

# A Study of Medicinal and Poisonous Herbs in Shakespeare's Works

Eiko KAWAGOE

Kobe City College of Nursing

## Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate one aspect of medicine appearing in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets: medicinal and poisonous herbs. I examined all the plants from Onions' A Shakespeare Glossary, and Schmidt's Shakespeare Lexicon and selected those herbs having medical or poisonous properties. As a result, I have identified 62 medicinal or poisonous herbs in the entire collection of his plays and sonnets, while R.R. Simpson has identified only 36.

The fact that Shakespeare used this number of herbs implies that the dramatist had a profound knowledge of such plants. It is no exaggeration to say that he was quite a herbalist. Moreover, he effectively uses them in his plays in various ways, not only for their medicinal qualities but also as symbols, metaphor, simile, analogy, irony and pun. Some are mentioned in connection with the properties they have or the folk beliefs they represent, while some are used for their wonderful colors to create beautiful backgrounds.

In addition, it is very interesting to note that some words were coined by Shakespeare or used for the first time as compounds or in new meanings. Each of them is used in a very creative and original way in its context.

The findings resulted from a detailed investigation of all of Shakespeare's plays and depict one important aspect of his unique style. This rich harvest of information will be invaluable in the greater theme, 'Shakespeare and medicine,' which we hope to study further.

## Introduction

The World Shakespeare Bibliography contains all the main recent studies on Shakespeare with 4,476 articles for 1995 and 4,319 for 1996. Of these, three were devoted to medicine in 1995 and four the following year. The former studies are contained in Shakespeare Index: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Articles on the Plays 1959-1983. The total number of studies in this index is 7,116, but in only 42 studies are the themes related to medicine or allude to certain points regarding medicine. Naturally, most of the studies take literary approaches, but the number of studies on medicine, however, is very small. Shakespeare with his deep insight into the human condition, must have paid great attention to that very important topic of medicine, which affects our health. His son-in-law, John Hall, was a renowned doctor at that time, so we can infer

that Shakespeare must have gained medical knowledge from him, and that Shakespeare must have been interested in medicine. This paper attempts to investigate one aspect of medicine appearing in his plays as described below.

## Methods

Medical practice during the Renaissance period was bound up with herb-doctoring, superstition, and quackery. All three of them need to be studied as they appear in the plays in order to elucidate Shakespeare's knowledge and attitude towards medicine. In this paper, I will attempt to investigate the first type of practice, namely, herb-doctoring. Herman Pomeranz argues, "Shakespeare throughout his plays shows a surprising knowledge of the therapeutic effects of various herbs and drugs.... It is possible that he was acquainted with one of the outstanding

works of the sort. All in all there is more mention of medical botany in his plays than in all the other late Elizabethan or early Jamesian writers." (210) Moreover, R.R. Simpson states, "The medicines of Shakespeare's day were derived largely, though not exclusively, from herbs, and throughout the plays Shakespeare mentions 36 varieties of these herbs so used." (174) No researcher, however, has examined all the plants used for medication or poison in all of Shakespeare's plays, so I shall take a look at all the plants in Onions' A Shakespeare Glossary, and Schmidt's Shakespeare Lexicon and select those having medicinal or poisonous effects,

according to some reliable sources.<sup>1)</sup> Though very time-consuming, such investigation is amply rewarding as it helps to establish Shakespeare's knowledge of plants for medicinal or poisonous use and the way he uses these plants in his works.

## Results and Discussion

I have identified 62 plants used either for medical purposes or as poisons in all of Shakespeare's plays. They are listed below according to main medicinal or poisonous effects as follows.

**Table 1 Plants and their main effects**

1	antidotes	stewed prune
2	cathartics	aloe, coloquitida, cyme, gall, rhubarb
3	diuretics	columbine, knot-grass
4	diaphoretic	camomile
5	vermicide	pomegranate
6	analgesics	cowslip
7	tranquilizer	sweet marjoram, rosemary, saffron
8	lenitive	mallows, mistletoe
9	cordial	almond, Carduus Benddictus, hyssop, marigold, rose
10	analeptics	laurel (bay)
11	sedatives	lavender
12	hypnotics	lettuce, poppy, mandragora (mandrake)
13	aphrodisiacs	eringo, ginger, long purple, pansy (love-in-idleness), potato
14	anaphrodisiac	Dian's bud
15	narcotic drugs	darnel, mandragora (mandrake)
16	ointment	balm, plantain, savory, thyme, wormwood
17	hemostatics	flax
18	for eczema	burdock
19	astringents	burnet, gum
20	antirheumatic drugs	nettle
21	for biliousness	dock
22	for pleoptics	fennel
23	for making man invisible	fern-seed
24	antidepressant drugs	fumiter
25	for spasm	garlic
26	for comforting and strengthening the nerves and sinewes	mint
27	antianemia	parsley
28	cure-all	Carduus Benedictus (holy thistle), elder, herb of grace, rue, violet
29	poison	aconite, crowflower, cuckoo-flower, darnel, hebenon, hemlock (insane root)

I shall now take a look at each plant in context and investigate how it is used.

