

FLOWERS IN SHAKESPEARE

By A. J. WM. MYERS

THE people in Shakespeare's England were lovers of gardens. Where each bed was complete in itself the whole made a "knotted garden." They were also fond of having "a pleached bower," a "pleached gate" or "a thick pleached alley." They formed secluded places for dessert (then called banquet) or business, or pleasure, and especially for lovers for "love-thoughts be rich when canopied with bowers."

Shakespeare refers, and correctly, to at least seventy flowers. And a similar accurate knowledge is revealed in his reference to animals, birds, fish and other creatures; cereals, vegetables, nuts and trees; ships and sailing; military matters and battles; English history and the Bible; and medicines and diseases of the body and, strangely, of the mind.

The author knows "baleful weeds" and "tooth'd briars; that canker worms "eat my bud" and gall "the infants of the spring"; "caterpillars" and "parasites" destroy "the tender leaves"; that cold winds and "an envious sneaping frost" often "bites the first-born infants of the Spring"; and "unruly blasts" and a "killing frost" nip everything and then "flowers with frost" must "hang the head." One must water "new plants" and pruning is necessary, to "cut off the heads of fast growing sprays." In grafting "we marry a gentler scion to the wildest stock" and so "improve on nature" but remember that "the art itself is nature." He knew that if we "wound the bark, the skin of our fruit-trees" they may be safely pruned. The gardener must kill weeds in spring or "they'll o'er grow the garden, and choke the herbs for lack of husbandry." From this he draws a moral for life. The bard knew about cutting and caring for flowers: "Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime Rot and consume themselves in little time." He must have taken dead flowers from vases for "they smell far worse than weeds." And gardeners know times and seasons and "each thing that in season grows."

Shakespeare, the universal genius, knew flowers and we turn now for a brief glance at those he mentions.

The Anemone or Windflower was all the rage in the early sixteen hundreds after its introduction from Aleppo — white, yellow, purple, crimson, striped. Some say this was the flower Jesus referred to as the lilies of the field. When Adonis is killed by the boar "A purple flower sprung up, chequered with white."

Artemesia or Diana's Bud was considered valuable in keeping away moths from clothes. As Absynth or Wormwood it is not so attractive. Hamlet gleefully exclaims, "Wormwood, woormwood." It was also used in weaning babies: "When I did taste the wormwood on the nipple of my dug and felt it bitter."

Anne Page asks the elves to scour the chairs "with juice of balm" to bring luck. Cleopatra, dying, murmurs of her lover, "as sweet balm, as soft air, as gentle, — O Anthony!" It suggests the Balm of Gilead, that there is healing in God.

"Toothed Briars, sharp furzes" often "entered their frail shins." Beauty is often "scratched with briars." And at times many exclaim with Rosalind, "O! how full of briars is this working-day world." No bower would be complete without Sweet Briar or Eglantine: "Quite over-canopied with lush woodbine, with sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine."

The Broom-flower is mentioned in the Tempest: "Thy broom-groves, Whose shadow the dismissed bachelor loves. Being lass-lorn." The broom is best known as the emblem of the Plantagenets. King Henry II exclaimed, "This golden plant shall be my emblem henceforth." This plant is also used for brooms. Puck exclaimed, "I am sent with broom before To sweep the dust behind the door."

We do not fancy Burdock as a flower but it flourished then as now. "Burs I can tell you; they'll stick where they are thrown."

Even the Bullrush is not overlooked. The gaoler's daughter, dead, is bedecked with these and "a thousand fresh water flowers of several colours."

Of the three names, Buttercup, Cuckoo-buds, and Celandine the first is best known. "Cuckoo-buds of yellow hue" and "Cuckoo-buds of every hue" is thought to be the buttercup or king-cup but it has only one colour. It may be the lesser celandine so liked by Wordsworth. This is the common Pilewort. The Cuckoo-flower may be the Ragged Robin, one of the "idle weeds" with which the crazed king Lear garlanded himself.

