus castus*, a verbanaceous tree), the cupid's flower was employed by Oberon to disenchant Titania, his queen.

Shakespeare refers to violets and daisies dozens of times, but very often he refers to clusters of flowers, sometimes in a brief poetic description like Oberon's, sometimes in a song like that near the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* or as the subject of a dialogue with action, at the centre of which is "a flower-maiden" as in the case of Ophelia in her mad scene in *Hamlet*.

So, we can state that a common idea of Shakespeare's works is the flow of life through all things, in nature and man alike. A close reading and interpretation of the text shows us what kind of visual richness can be wrought from Shakespeare's works.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Shakespeare mentions more than 180 different types of flowers in all his work.
2. The flowers that appear most frequently in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are roses, followed by cowslips, woodbine, primrose, thyme, oxlips, lily, violet, and eglantine.
3. Shakespeare's flowers have different symbols, ranging from pure endless love to adultery or foreshowing tragic ends.

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