### 1) antidotes

#### a. stewed prune

Pompey:

Sir. She came in great with child; and long-  
ing, saving your  
honour's reverence, for stewed prunes;  
(Meas. II. i. 91-3)

According to Schmidt, 'stewed prune' was a favorite with prostitutes and the prunes, usually used for antidotes, are alluded to as abortive medicine in Measure for Measure. Stewed prunes, at the same time, caught the popular fancy, which is proved by the following lines:

Three venes for a dish of stewed prunes; and,  
by my troth, I  
cannot abide the smell of hot meat since.  
(Wiv. I. i. 295-8)

### 2) cathartics

#### a. aloe

Love's arms are peace, 'gainst rule, 'gainst  
sense, 'gainst shame,  
And sweetens, in the suff'ring pangs it bears,  
The aloes of all forces, shocks, and fears.  
(Compl. 273)

Aloe, a drug of purgative qualities is used as a symbol of bitterness.

#### b. coloquintida

Iago:

The food that to him now is as luscious as  
locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerb as  
the coloquintida (Oth. I. iii. 348)

In Othello, Iago contrasts the lusciousness of locusts with the bitterness of this drug. From the fruit of coloquintida is obtained the well-known

bitter and purgative drug, colocynth. Noticed by the medical writers of Shakespeare's time, the plant was cultivated in England, and has a very loathsome and bitter taste.

#### c. cyme

#### d. rhubarb

Macbeth:

What rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative  
drugge would scowre these English hence.  
(Mac.V. iii. 55)

Cornered Macbeth desperately tries to find a way to "wash away" the English army, but in vain. Cyme and rhubarb are used as examples of purgative drugs. Macbeth wants to use the drugs against the English army. It is an irony, however, that Macbeth himself should be washed away because of his atrocities.

#### e. gall

Posthumus:

And with mine eyes I'll drink the words you  
send,  
Though ink be made of gall.  
(Cym. I. i. 100-1)

Sir Toby:

Let there be gall enough in thy ink  
(Tw. N. III. ii. 51-2)

Gall, meaning oakgall, is a paronomasia of gall meaning bitter bile. It is interesting that in both of these quotations above, ink, bitter with gall, is used to wield an acrimonious pen.

### 3) diuretics

#### a. columbine

Armado:

"The armipotent Mars, of lances the al-  
mighty,  
Gave Hector a gift, the heir of lion;  
A man so breathed, that certain he would

fight, yea;  
From morn till night, out of his pavillion.  
I am that flower” -

Dumaine:

That mint.

Longaville:

That columbine. (LLL V. ii. 655)

Ophelia:

There's fennel for you, and columbines  
(Ham. IV.v.181)

While columbine has the negative images of ingratitude, illicit intercourse and foolishness, it is also used with a positive image as a popular crest. In Love's Labour's Lost, Armado is jeered by Longaville with the word columbine and its negative images when ostentatious Armado is absorbed in himself. In Hamlet, Ophelia offers columbine to the King, and here it has a positive emblematical image.

b. knot-grass

Lysander:

Get you gone, you dwarf;  
You minimus, of hind'ring knot-grass made;  
You head, you acorn. (MND. III. ii. 239)

There is a folk belief that the growth of children could be stopped by a diet of knot-grass. Lysander abuses the small-statured Hermia, a former lover, with foul language.

#### 4) diaphoretic

a. camomile

Sir John:

Though the camomile, the more it is trodden on, the faster it grows, yet youth, the more it is wasted, the sooner it wears.  
(1H4 II. v. 400)

Camomile has a special property: the more it is trodden and pressed down the more it grows. This

property is symbolically contrasted with human youth in the quotation above.

#### 5) vermicide

a. pomegranate

Lafeu:

You were beaten in Italy for picking a kernel out of a pomegranate (All's W. II. iii. 276-7)

Juliet:

Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate-tree  
(Rom. III. v. 4)

The kernel of a pomegranate is used as something of little value. The pomegranate tree does not have any connotation, nor medical or symbolical allusion in the quotations.

#### 6) analgesics

a. cowslip

Burgandy:

The even mead that erst brought sweetly forth  
The freckled cowslip, burnet, and sweet clover  
(H5 V. ii. 48-9)

Ariel:

Where the bee sucks there lurk I,  
In a cowslip's bell I lie. (Tp. V.i.89)

Thisbe:

Those yellow cowslip cheeks.  
(MND. V. i. 339)

Fairy:

The cowslips tall her pensioners be;  
In their gold coats spots you see;  
Those be rubies, fairy favours,  
In those freckles live their savours;  
I must go seek some dewdrops here,  
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.  
(Ibid. II. i. 10-5)

Ariel:

Where the bee sucks, there suck I:  
In a cowslip's bell I lie; (Tp. V. i. 88-9)

Queen:

The violets, cowslips, and the primroses  
Bear to my closet. Fare thee well, Pisanio.  
(Cym. I. v. 83-4)

Giacomo:

On her left breast  
A mole, cinque-spotted, like the crimson  
drops  
I' th' bottom of a cowslip. Here's a voucher  
(Cym. II. ii. 37-9)

In all the cases above, a cowslip, a wild flower, colors the background of each play. And according to The Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition on Compact Disc,<sup>2)</sup> in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Shakespeare is the first to use the compound expression, "cowslip cheeks." It makes an especially beautiful background with other colorful flowers.