Camomile smells sweetest when crushed. Falstaff said, "The more it is trodden on the faster it grows."

Caraway was used for seasoning and also for eating with apples. Shallow invites Falstaff: "Nay, you shall see mine orchard where, in arbour, we shall eat last year's pippin of mine own grafting, with a dish of caraways."

The Carnation was originally Coronation. It was used also to flavor wine and was called Sops in Wine and Clove

Picotee meaning "pinked edges." When the year is "growing ancient" said the young Perdita, then "the fairest flowers o' the season are the carnation and gillivors."

"He that sowed Cockle reaped no corn" is the sage adage in *Love's Labor's Lost*.

Columbine was loved then as now. It was sometimes called *aquilegia* because it was thought to resemble an eagle's talons. It symbolized the seven gifts of God and was usually painted with seven instead of five petals.

The term "slip" in Cowslip is said to be from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning dung because these flowers grew luxuriantly in pastures. The English cowslips were fragrant: "The even mead that erst brought forth The freckled cowslip." They were also called fairy cup and *Aeriel* sings: "In a cowslip's bell I lie." Shakespeare, a close observer, describes *Imogen*: "On her left breast A mole cinquespotted, like the crimson drops In the bottom of a cowslip."

The *Crocus* is not named by Shakespeare but many think it is referred to as saffron though that might better fit the daffodil.

The *Crown-imperial* is described by *Perdita* as one of the finest "flowers o' the spring."

Elizabethan gardens had almost hundreds of kinds of Daffodils so Wordsworth did not exaggerate when he wrote "ten thousand saw I at a glance." It is spring "when daffodils begin to peer" in "the sweet o' the year." "Daffodils That come before the swallow dares" are most welcome. The wooers of the gaoler's daughter brought maids "with chaplets on their heads" of daffodils. It is curious how the name developed: *asphodel*, *affodyl*, *daffodil*. It is supposed to be "that fat weed That roots itself in ease on *Lethe's wharf*."

The *Daisy* is one of the flowers in England that "paint the meadows with delight." It is one of *Ophelia's* bouquet — "There's a daisy for you." Even then daisies were "smell-less yet most quaint." Burns refers to it as "The wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower." It seems to be our *marguerite*.

The ubiquitous golden-crowned *Dandelion* — *dents de lion* — is not overlooked. He even knew that sheep do not like it: "demi-puppets. . .whereof the ewe not bites."

Darnel mixed with wheat makes bitter bread as *Joan of Arc* said to taunt the English when they failed to take Rouen: " 'Twas full of darnel; Do you like the taste?"

Dock, *Furmiter*, *Furze* or *Gorse* are not attractive flowers. *Cordelia* is heartbroken to see her father crowned with weeds.

Fennel was used as a relish. Falstaff, berating the prince, said to Dall, he "eats conger and fennel." Ophelia gave it to the king to clear his sight saying "There's fennel for you." It is interesting that the Greek name for it is *marathon*.

The Fern is not a flower but it was supposed to blossom on midsummer night. Gadshill tells Henry VI, "We have the receipt of fern-seed, We walk invisible." On midsummer night many watched to see the fern flower and to gather the seed.

The Flower-de-luce, though its botanical name is *iris*, was classed with lilies. "Lilies of all kinds, the flower-de-luce being one." In Greek mythology it guided dead women to the Elysian fields. It produced the orris root used especially to put among garments.

Garlic is not a flowering plant but must be included for a line of Dorcas to the clown: "Garlic to mend her kisses with."

When the year is "growing ancient" then "the fairest flowers o' the season are our carnations and streaked gillivors."

Ophelia, when her body was found, had garlands of weeds including Harebell or Crow-flower and other weeds.

The Hawthorn is a shrub but the amorous Sir John refers to the "lispig hawthorn buds." It is early spring for "when wheat is green" then "hawthorn buds appear."

