

Herb Paris, Romeo and Juliet and Thomas Hesketh

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Herb Paris, *Romeo and Juliet* and Thomas Hesketh

Mercutio. Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.

Romeo. Pink for flower.¹

Romeo and Juliet is a play full of plants and of metaphors derived from plants.² Juliet famously says ‘That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet’ (II.i.43-4) and figures her relationship with Romeo in floral terms:

This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.

(II.2.121-2)

Old Capulet promises that his house will be full of ‘fresh female buds’ (I.2.29), and there is a whole scene set in a garden during the course of which Friar Laurence offers a long meditation on plants (II.3.1-12, 19-20). At the end of the play Juliet herself becomes both a flower and one who is mourned with flowers:

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

(IV.5.28-9)

Old Capulet laments that ‘Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corse’ (IV.5.89), an image echoed by Paris when he says ‘Sweet flower, with flowers thy bridal bed I strew’ (V.3.12).

A number of critics have commented on the play’s horticultural imagery, particularly rosemary, which is associated with Romeo,³ and Angelica, apparently the name of the nurse, but also that of a tall, umbelliferous plant.⁴ However it is less often observed that Paris is also imaged in floral terms:

Lady Capulet. Verona's summer hath not such a flower.

Nurse. Nay, he's a flower; in faith, a very flower.

(I.i.78-9)

Herb paris was indeed a flower, and one to which a symbolic tradition was attached. Susanna Greer Fein notes that 'Herb paris carried a centuries-old tradition of popular moralization in English writings. Any Elizabethan playgoer who remembered that herb paris was the familiar English truelove plant would probably have recognized the relevance of its general import'; 'Because of the truelove's distinctive name and shape, the herb became the mediating metaphor for numerous late-medieval poems and sermons on the subject of the opposition between secular and spiritual love'.⁵ The apparent allusion to herb paris both underlines the love theme of *Romeo and Juliet* and may also suggest where Shakespeare obtained some of the botanical knowledge displayed in this and others of his plays. It is well known that he used the *Herbal* of John Gerard, but Gerard himself was also dependent on sources, and we can often identify those sources from Gerard's account of where the plants were found.⁶ In the 1636 edition of *Gerard's Herball*, the section headed 'Of One-berry, or Herbe True-love, and Moone-wort' begins 'Herbe Paris riseth up with one smal tender stalke two hands high; at the very top whereof come forth foure leaves directly set against one another in manner of a Burgundian Crosse or True-love knot: for which cause among the Antients it hath been called Herbe True-love'; among the places where it grows he lists 'Hesset in Lancashire' and also 'in Blackburne at a place called Merton in Lancashire'.⁷ 'Merton' is Martholme, home of the naturalist Thomas Hesketh (1560-1613), friend and correspondent of Gerard (and also of Lord Burghley) from about 1593. Herb paris does not appear in the 1597 edition, but Gerard already knew Hesketh by then; 'Mr Hesketh's Primrose' is recorded in the 1597 edition, which also mentions cloudberryes, another Hesketh plant, and M. J. Y. Foley notes that 'It is quite possible that Gerard, prior to the publication of

his Herbal in 1597, visited Hesketh at Martholme and met his mother (Lady Alice) as he refers to Martholme as “my Lady Heskiths house”⁸.

In his 1985 book *Shakespeare: the 'lost years'* E. A. J. Honigmann revived the idea that Shakespeare might have spent time in Lancashire, and specifically at Rufford Old Hall, Thomas Hesketh's childhood home. Honigmann suggested that Shakespeare was the 'Shakeshafte' mentioned in the 1581 will of Alexander Hoghton of Hoghton Tower and that he consequently spent a few months at Rufford;⁹ the idea has since been taken up with enthusiasm by Richard Wilson among others. However, Shakespeare does not need to have been at Rufford to have been potentially connected to Hesketh: Wilson says that Honigmann's book 'clinch[ed] Shakespeare's links with the Heskeths', but he goes on to add that it does so by 'showing how closely they were related to his fellow Globe trustee Thomas Savage, a native of Rufford'; Wilson also points out, amongst other Stratford-Lancashire connections, that the Stratford schoolmaster Alexander Aspinall 'was from Clitheroe, close to Hoghton, and a family long employed by the Hoghtons'.¹⁰ Shakespeare could, then, have known (or known of) the Heskeths through London or Stratford connections. There was also another route through which Shakespeare could have come across Thomas Hesketh. *Romeo and Juliet*, first published in 1597, is usually dated to 1594-6. In or before 1596, Shakespeare was living in Bishopsgate,¹¹ and this would have brought him into potential contact with Gerard;¹² Charles Nicholl confirms that 'It is likely that when Shakespeare lived here there was a physic garden designed by Gerard round the corner from him'.¹³ There are a lot of ifs here, but there is also potential links between Shakespeare and Gerard's source for herb paris. Given that herb paris does not appear in the 1597 edition of Gerard and that *Romeo and Juliet* was in any case almost certainly written before that, a personal connection might be one explanation for Shakespeare's use of it as part of the floral imagery of the play.