## 7) tranquilizer

### a. sweet marjoram

Lavatch:

Indeed, sir, she was the sweet marjoram of  
the sallet, or rather the hearb of grace.  
(All's W. IV. v. 17)

Sweet marjoram is a symbol of happiness and was believed to be both a happy herb sent by the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, and talismanic. Prudent Helena leads a stupid husband into better ways and she is a real symbol of happiness, sweet marjoram.

### b. rosemary

Ophelia:

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance.  
(Ham. IV. v. 175)

Friar:

She's not well married that lives married  
long,  
But she's best married that dies married  
young.  
Dry up your tears, and stick your rosemary  
On this fair course. (Rom. IV. v. 79)

Perdita:

Reverend Sir,  
For you there's rosemary and rue; these keep  
Seeming and savour all the winter long  
(Wint. IV. iv. 74)

The smell of rosemary quickly comforts the mind, memory, and inward senses, refreshes all the vital powers, and, in not a little way recreates and cheers both the heart and mind of man. In the quotation from Hamlet, the frenzied Ophelia offers rosemary to her brother. It is an irony that she herself needs the rosemary to comfort her brain. Moreover, rosemary is of great value in social situations - at weddings, funerals, etc. and to bestow among friends. In the excerpt from Romeo and Juliet and Winter's Tale above, rosemary is used for the funeral.

Other examples of rosemary as a favorite and savory herb are as follows:

Bawd:

Marry come up my dish of chastity, with  
rosemary and bays (Per. IV. vi. 160)

Edgar:

Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices  
Strike in their numbed and mortified bare  
arms  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rose-  
mary (Lr. II. iii. 16)

Nurse:

Doth not rosemary and Romeo begin both  
with a letter?

Romeo:

Ay, nurse; what of that? Both with an R.

Nurse:

Ah, mocker! That's the dog's name; R is for the dog.

No; I know it begins with some other letter:

- and she

hath the prettiest sententious of it, of you and rosemary,

that it would do you good to hear it.

(Rom. II. iv. 219-27)

c. saffron

Ceres:

Who (i.e. Iris) with thy saffron wings upon my flowers,

Diffusest honeydrops, refreshing showers.

(Tp. IV. i. 78)

Antipholus of Ephesus:

Did this companion with the saffron face

Revel and feast it at my house to-day?

(Err. IV. iv. 64)

Clown:

I must have saffron to colour the Warden pies. (Wint. IV. iii. 48)

Lafan:

No,no,no, your son was misled with a snipt-taffeta fellow there, whose villanous saffron face would have made all the unbaked and doughy youth of a nation in this colour.

(All's W. IV. v. 2)

In the quotations above, saffron is used as a saffron color and visualizes wings, faces and pies for the audience and enriches their imagination.

## 8) lenitive

a. mallows

Antonio:

He'd now it with nettle seed.

Sebastian:

Or docks, or mallows (Tp. II. i. 144)

Mallows is used as a mere wild flower and has no connotation.

b. mistletoe

Tamora:

The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,

Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe.

(Tit. II. iii. 95)

In the forlorn shade of trees the baleful mistletoe, which has also the effect of exhilarating the spirits, creates a background to let man show his brutality.

## 9) cordial

a. almond

Thersites:

he parrot will not do more for an almond than he for a commodious drab

(Troil. V. ii. 194-5)

Almond is used as a favorite food for a parrot and has no connotation.

b. hyssop

Iago:

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 time,...why the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. (Oth. I. iii. 322)

Hyssop tea and syrup were esteemed as cordials and in an old recipe book hyssop is recommended to be taken in warm ale, fasting in the morning to cause an excellent color and complexion. In Othello, Iago recommends hyssop to a man who wants to commit suicide out of disappointment in love.

## c. marigold

Perdita:

The marigold that goes to bed with the sun,  
And with him rises weeping. These are flow-  
ers

Of middle summer. (Wint. IV. iv. 105)

Marigold closes when the sun sets and opens when the sun rises. Perdita explains this nature of the flower.

Great princes' favourites their fair leaves  
spread

But as the marigolds at the sun's eye.

(Sonn. XXV. vi.)

It similizes regal splendor with the nature of marigold withering at night in the sonnet above.

Her eyes like marigolds had sheathed their  
light,

And canopied in darkness sweetly lay

Till they might opne to adorn the day.