The "cursed hebona" is believed to be Henbane. The king's ghost tells Hamlet how he was murdered by "the leperous distilment" poured into his ear. Incidentally, "the insane root that takes the reason prisoner" is perhaps the hemlock that Socrates had to drink.

"Herbs o' Grace" were especially for "sallets," perfumes and medicines. If there were no "sallets in the lines to make the matter savory" it was not good poetry. In "neat cookery" they "cut our roots in characters" or letters. Even Cleopatra is said to have had "salad days" when one is "green in judgment, cold in blood."

Christmas is not quite right without Holly. It comes to us by way of the Roman saturnalia along with the boar's head, candles, yule log, and mince pies. The Anglo-Saxon *hologen*, holly, was supposed to keep off evil spirits. "Then heigh-ho, the holly! This life is most jolly."

The very name Honey-suckle sounds luscious. It is one of the vines used to make "a pleached bower" where "honey-suckles, ripened by the sun, Forbid the sun to enter."

"The darling buds of May" in England would include the *Hyacinth*. These are mentioned in the sonnets.

The Ivy goes with the holly. They were the female and the

male and both reigned in the hall at Christmas. "The female ivy" says Titania, "so Enrings the barky fingers of the elm." The Winter's Tale speaks of sheep "browsing on ivy."

Lady-smocks is a common English flower. Ver, that is, Spring, in Love's Labour's Lost, sings: "When daisies pied and violet's blue And lady-smocks all silver-white And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue Do paint the meadows with delight." That is a lovely description.

Lark's-heels is our nasturtium. These are the "lark's-heels trim" in the song in The Two Noble Kinsmen.

Larkspur was called delphinium by the Greeks because of the supposed resemblance to the dolphin.

Lavender was used by the Romans in the bath hence its name, lavare, to wash or bathe. Perdita, speaking to her guests says, "Here's flowers for you; Hot lavender" and other herbs. The term 'hot' refers to the classification in mediaeval medicine meaning "to comfort and dry up the moisture of a cold brain." Lavender was used (as now) to put among handkerchiefs, sheets, and apparel and used as well as a fragrant flower.

Long Purples were among the flowers with which Ophelia decked herself. Some think Long Purples or Loosestrife is the purple-flowering orchis, and others that it is Dead Men's Fingers.

Mallow, with dock and their clan, are among the gardener's enemies.

The Mandrake, Mandragora, May Apple and love plant or root of White Byrny was believed to have almost magical powers. This was the plant Rachel used and then had children (Gen. 30: 15) It is a forked root a bit like the human form and "shrieks. . .when torn out of the earth." And the lecherous Falstaff speaks of that "forked raddish," Justice Shallow, for the "whores called him mandrake." It also makes one of "the drowsy syrups." In Othello, and Anthony cries "Give me to drink mandragora."

Marigold or Calendula is called "the spouse of the sun" for it "goes to bed wi' the sun and with him rises," "rises weeping" for it often has drops of dew in the flower when it opens.

When the lovely Lucrece lay down to sleep "Her eyes, like marigolds, had sheath'd their light." The calendula is the "Ardent Marigold" of Keats, and sonnet XXV declares that "favorites display themselves before the prince as marigolds at the sun's eye."

Marjoram is almost always called Sweet Marjoram. It was largely used in "sallets." "Indeed, sir, "said the clown, "she was the Sweet Marjoram of the sallet, or, rather, the Herb of Grace."

Mint was used with fish, peas, puddings, and meat. Pliny says "the smell of mint doth stir up the mind and taste to a greedy desire of meat." When the ham actor, impersonating Hector, cries, "I am that flower" Dumaine, one of the lords, interjects, "that mint!"

The Mistletoe deeply interested ancient people. It was this that Virgil gave to Aeneas to protect him in the underworld. It is probably the golden bough of the Druids which, when cut by the High Priest with a golden sickle, must never touch the ground. Ladies should know that kissing under the mistletoe is not likely to be effective unless "a berry is plucked off and given with each kiss to the maiden." But it is a parasite so the all-wise Shakespeare calls it "the baleful misletoe."

