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British Literature

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Shakespeare's Symbolic Flowers

Blackmore, Simon A. "Ophelia's End - Does She Give out Flowers?" *Ophelia's End - A*

Document in Madness. Shakespeare Online. 9 November 2011. Web. 16 January 2013.

Ophelia's imaginary flowers symbolize each of the main characters in the drama *Hamlet*.

Often seen at weddings, rosemary is the flower she gives to Hamlet's image (he's not present) and the flower she gives to Laertes; the flower stands for remembrance. She also hands her brother pansies, which signify grief at the death of their father. The next flower is fennel, and she presents it to Claudius as it means flattery and deceit. In addition to fennel, Claudius receives columbines. These stand for the ingratitude Claudius showed when he murdered his brother and stole the throne. Next, Ophelia hands Gertrude rue which traditionally denotes repentance. Young Ophelia also keeps rue for herself, but she will wear it for regret and grief. Gertrude is also given daisies as a sign of her unfaithfulness to King Hamlet and to her son. Finally, Ophelia says she would have given violets had they not withered when her father died. The violets relate to a warning Laertes gave Ophelia about the petty, insignificant love he believed Hamlet had for his sister.

Butler, F. G. "Lear's Crown Of Weeds." *English Studies*. 70.5 (1989): 395. *Literary Reference Center*. GALILEO. Web. 8 Jan. 2013. As Lear rages in a metaphorical tempest, the once powerful king has crowned himself with thorns just as Roman soldiers crowned Christ

as He was lead to his crucifixion. His crown begins to symbolize his shame for his self inflicted loses and his guilt of his past actions. He feels abandoned by his two remaining daughters and his exiled daughter as he staggers though a world he finds confusing and meaningless. As Lear sings mad phrases and the storm thunders and cracks, the King's self made crown visually symbolizes the poison Lear has brought into his kingdom, his family, and his mind. Just has the collection of weeds in his crown are useless, rank, and strangling, so has Lear's kingly reign of England and fatherly control of his family been marred. However, in this crown, as in his life, one plant offers hope. It is the corn plant and Cordelia who will grant him a cure from his selfish madness.

Cahn, Victor L. "Nature." *Plays of Shakespeare: A Thematic Guide*. 255-261: Greenwood, 2001. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 8 Jan. 2013. The natural elements of Shakespeare's plays refer to several possibilities: human actions, human personalities, and the natural setting surrounding humans. Shakespeare uses nature as an interacting force that responds to the movements, personalities, and whims of his characters. Some of his plays include natural settings that offer peace, solace, and safety from circumstances. This alluring quality of nature is present Shakespeare's comedies; however, Shakespeare's histories and tragedies contain a darker form of nature that reacts to the deeds, moods, and traits of the characters. In *Hamlet*, a ghost appears but disappears when the natural word interrupts its visitation, hinting that the ghost may be leading Hamlet to evil. *King Lear* contains a convergence of all imaginable natural creations: plants, animals, setting, weather, and humans. It is in this play that all the elements combine to create an environment that is indifferent to the sufferings of all its elements, and good and evil clash. Goodness wins, but at an enormous cost.

Ellacombe, Henry Nicholson. *The Plant-lore and Garden-craft of Shakespeare*. London:

Satchell. 1884. *Kindle* ebook file. Many plants are mentioned in Shakespeare's works.

Early in *King Lear*, the fool subtly warns Lear of Goneril's deceptive flattery by evoking the image of a peascod, a symbol of persuasion and false plattery. During Act III the tempest's lightning destroying the mighty oaks represents the once great king losing his strength and constancy as his daughters betray him for power. Later in this scene after the storm and Gloucester's betrayal, the oil from flax is used as a balm for Gloucester after his eyes are removed. Likewise in *Hamlet*, bachelor buttons wear worn by those looking for a love interest serve as Laertes' warning to Ophelia to guard her heart against loving Hamlet. When Ophelia's body is discovered draped in flowery garland, the flowers called Dead Man's Fingers are part of her bouquet thus proving her drowning was deliberate. Lastly, the hemlock plants used to murder King Hamlet are what set the drama in motion.

Hilderic, Friend. *Flower Lore*. Rockport, MA: Para Research, 1981. Print. Including many superstitions and local plant names, the book is a compilation of British plant lore. When the weeds of King Lear's crown of thorns are examined, one finds that each holds a deep meaning. Thorns were used to keep demons away when a child was born. Could Lear be trying to rid himself of his demonic daughters? Fumitors were called "smoke weeds" because as smoke causes the eyes to water, so do these weeds. This parallels Lear's blind acceptance of the empty words of his oldest children. Also, this weed was believed to shield the holder from venomous beasts, and Lear often refers to Goneril and Regan as serpents, or beasts. Another element of his crown called burdocks grew in tangled growths that were sometimes called an Old Man's Beard. This could be a reference to

Lear as the aged king of Ancient Britain. In spite of being a stinging painful plant, there was a legend that stated the nettle plant cured a young girl's weak eyesight. The lack of sight is a reoccurring element in this tragedy. All of these plants, known by multiple names across the English countryside, might collectively be grouped as cuckoo-flowers as together they plague farmers. Once these plants begin to flourish in a corn field, they slowly strangled and destroyed the corn. Corn, just as a wise king, provides nourishment to the people. If the corn is killed, the kingdom will fall.