(Lucr. 397)

This nature of marigold always following the sun symbolizes a beautiful chaste lady in Rape of Lucrece. And marigold also colors the background as follows.

Marina:

The purple violets and marigolds

Shall, as a chaplet, hang upon thy grave

While summer days do last. (Per. IV. I. 16)

Song:

And winking Mary-buds begin

To ope their golden eyes. (Cym. II. iii. 25)

## d. rose

Titania:

And stick musk roses in thy sleek, smooth  
head. (MND. IV. i. 3)

Julia:

The air hath starved the roses in her cheeks  
(Gent. IV. iv. 159)

Song:

There will we make our beds of Roses  
And a thousand fragrant posies.

(Wiv. III. i. 19)

The above quotations are only a few of the numerous examples of roses. Shakespeare speaks of the rose more frequently than any other flower. Sixty references to the rose are scattered through his works. Sometimes he talks of the rose itself and sometimes he uses the word to make a striking comparison, or analogy.

**10) analeptics**

## a. laurel (bay)

Ulysses:

Prerogative of age, crownes, scepters, lawrels.

(Troil. I. iii. 107)

George of Clarence:

To whom the Heav'ns, in thy natiuitie,

adjudg'd an oliue-branch and lawrell crowne.

(3H6 IV. vii. 34)

Titus:

Comes Andronicus, bound with laurel boughs,

To re-salute his country with his tears,

Tears of true joy for his return to Rome

(Tit. I. i. 74)

Cleopatra:

Upon your sword

Sit laurelled victory (Ant. I. iii. 100)

Lord:

Mary, come up, my dish of chastity with

rosemary and bays! (Per. IV. vi. 151)

Laurel is a symbol of victory and the expression laurel crown above is a compound first used by Shakespeare. Bay, a synonym for laurel is a symbol of chastity in the last quotation.

**11) sedatives**

## a. lavender

Perdita:

Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram;  
 The marigold, that goes to bed wi' the sun  
 And with him rises weeping: these are flowers  
 Of middle summer, and I think they are given  
 To men of middleage. (Wint. IV. iv. 104-8)

Lavender is listed as an example of a flower of mid-summer.

**12) hypnotics**

## a. lettuce

Iago:

If we will plant nettles or sow lettuce.  
 (Oth. I. iii. 325)

Lettuce used to be used as hypnotics, but it has no connotation in the quotation above.

## b. poppy

Iago:

Not poppy, nor mandragora, nor all the  
 drowsie syrups of the world shall ever  
 medicine thee to that sweete sleepe.  
 (Oth. III. iii. 330)

The Poppy that Iago alludes to is the Opium Poppy. Shakespeare introduces the poppy only indirectly when he speaks of the "drowsy syrup" in Othello. The white poppy is the flower from which the sleeping potion was made. It is noticeable that in this meaning Shakespeare is the first to use the word 'opium.'

## c. mandragora (mandrake)

Iago:

not poppy, nor mandragora, nor all the drowsie  
 syrups of the world shall ever  
 (Oth. III. iii. 330)

In Othello, the soporific qualities which are analogous to the poppy are alluded to.

Cleopatra;

Give me to drink mandragora

That I may sleep out this great gap of time,  
 My Antony is away. (Ant. I. v. 4-6)

In Antony and Cleopatra, it is only for its early employment as a remedy, - especially for its soporific qualities.

Falstaff:

Thou mandrake (2H4 I. ii. 17)

Ditto:

They call'd him mandrake. (Ibid. III.ii. 339)

Suffolk:

Would curses kill as doth the mandrake's  
 groan. (2H6 III. ii. 310)

Juliet:

And shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the  
 earth,  
 That living mortals, hearing them, run mad-  
 (Rom. IV. iii. 47)

The quotations above are based on the fable: Whoever tried to uproot such a plant would have to tie a dog to it to pull it up, which would give a loud shriek as it dug it up, otherwise, if a man were to do it, he would surely soon die.

**13) aphrodisiacs**

## a. eringo

Sir John:

Let it.. haile kissing comfits, and snow  
eringoes. (Wiv. V. v. 23)

Eringo is Shakespeare's invention of uncertain origin, and it is regarded as aphrodisiacs. Eringo, together with "kissing comfits," make up the background of a love scene for Falstaff and the wives of other men.

## b. ginger

Clown:

Yes by S. Anne, and ginger shall be hotte



y'th mouth too. (Tw. N. II. iii. 126)

Ginger adds flavor to liquor and at the same time is thought to be aphrodisiacs. Clown sides with an epicurean, implying the aphrodisiac value of ginger.

The following two quotations denote ginger as an old women's favorite:

Clown:

marry, then, ginger was not much in request, for the old women were all dead.