Monk's-hood is also known as Wolf's-bane and Aconite. It produced venom, as King Henry IV expressed it, as strong and sudden "as aconitum or rash gunpowder," and is the kind Romeo demands of the apothecary "That the life-weary taker may fall dead." Its handsome leaves and flowers make it still a favorite in garden .

Bottom said to Mustard-seed, one of the fairies, "that same cowardly, giant-like oxbeef hath devoured many a gentleman of your house. I promise you your kindred hath made my eyes water ere now."

The soft Myrtle is an emblem of peace and plenty, repose and love. "The moon-dew on the myrtle leaf" has a sweet scent.

The Narcissus calls to mind the handsome youth who was so enamored of his own beauty that he "died to kiss his shadow in the brook" and gives his name to that self-love which is a serious mental ill. His death gave rise to the flower: "And in his blood that on the ground lay spill'd, A purple flower sprung up, chequer'd with white." It may be, as some hold that this is the pansy or violet. Emilia exclaims, "Were there not maids enough?" What a fool, she implies, to love himself when maids are available!

Nasturtiums or yellow "Lark-heels trim" is popular. It is also called lark's-spurs or —toes. With carnations it made a "delicious tussie mussie" or nosegay.

"We call a nettle but a nettle and the faults of fools but folly." "Stinging nettles" they were called and yet "The strawberry grows beneath the nettle."

"Mine eyes smell onions" said Lafeu, "I shall weep anon". It is a stinging phrase.

The Oxlip was considered by some a hybrid of cowslip and primrose. Titania's bank contained oxlips and Perdita speaks of "bold oxlip." "Oxlips in their cradles growing" describes them.

The Pansy or Love-in-idleness is not our large blossom, but the little viola or Johnny-jump-up. "Pansies, that's for thoughts", said Ophelia. Pensee is the French name, meaning thought, and heartsease is another lovely name for these flowers.

"Maiden Pinks of odours sweet" and "daisies" and "sweet thyme true" are all in the song in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

"O! sir, plantain, a plain plantain. . .no salve, sir, but a plantain" expresses Love's Labor's Lost attitude to this plant.

The Pomegranate or many-seeded apple, as the French name has it, was highly valued. Its brilliant flower and fruit made it an emblem of prosperity. The Promised Land was to be "a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees and pomegranates." It was embroidered on Aaron's priestly robe, copied perhaps from Persian kings, and carved on pillars of the temple. Some think it was the tree of forbidden fruit in the Genesis story. The wily Pluto gave his wife Proserpine a pomegranate and she ate three of the seeds so could not return to earth. A compromise was effected and she was allowed on earth half the year so, with Ceres, we have our cereals. It is romantically correct that when Romeo and Juliet spent the night together the nightingale should sing "on yon pomegranate tree."

The Poppy produces the "drowsy syrup" to which the fierce Othello would not trust but must use his naked hands. "Not poppy nor mandragora, Nor all the drowsy syrup of the world, Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep Which thou owd'st yesterday." "In Flanders fields the poppies grow" and it has become the flower of remembrance and a lovely sight to all, except perhaps the farmer.

The Primrose family is early: "Primrose first child of Ver, Merry springtime's harbinger." Arviragus places a primrose on the grave of Fidele, the disguised Imogen, saying, "I'll sweeten thy sad grave: thou shalt not lack The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose." Perdita speaks of "pale primroses, That die unmarried, ere they can behold Bright Phoebus in his strength." "Faint primrose beds" were abundant in the woods in England. Venus, enticing Adonis, says, "Witness the primrose bank whereon I lie." Ophelia and Laertes say good-by and she reminds him, in reply to his lecture, that "Himself" who "the primrose path of dalliance treads" perhaps "recks not his own rede."

The cuckoo-flower is thought to be the Ragged Robin. It

is listed among the "idle weeds" with which King Lear garlanded himself.