There are also two other plants given by Hesketh to Gerard which have Shakespearean resonances. First, Charles Raven notes that amongst the plants in the *Herbal* which were found by Hesketh was ‘*Viola lutea* “by a village in Lancashire called Latham [Lytham] four miles from Kyrckam [Kirkham]”’.¹⁴ *Viola* is the name of the heroine of *Twelfth Night*, and yellow (*lutea*) is a significant colour in the play: Viola’s supposed sister died of ‘a green and yellow melancholy’, and Malvolio is tricked into wearing yellow stockings.¹⁵ Second, in his NDNB entry on Hesketh David Brinson notes that ‘One berry (*Herba Paris*), along with purple goat’s beard (*Tragopogon purpureum*), red bird eyne, *Primula veris flore rubro*, and the bird cherry tree ... were all to be found at Martholme’;¹⁶ *Tragopogon purpureum* is identified by Gerard as ‘Go to bed at noone’, since it folds up its petals in the middle of the day, and he says it grows ‘in Lancashire on the banks of the river Chalder, neere to my Lady Heskiths house’.¹⁷ ‘And I’ll go to bed at noon’ is also the last sentence uttered by the Fool as he disappears without explanation in the middle of *King Lear*.¹⁸ The image of the Fool as a plant which prematurely ceases to bloom chimes with the play’s other aspects of dark pastoral and also underscores the image of the Fool as representing nature.¹⁹

The reference to herb paris is similarly suggestive. *Romeo and Juliet* is rich in imagery of religion, particularly pilgrimage (this is nicely caught in the Baz Luhrmann film). Greer Fein notes that ‘The plant’s four equal leaves also led to its being widely taken as a sign of the cross, with an assortment of ensuing religious analogies; the plant’s earliest recorded name, from the thirteenth century, is *Crux Christi* ... The botanical term *paris* derives from Latin *pars*, “equal,” a description of the leaves’. She cites Gerard as comparing it to ‘a Burgundian Crosse’ and naming it as ‘Herbe true-love’ and observes that in medieval sermons ‘herb paris represents the transience of earthly love’.²⁰ Brinson notes that Lady Hesketh was a recusant

and kept a seminary priest at Martholme Hall,²¹ and the reason it is easy for us to track her son Thomas's movements is that he too was a recusant, so required to register where he was residing. Foley also observes of Thomas Penny, another Lancashire botanist, that 'between 1565 and 1569, he travelled on the continent, mainly to avoid the religious hostility present in England at that time', and Foley's third collector, Thomasin Tunstall, may have been pursued for recusancy in 1629.²²

Why should botany and recusancy go hand in hand? Partly, it is because all three of Foley's plant collectors came from Lancashire, where many people stayed stubbornly Catholic whatever London-based ecclesiastical authorities might say. Partly though it was because the garden was a safe space for the cultivation of belief as well as of plants. Alexandra Walsham argues that we need to pay more attention to the resonances of natural spaces in Renaissance England: she suggests that priests trained on the continent and returning to England and Wales 'collaborated with the laity not merely in reconsecrating private houses and chambers as new arenas for worship but also in sanctifying hitherto neutral locations in the natural world – gardens, orchards, woods and fields – as spaces in which Catholics could meditate, pray, and commune with their Maker',²³ perhaps in something of the same way as pilgrims to the Holy Land had traditionally collected natural objects such as twigs, earth, water and stones.²⁴ Shakespeare may well have had Catholic sympathies himself - we will probably never know - but he did not need to have done so to agree with Elizabeth I that there was nothing to be gained from making windows into men's souls, and that it was not conducive to peace and prosperity to outrage people's seriously held convictions. He did not need to have spent time in Lancashire to reach this fairly obvious conclusion, and he also did not need to spend time in Lancashire to meet Lancastrians. An important part of ideas about plants in the early modern period centred on notions of sympathy and affinity. Whether or not

Shakespeare ever went to Rufford Old Hall, there is an affinity between Friar Laurence and Thomas Hesketh, and perhaps between Hesketh and Shakespeare more widely. Noting that sympathy helps us to register the importance of religious imagery in *Romeo and Juliet*, and may also encourage us to think about *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*.