(Meas. IV. iii. 9)

Salarnio:

I would she were as lying a gossip in that as ever knapped ginger. (Mer. V. III. i. 10)

c. long purple

Queen Gertrude:

There with fantastic garlands did she come  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples

That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers  
call them: (Ham. IV. vii. 169-72)

Long purple, used as aphrodisiacs, ironically decorates the maid's (Ophelia's) garland. These flowers, which have connotative and symbolic meanings, make up Ophelia's fantastic garlands.

d. pansy

Ophelia:

And there is pansies - that's for thoughts.  
(Ham. IV. v. 176)

Lucentio:

But see, while idly I stood looking on,  
I found the effect of love-in-idleness  
(Shr. I. i. 151)

Oberon:

Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell:  
It fell upon a little western flower,

Before milk-white, now purple with love's  
wound,

And maidens call it love-in-Idleness.

(MND. II. ii. 168 )

Oberon:

Be as thou wast wont to be;

See as thou wast wont to see.

Dian's bud o'er cupid's flower

Hath such force and blessed power.

(MND. IV. i. 73)

Pansy, with its other names, 'love-in-idleness' and 'Cupid's flower,' is very effective aphrodisiacs. Especially in A Midsummer Night's Dream, this aphrodisiac power is the central theme of the play, but such power is a fictional one and does not exist in reality.

e. potato

Thersites:

How the diuell luxury with his fat rumpe and  
potato finger, tickles these together.

(Troil. V. ii. 56)

The compound, potato finger, is Shakespeare's invention and it refers to an aphrodisiac quality. Probably the shape of the potato creates a phallic image.

Falstaff:

Let the sky rain potatoes; let it thunder to  
the tune of green sleeves, hail kissing com-  
forts, and snow eringoos. (Wiv. V. v. 21)

#### 14) anaphrodisiac

a. Dian's bud

Theseus:

Or on Dianaes Altar to protest for aie,  
austerity, and single life. (MND. I. i. 89)

Oberon:

Dians bud or [=o'er] cupids flower, hath

such force and blessed power. (Ibid. IV. i. 78)

Dian's bud, used by Oberon to free Titania from the spell cast on her by Puck, is Shakespeare's invention and does not exist in reality. It was doubtless one of the numerous Artemisias and may have been wormwood, or possibly mugwort. They were formerly commonly valued for their medicinal properties as an anaphrodisiac. Dian's bud in A Midsummer Night's Dream disentangles the relationships of the lovers.

### 15) narcotic drugs

#### a. darnel

Cordelia:

As mad as the vex'd sea, singing aloud,  
Crown'd with rank femiter and furrow-weeds,  
With hardocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-  
flow'rs,

Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow  
In our sustaining corn. (Lr. IV. iv. 5)

The seeds of darnel possess narcotic and singularly intoxicating properties.

Darnel in Lear's crown makes the insane Lear even more frenzied and intoxicated.

Burgundy:

Her fallow lees,  
The darnel, hemlock, and rank fumitory,  
Doth root upon. (H5 V. ii. 45)

Darnel, together with other weeds, hemlock and fumitory, make uncultivated and untilled land more desolate and form the background of this play.

### 16) ointment

#### a. balm

And drop sweet balm in Priam's painted wound, (1466 Lucr.)

Norfolk:

The which no balm can cure but his heart blood

Which breathed this poison. (R2 I.i,172,173)

Lady Anne:

pour the helpless balm of my poor eyes.  
(R3 I. ii. 13)

Troilus:

But saying thus, instead of oil and balm  
Thou lay'st in every gash that love hath  
given me  
The knife that made it. (Troil. I. i. 61-3)

Macbeth:

Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second  
course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast  
(Mac. II. ii. 37-8)

King Henry:

My pity hath been balm to heal their wounds  
(3H6 IV. 8)

The references to 'balm' above are to the balsam of the East, the precious ointment made from various gum-bearing trees.

Richard:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash the balm from an anointed king.  
(R2 III. ii. 50-1)

Richard:

With mine own tears I wash away my balm,  
With mine own hands I give away my crown  
(R2 IV. 197-8)

King Henry:

I am a king that find thee, and I know  
'Tis not the balm, the sceptre, and the ball  
(H5 IV. i. 256-7)

King Henry:

Thy place is filled, thy sceptre wrung from

thee,

Thy balm washed off wherewith thou wast  
anointed. (3H6 III. i. 14-7)

Balm is also used as a plant which serves to  
anoint kings, as we see from the above quota-  
tions.

b. plantain

Romeo:

Your plantain leaf is excellent for that.

Benvolio:

For what I pray thee?

Romeo:

For your broken shin. (Rom. I. ii. 52)

The compound expression, plantain leaf, is first  
used by Shakespeare, and it is an ointment for a  
broken shin. It is harshly ironical, therefore  
Romeo's heart cannot be cured by this leaf.  
Plantain figures again in Love's Labour's Lost as  
a remedy for a broken shin:

Costard:

O sir, a plantain, a plain plantain, no l'envoy,  
no

l'envoy, no salve, sir, but a plantain.