Rhubarb perhaps should not be included among the flowers. Its medicinal value was well known. MacBeth cried out, "What rheubarb, senna, or what purgative drug Would scour these English hence!"

There are at least sixty references to the Rose in Shakespeare,—red, white, damask, canker, variegated, yellow, yellow-double. Emily was right: "Methinks a rose is best." The apothecary to whom Romeo applied for poison has among many samples, "old cakes of roses." No bower is complete without "sweet muskroses, and with eglantine." "My super-dainty Kate" looked as fine "As morning roses newly wash'd with dew." We can smell the "perfumed tincture of roses," and it must be lovely to have "Gloves as sweet as damask roses." When Don John declares "I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace," he means by canker not a bug or a nasty sore but an untended rose. The wars of the roses devastated England but Richard III declared, "We will unite the white rose and the red." Mrs. Quickly found Falstaff "as red as any rose." Tyrrell, sent to murder the little princes, could not do so for "Their lips were four red roses on a stalk." What can be fairer than "morning roses newly wash'd in dew." Venus thought that Adonis's "beauty set Gloss on the rose." Perhaps the fourteen year old Juliet is right: "What's in a name? that which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet" but we hope we will never lose the name. The poet points a moral. We should not lose our virtue for "Sweet roses do not so" for "Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made." In those days every home had its jar of potpourri. "Perfumed tincture of roses" was easily made in Shakespeare's day but flowers have been so much "improved" that almost all their fragrance is gone.

The Rosemary is well remembered: "The boar's head in hand bring I With garlands gay and rosemary."

Perhaps Rue should be used more now for it was supposed to sharpen the wit and cure insanity. Ophelia, distributing flowers with nice discrimination says, "There's rue for you; and here's some for me; We may call it herb-grace o' Sundays. Oh! You must wear your rue with a difference." Herb-grace on Sunday and as a savory in sallets but it also had an ominous meaning — you may rue it. The gardener in King Richard II soliliquizes: "Poor queen! . . . I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace; Rue, even for ruth."

Saffron may be, authorities think, either the crocus or

daffodil. Saffron was a color and a flavoring. "The saffron wings of Iris" and the robes of Hymen were of this hue. Cooks used it: "I must have saffron to colour the warden pies," warden being a variety of pears. The extraction of saffron was quite an industry.

The Bard of Avon does not miss much, not even the Samphire, which grows on the precipitous sides of towering cliffs. Gathering it is dangerous: "Halfway down Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!" It is aromatic and used in pickling.

We usually speak of summer Savory but there is also a winter savory. Savory was used then as now for seasoning, especially for "farsing," perhaps a more elegant word than stuffing.

To those who have had to take Senna it is not a pleasant flower. It and rhubarb had medicinal value.

The Thistle was common and bees loved it then as now. The enchanted Bottom orders: "Kill me a red-hipped humble-bee on the top of a thistle."

Thrift, like thyme and camomile, is small and "the more it is trodden on the faster it grows."

The Thorn was troublesome. All are warned against "the thorns and dangers of the world." Hamlet consigned his mother "to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, To prick and sting her," and king Richard warns that "they shall feel this day as sharp to them as thorn."

Thyme covers Mount Hymettus in Greece and is supposed to make that honey the most delicious of all. "As sweet as the honey on Mount Hymettus" was a proverb. Thyme was used in cooking and is fragrant and aromatic when crushed. It is fine if one knows "a bank whereon the wild thyme blows."

The Violet is a tiny, shy flower and yet is celebrated by many poets. Shakespeare often mentions it with tenderness: "Violets dim, But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes Or Cythcers's breath." To presume "to throw a perfume on the violet" is ridiculous. Very sweet music may have "the sweet sound That breathes upon a bank of violets." They are very fragile as Ophelia knew: "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died."

Woodbine, No bower is complete unless "quite over-canopied with lush woodbine." The word is used now for ivy but more likely it referred to the honeysuckle.