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Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, edited by T. J. B. Spencer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), II.4.56-7. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

² For more extensive discussion of plant imagery in the play see my 'Pears and statues', in *Romeo and Juliet: Critical Insights*, edited by Robert Evans (Grey House Publishing, 2017).

³ Philip Williams, 'The Rosemary Theme in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Modern Language Notes* 68 (1953), pp. 400-403.

⁴ Jonathan Bate suggests that it might be the name of Lady Capulet rather than of the Nurse, and also takes issue with a suggestion by Liane Ferguson and Paul Yachnin that it means the herb rather than a character ('An Herb by Any Other Name: *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.iv.5-6'), *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33.3 (autumn, 1982), p. 336. However this is in a sense a false dichotomy: the name has surely been chosen because it is that of a herb. See Liane Ferguson and Paul Yachnin, 'The Name of Juliet's Nurse', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32.1 (Spring 1981),

pp. 95-6, p. 95: 'Angelica is the name neither of the Nurse nor of Lady Capulet; it is an herb which, like the dates and quinces called for three lines earlier, was cultivated for culinary purposes'.

⁵ Susanna Greer Fein, 'Verona's Summer Flower: The "Virtues" of Herb Paris in *Romeo and Juliet*', *ANQ* 8.4 (1995), pp. 5-8, p. 5.

⁶ M. J. Y. Foley, 'Some localised early plant records from North-west England: then and now', *Watsonia* 27 (2009), pp. 335-64, p. 356.

⁷ Marcus Woodward, *Gerard's Herball* (London: The Minerva Press, 1971), pp. 101 and 102.

⁸ Foley, 'Some localised early plant records from North-west England: then and now', p. 358.

⁹ E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: the 'lost years'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 39.

¹⁰ Richard Wilson, 'Introduction: a torturing hour - Shakespeare and the martyrs', in *Theatre and religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, edited by Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 1-39, pp. 26 and 21.

¹¹ 'The earliest record of Shakespeare in Bishopsgate is in October 1596' (Nicholl, *The Lodger*, p. 40).

¹² Marcus Woodward's edition of Gerard notes that 'Miss Rohde in her *Old English Herbals* suggests that Shakespeare may have seen Gerard's garden, for he lived for a time nearby' (Woodward, *Gerard's Herball*, introduction, p. xiv).

¹³ Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger: Shakespeare on Silver Street* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 62. There was a committee meeting about it on 2 November 1602 but plans seem to go back to the late 1590s.

¹⁴ Charles E. Raven, *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), p. 212.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, edited by J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975), II.iv.114.

¹⁶ David Brinson, 'Hesketh, Thomas (*bap.* 1560, *d.* 1613), botanist and physician', NDNB.

¹⁷ Brinson, 'Hesketh, Thomas', p. 167.

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, edited by Kenneth Muir [1964] (London: Methuen, 1972), III.vi.83.

¹⁹ On dark pastoral in the play see for instance my 'A Matter of Life and Death: The Fourth Act in Shakespearean Tragedy', *The Ben Jonson Journal* 22.2 (2015), pp. 188-207.

²⁰ Greer Fein, 'Verona's Summer Flower', pp. 5 and 6. The reference she gives for this is 1597: 101, but this is wrong; it is from the 1636 edition.

²¹ Brinson, 'Hesketh, Thomas'.

²² M. J. Y. Foley, 'Some localised early plant records from North-west England: then and now', *Watsonia* 27 (2009), pp. 335-64, pp. 355-6.

²³ Alexandra Walsham, 'Holywell: contesting sacred space in post-Reformation Wales', in *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 211-236, p. 221.

²⁴ Derek Krueger, 'The Religion of Relics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium', in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, edited by Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (London: The British Museum Press, 2011), pp. 5-17, p. 11.