Moth:

By saying that a costard was broken in a  
shin

Then called you for the l'envoy

Costard:

True! and I for a plantain. (LLL. III. i. 74)

c. savory

Perdita:

Here's flow'rs for you:

Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjorum.

(Wint. IV. iv. 104)

It is also used as a flower of mid-summer just as  
lavender mentioned above.

d. thyme

Oberon:

I know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows.

(MND. II. ii. 252)

Thyme is an ingredient of magic medicine in A  
Midsummer Night's Dream, though in reality it  
is a speedy remedy against the sting of a bee.

Iago:

Our bodies are gardens, to the which our

Wills are gardeners, so that if we will plant  
nettles,

or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme

(Oth. I. iii. 320-2)

Iago mentions many plants these medicinal plants  
including thyme in our bodies. It is ironical that  
such a vicious fellow feels he needs healing uncon-  
sciously.

e. wormwood

Nurse:

For I had then laid wormwood to my dug,..

When it did tast the wormwood on the nipple  
of my Dugge, and felt it bitter., pretty fool,  
(Rom. I. iii. 26-9)

Ham (Aside)

Wormwood, wormwood. (Ham. III. ii. 191)

Ros.

To weed this wormwood from your fruitful  
brain,

And therewithal to win me, if you please,  
(LLL. V. ii. 857-8)

Wormwood used as a protection against insects  
of all kinds, is used proverbially for bitterness in  
all the quotations above.

**17) hemostatics**

a. flax

Young Clifford

And beauty, that the tyrant oft reclaims,

Shall to my flaming wrath be oil and flax.

(2H6 V. ii. 55)

## Servant

I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs  
To apply to his bleeding face.

(Lr. III. vii. 106)

Flax and whites of eggs are used as hemostatics  
in the above quotations.

## 18) for eczema

## a. burdock

Lysander:

Hang off, thou cat, thou bur!

(MND. III. ii. 260)

A bur of burdock symbolized a nuisance to stick  
to.

## 19) astringents

## a. burnet

Burgundy:

The even mead that erst brought sweetly  
forth

The freckled cowslip, burnet, and sweet clover  
(H5 V. ii. 49)

Burnet, together with cowslip and sweet clover,  
colors the mead and makes a beautiful back-  
ground.

## b. gum

Othello:

...of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. (Oth. V. ii. 348-51)

Dropping tears are visualized with the simile of  
drops of gum falling from Arabian trees.

## 20) antirheumatic drugs

## a. nettle

Hotspur:

Out of this nettle, danger,  
we pluck this flower, safety (IH4 II. iii. 9)

King Richard:

Yield stinging nettles to my enemies.

(R2 III. ii. 18)

Nettle is noted for the stinging property of the  
hairs on its leaves. It is first used figuratively by  
Shakespeare meaning torment, as we can see from  
the quotations above.

## 21) for biliousness

## a. dock

Burgundy:

And nothing teems  
But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies,  
burs. (H5 V. ii. 52)

Antonio:

He'd sow it with nettle seed,

Sebastian:

Or docks, or mallows. (Tp. II. i. 144)

Dock is used as a useless weed in the quotations  
above.

## 22) for pleoptics

## a. fennel

Ophelia

There's fennel for you, and columbines.  
(Ham. IV. v. 180)

Falstaff

Because their legs are both of a bigness, and  
'a plays at quoits well, and eats cunger and  
fennel, and drinks off candle's ends for flap-  
dragons, ... and such other gambol faculties  
'a has, that shows a weak mind and an able  
body. (2H4 II. iv. 245)

The first quotation alludes to it as an emblem of  
flattery, for which ample authority has been  
found by commentators. In the second quotation,  
the allusion is to the reputation of fennel as an  
inflammatory herb.

## 23) for making man invisible

## a. fern-seed

Chamberlain:

We steal as in a castle, cock-sure; we have  
the receipt of fern-seed, we walk invisible.

(1H4 II. i. 95)

Fern-seed is the seed of the plant Filix, and is supposed to have the power of rendering people invisible. It was used to mimic magic in the 16th century.

#### 24) antidepressant drugs

a. fumiter

Cordelia:

Crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds  
(Lr. IV. iv. 3)

Fumiter, which is effective for melancholia, is used symbolically to show the irony of the king's madness.

Burgundy:

The Darnel, hemlock, and rank fumitory  
Doth feed upon. (H5 V. ii. 45)

Fumitory, together with other weeds, darnel and hemlock, makes uncultivated and untilled land more desolate and forms the background of this play, as we have seen above.

#### 25) for spasm

a. garlic

Menenius:

Upon the voice of occupation and  
The breath of garlic-eaters!  
(Cor. IV. vi. 97-8)

Garlic-eaters denote working class people in the quotation.

#### 26) for comforting and strengthening the nerves and sinewes

a. mint

Perdita:

Here's flowers for you,  
Hot Lavender, mints, savory, marjoram.  
(Wint. IV. iv. 104)

Like lavender and savory mentioned above, mint is a flower of midsummer.