Harrison, Thomas P. "Flower Lore In Spenser and Shakespeare Two Notes." *Modern Language Quarterly*. 7.2 (1946): 175. *Academic Search Complete*. GALILEO. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.

English Renaissance writers Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare used plant knowledge differently in their works. Spenser's knowledge was academic as his works were based on augmented allusions instead of real flowers that commonly grew in England. Thus, Spenser often chose to use imagined flowers to create symbols in his poems. However, by using common names, Shakespeare took the Ancient Greek flowers and created symbols that combined both the classical allusions and modern blooms. By using simpler names for real flowers, Shakespeare merged the allusions of Cupid, Diana, and others with the common flower names of the time period. This may have helped create works that appealed to all classes of people.

Kerr, Jessica, and Anne Ophelia Todd Dowden. *Shakespeare's Flowers*. Johnson Books, 1997. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 5 Jan. 2013. Shakespeare's Stratford hometown contained meadows, woods, and a river lined with flowers. Nearby were the grandiose gardens of Warwickshire, and in London he saw the foliage line the banks of the Thames. The England of his time was superstitious and relied on folk lore to cure common

ailments. Shakespeare, as did most people of the time, knew these treatments and the common herbs used. While some of his plays contain little reference to flowers, the plays we wrote after his retirement to Stratford are filled with the plants and trees that bloomed in his garden. He also knew the destructive power of weeds in a lush garden. The weeds in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* were commonly worn as circular headwear to mark the joy of weddings and the sadness of funerals.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet. The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Dallas: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 1135-1197. Print. Ophelia is the love interest of Prince Hamlet who strives to prove his uncle is a murderer. She is the daughter of King Claudius's councilor, Polonius, and sister of Laertes. As Laertes leaves for France, he cautions her to guard her heart against feelings for Hamlet. He warns her that Hamlet may not be allowed to marry whom he truly loves, instead he may marry for political reasons. As Laertes departs, their father further warns Ophelia to avoid all contact with Hamlet, and she agrees. Even though she tries to avoid Hamlet, she tells her father of a frightening encounter with the Prince. After hearing this, Polonius uses his daughter as method of spying on Hamlet and reports his actions to Claudius. During this staged meeting with Hamlet, Ophelia tries to return tokens to Hamlet, but in a fit of fake insanity, he furiously argues that he never gave her anything, and he denies he ever loved her. Though a chain of events that leaves Ophelia without her brother, father, and lover, she comes insane with lonely grief. In her final scene of delirium, she gives twigs and branches she believes are flowers to the principal characters in her life.

--,--. *King Lear. The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Dallas: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 1249-1305. Print. An eight century king abdicates his British throne to his

three daughters. He wants to give the greatest share of the kingdom to his favorite daughter Cordelia; however, when she refuses to verbally flatter him with words of love, King Lear becomes angry and disowns and exiles her from England and his sight. As the king deteriorates and tries to live his remaining days with two plotting, evil daughters, Regan and Goneril, Lear slowly begins to realize he is responsible for out casting his only faithful daughter from his life and himself from his sanity. During the worst mental, physical, and natural tempest Lear has ever experienced, the aging monarch rages at the storm while he slowly loses reason. Exiled from his remaining two daughters, his kingdom, and his sanity, Lear creates a crown of weeds that symbolize him as both a regretful father and a martyr for loss of power.

Thiselton-Dyer, Thomas Firminger. "Plants." *Folk-lore of Shakespeare*. New York: Harper Brothers and Franklin Square, 1884. 201-249. *Kindle* ebook file. It is obvious Shakespeare had great knowledge of plants, folk-lore, traditions, and superstitions. Each plant mentioned in his works contains a symbolic meaning. King Lear's cuckoo-flowers, commonly known as ragged robins or buttercups, only bloomed when the cuckoo came, which was extinct. Claudius' columbines symbolize the doomed and unnatural love between the King and Queen Gertrude. The rue flower, or Herb of Grace, is a bitter plant that came to be seen as a sign of asking for God's grace and forgiveness. During Act I of *Hamlet*, Laertes and Ophelia speak of primrose which may be suggestive of immoral gratification. Rosemary was supposed to strengthen memory when it was given to departing friends. Because they only saw the beginning of a year and never the end, Violets are often a sign of early death. When Ophelia takes her life, she uses the branches of the willow tree which depicts those who have been forsaken in love.

Towne, Rosa M. "Medicinal Plants of Shakespeare." *Herbalgram* 35 (1995): 43. *Alt Health Watch*. GALILEO. Web. 8 Jan. 2013. When writing his plays, Shakespeare selected plants that people could identify both in their imaginations and by their medicinal properties. Shakespeare intended for his audience to know the properties of the chosen flower. For example, when Romeo tells Benvolio that a Plantain leaf will help his skin, an Elizabethan audience knows the healing properties of this plant. Likewise, when Ophelia hands Laertes the Rosemary flower, the audience knows she was asking her brother to remember their deceased father and to possibly remember her.

Ward, Bobby J., and Ann Lovejoy. *Contemplation upon Flowers: Garden Plants in Myth and Literature*. Timber Press, 1999. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 5 Jan. 2013.