#### 27) antianemia

a. parsley

Biondello:

I knew a wench married in an afternoon as she went to the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit. (Shr. IV. iv. 101)

Parsley here is used for stuffing a rabbit, and has no connotation.

#### 28) cure-all

a. Carduus Benedictus (holy thistle)

Margaret:

Get you some of this distill'd carduus benedictus., and lay it to your heart; it is the only thing for a qualm.

Hero:

There thou prick'st her with a thistle

Beatrice:

Benedictus! why benedictus? You have some moral in this benedictus.

Margaret

Moral? no, by my troth I have nomoral meaning, I meant plain holy-thistle.

(Ado III. iv. 80)

The Carduus benedictus was even supposed to cure the plague, which was the highest praise that could be given to a medicine in those days. Beatrice is a man-hater but Benedic is deeply in love with her. Beatrice, pretending to be ill, is recommended Carduus benedictus, which differs from Benedic by three letters and acts as a pun.

b. elder

Host:

What says my Aesculapius? My Galien? My heart of elder? (Wiv. II. iii. 29)

Elder can easily become hollow, so the heart of an elder means a coward.

The property of elder is used symbolically.

## c. herb of grace (rue)

Gardener:

Here did she fall a tear, here in this place  
I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace.  
Rue, even for ruth, here shortly shall be seen,  
In the remembrance of a weeping queen.  
(R2 III. iv. 105-6)

The bitter herb, herb of grace, is "in the remembrance of a weeping queen" and is a symbol of grace.

Ophelia:

There's rue for you, and here's some for me;  
we may call it herb of grace a'Sundays. You  
may wear your rue with a difference.  
(Ham. IV. v. 18)

Herb of grace (rue) also has an aphrodisiac quality and the quotation from Hamlet implies that Ophelia and the queen both need this effect.

## d. violet

...the yellows, blues  
The purple violets, and marigolds  
Shall as a carpet hang upon thy grave  
(Per. IV. i. 15-7)

This purple violet, together with the yellows, blues and marigold make up the colorful carpet. This violet is used rather as a beautiful color.

**29) poison**

## a. aconite

Though it dose worke as strong as aconite, or rash gun-powder (2H4 IV. iv. 48)

The ancients regarded aconite as the most deadly of all poisons, and in Shakespeare it is indeed depicted as a poisonous plant. It was also supposed in Elizabethan days to be an antidote itself, but we cannot find any such example in Shakespeare.

## b. crowflower

Queen:

With fantasticke garlands..Of crow-flowers,

nettles, daysies, and long purples.

(Ham. IV. vii. 170)

Poisonous crowflower is a symbol of Ophelia's agony and madness.

## c. hebenon

Ghost:

Upon my secure hower thy uncle stole with  
juice of cursed hebenon in a violl.  
(Ham. I. v. 62)

Poisonous hebenon symbolically denotes King Claudius' treachery and desire.

## d. hemlock (insane root)

Witch:

Root of hemlocke, digg'd i' th' darke.  
(Mac. IV. i. 25)

From time immemorial, hemlock has been known for its poisonous nature, and was believed to have been collected after night-fall by witches and used by them in their concoctions.

Burgundy:

Her fallow leas  
The darnel, hemlock, and rank fumitory  
Doth root upon. (H5 V. ii. 44)

Hemlock, together with other weeds, darnel and fumitory, makes uncultivated and untilled land more desolate and forms the background of this play, as we have seen above.

Cordelia:

Crowned with rank fumiter and furrow weeds  
With harlock, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers.  
(Lr. IV. iv. 4)

Hemlock, together with cuckoo-flower, symbolizes Lear's madness as we have seen above.

## Conclusions

Shakespeare uses medicinal and poisonous herbs in various ways. The number of herbs which are used for their original effects in Shakespeare's plays is limited. Cyme and rhubarb are used as purgatives, rosemary as a herb comforting the brain, mistletoe for exhilarating the spirit, hysop as a cordial, poppy and mandragora as a hypnotic, eringo, ginger, pansy and potato as an aphrodisiac, darnel as a narcotic, balm and plantain for ointment, flax as a styptic, aconite for poison. Shakespeare's invention, Dian's bud, is used for an anaphrodisiac, while fern-seed is used for making man invisible as a way of mimicking magic. In the other cases, the qualities and properties of some herbs are transferred into having other effects. Stewed prunes, usually believed to act as an antidote, allude to abortive medicine. As a kind of ointment, thyme is an ingredient of magical medicine.

Other plants are not used for their medicinal or poisonous qualities. Some of them are used symbolically in context. The purgatives, aloe, coloquintida and gall are symbols of bitterness. A diuretic, columbine, is a symbol of ingratitude, illicit intercourse and foolishness. Sweet marjoram, which can comfort the brain, is a symbol of happiness. Laurel, an analeptic, is a symbol of victory. Herb of grace (rue) a cure-all, is a symbol of grace. Bay, for rheumatism, is a symbol of chastity. Fennel, for pleoptics, is an emblem of flattery. Fumiter, for melancholia, symbolically denotes the character's melancholy. The poisonous crowflower, cuckoo-flower, hebenon and hemlock are all used symbolically in their respective contexts.

The properties of some plants are used in the plays. As we saw, the more camomile is trodden, the more it grows, which is contrasted with human youth. Marigold follows the sun. Its nature is used as a simile. Elder can easily become hollow and this property is used

symbolically. Bur of burdock is a nuisance to stick to. The stinging property of the hairs on a nettle leaf figuratively denotes torment.

Metaphor, simile, analogy, irony and pun are also used. Wormwood is a metaphor for bitterness. Falling gum is a simile of falling tears. Roses are used as analogies many times. Long purple is used to present irony, while Carduus Benedictus acts as a pun. The beautiful colors of saffron, violet and burnet depict the beautiful background. Knot-grass is based on the folk belief that the growth of children could be stopped by eating it.

Cowslip and mallows are depicted just as wild flowers, while savory, lavender and mint are midsummer flowers and dock is just a weed. Almond is a favorite for a parrot, while garlic-eater denotes the working-class person.

From those we have listed above, only 16 out of 62 herbs are used for medicinal or poisonous qualities in the whole of Shakespeare's plays. Two plants are used for imaginary medicinal qualities, two for transferred qualities. Fourteen plants are symbolically used in the contexts, and six are mentioned in connection with the properties they have. Metaphor, simile, analogy, irony and pun are effectively utilized and we can find one example for each of them. Three beautiful flowers are used for their wonderful colors. One plant is used in connection with its folk belief. The other plants are used just as wild flowers, weeds or mid-summer flowers.

The fact that Shakespeare used no fewer than 62 plants believed to have medicinal or poisonous qualities shows that the dramatist had a profound knowledge of these plants. It is not an exaggeration to say that he was quite a herbalist! Moreover, he effectively uses them in his plays in various ways, which can be thought of as one aspect of the bard's variegated style.

In addition, it is very interesting to note that some words are coined by Shakespeare or used for the first time as compounds or in new meanings.

(New words: cyme, Dian's bud, eringo; new compounds: cowslip cheek, plantain leaf, potato finger; new meanings: herb of grace, nettle, poppy.) Each of them is used in a highly creative and original way, which shows how Shakespeare created his original and unique world with his own neologisms, as he could not express such a world with just the expressions of the day.

Though R.R. Simpson has found only 36, I have identified 62 medicinal or poisonous herbs in Shakespeare's plays. These findings resulted from thorough studies of all of Shakespeare's plays and, I would like to believe, are of great value to the study of Shakespeare. They depict one vivid aspect of Shakespeare's style. This rich harvest of information will be invaluable in the greater theme, 'Shakespeare and medicine,' which I hope to study further.

### Notes

- 1) I selected the plants having medical or poisonous effects, according to the following sources: Baisley, Culpeper, Ellacombe, Grindon, Izawa, Kinjo, Rohde, Singleton. See Works Cited.
- 2) The following Shakespeare's neologisms are all based on The Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition on Compact Disc.

### Works Cited

- Baisley, Sidney. *Shakespeare's Garden*. New York: AMS Press (1970).
- Culpeper, Nicholas. *The Complete Herbal*. London: Thomas Kelly, 17, Paternoster Row (1840).
- Ellacombe, H.N. *The Plant-Lore & Garden-Craft of Shakespeare*. Exeter: William Pollard (1878).
- Grindon, H. Leo. *The Shakespeare Flora*. London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co. (1883).
- Harner, James L., ed. *World Shakespeare Bibliography* (1996). London: The Folger Shakespeare Library (1997).
- Izawa, Kazuo. *Colour Encyclopedia of Medicinal Herbs*. Tokyo: Shufuno Tomosya (1998).
- Kinjo, Seiki. *Shakespeare's Flowers*. Osaka: Tohoshuppan (1996).
- Onions, C.T. *A Shakespeare Glossary*. London: Oxford University Press (1953).
- The Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition on Compact Disc*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1994).
- Pomeranz, Herman. *Medicine in the Shakespearean Plays and Dickens Doctors*. New York: Powell Publications (1936).
- Rohde, S. Elenour. *Shakespeare's Wild Flowers Fairy Lore, Gardens, Herbs, Gatherers of Simples and Bee Lore*. London: The Medici Society, Ltd (1935).
- Sajdak Bruce T., ed. *Shakespeare Index: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Articles on the Plays 1959-1983*. New York: Kraus International Publications (1992).
- Schmidt, A. *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (1971).
- Simpson R. R. *Shakespeare and Medicine*. Edinburgh and London: E. & S. Livingstone Ltd (1959).
- Singleton Esther. *The Shakespeare Garden*. New York: The Century Co. (1930).

(Received December 14, 1998; Accepted February 17, 1999)