



## ENTOMOLOGICAL REFERENCES IN THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the insects mentioned by William Shakespeare in his plays. The objective of this study is to bring out the entomological knowledge possessed by William Shakespeare. Being a keen observer of nature, his dramas become the products of nature and he becomes the voice of nature. Insects are part of nature which finds its place in his plays. Insects take place in his plays both in positive and negative aspects. Even after four hundred years his entomological knowledge is very modern and critical. He makes exclusive use of words, descriptions and comparisons to refer to insects which proves that he has seen it with his own eyes.

### Keywords

Shakespeare, insects, drama, nature, knowledge, entomology, observer.

Dr. Johnson, an English literary critic of the eighteenth century in his *Preface to Shakespeare* remarked Shakespeare as the poet of nature for his action was not confined to the actions of men: he was an exact surveyor of the inanimate world(37). It is a true remark that William Shakespeare is universally regarded as the greatest dramatist and the finest poet of the English language. He lived in England during the era of Queen Elizabeth I. This Era was called Elizabethan era and considered as a peak of English culture. He is not only the greatest but also the most powerful and influential of the English writers. He definitely has had a direct and significant influence in shaping of English literature and development of the English language.

Shakespeare's descriptions always have some peculiarity gathered by contemplating things as they really exist. Whether he chooses life or nature as his subject, he makes exclusive use of words, descriptions and comparisons which proves that he has seen it with his own eyes. He had the habit of observing things minutely and imbibing the popular notions and trends related to natural history which he later introduced in his plays. This observation makes him come out with excellent metaphors in his works. Shakespeare frequently uses the insect image in his thirty seven plays. The usage of insect imagery in literature is not an uncommon thing.

Insects have appeared in literature from classical times to the present day. Insects are represented in both positive and negative ways. They represent either good qualities or bad qualities of the character. The positive qualities of insects include co-operation and hard work whereas negative qualities include greediness, entrapment, stinging and swarming. Ants and bees represent positive qualities for their co-operation and hard work in Book of Proverbs and Aeshop's Fables. Insects like dragonfly has symbolized harmony with nature while the butterfly has represented the happiness as well as the soul of a person who had died. The negative qualities of the insects are portrayed commonly in fantasy writings or in science fiction or in detective novels.

Insects and their underlying symbolism are prevalent in literature both in lyric and prose. There are over thirty references to insects in the Bible. Buddhist, Hinduism and Islamic writings also include references to insects. Secular writers have used insects as an effective contra point to human desires and aspirations. The practice of using insects in literature commenced when coordinated human thought and language were formulated.

Shakespeare uses many insect images and metaphors in his works. Shakespeare's entomological knowledge was primarily that of informed people in his time enhanced by an unusual flair for studying and using information gathered from others and from the classics. His knowledge of the subject was profound, so far, his scholastic needs demanded more or less hundred and one references to insects are found and located in his plays. The paper aims at exploring the usage of insect images in the works of Shakespeare in order to exhibit his scholarly knowledge about nature and its components.

In *Hamlet* there is a reference to water fly. Water fly is a little insect which may be seen on every pool dimpling the glassy surface of the water. He uses this as a term of reproach. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet asks Horatio,

**Dost know this water – fly? (5.2.88)**

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites exclaims,

**Ah, how the poor world is pestered**

**With such water flies, diminutives of nature (5.1.34-35)**

In *Henry IV, Part II*, there is a reference to Blue bottle. It is often used as a term of reproach. It furnishes an epithet applied by the abusive tongue of Doll Tear sheet to a beadle who had her in custody. She reviles him as “blue bottle rouge” (5.4.24). Mr. Patterson suggests that the term ‘Blue bottle’ is used because of the similarity of his costume to that of the insect.

Shakespeare kept bees in a literary sense. Honey bees are a part of the extra ordinary figurative landscape that Shakespeare provides his audience. Bees are a link for him between the natural world and the humans. His use of honeybee lore in his works suggests that bee keeping was an important industry in early modern England. At the beginning of *Henry V*, there is Shakespeare’s most famous and extensive apicultural metaphor. In *Henry V*, the Archbishop of Canterbury attempts to convince the young prince that he has the right to the throne of France that his country can support a military venture to take that throne. Archbishop’s argument hinges on the beehive as a metaphor for a rightly ordered kingdom. He says,

**For so work the honeybees,**

**Creatures that by a rule in nature teach,**

**The act of order to a peopled kingdom,**

**They have a king and officers of sorts,**

**Where some like magistrates correct at home (1.2. 183 - 187).**

Shakespeare’s reference to honeybees followed the classical source of Pliny, the Elder who says that bees have a government and they pursue individual schemes but have collective leaders. The ordered hive that Archbishop described is organized like the Elizabethan Society; He posits a whole economy and social network of bees ultimately driven by war.

Shakespeare pictures the loss of the bee leader when reporting the murder of Duke Humphrey of Suffolk and Cardinal Beaufort in *Henry IV part II*. Warwick exclaims,

**The commons like an angry hives of Bees**

**That want their leader scatter up and down**

**And care not who they sting in his revenge (3.2.125-127)**

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare deals with the stinging of bees. He presents a delightful irony when Cassius and Brutus taunt Antony.

Cassius: Antony, the posture of your blows are yet unknown.

But for your words they rot the hyblabees and leave them honey less.

Antony: O! yes and soundless too. For you have stolen their buzzing Antony. And very wisely threat before you sting. (5.1. 32 - 38).

In Elizabethan times, name given for the Gadfly insect is brize or breese. It is used as an allusion in *Troilus and Cressida* when Nestor speaks about the sufferings of cattle, he says:

**The herd hath more annoyance by the Breese  
Than by the tiger. (1.3.48 – 49)**

This Gadfly insect causes illness to cattle and the cattle alarmed occasionally by a peculiar sound while hovering for the purpose of oviposition.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare makes a comparison between the effect produced by the insect on the herds of cattle and the sudden abruptness and frenzy of Cleopatra's retreat from the naval conflict. Scarus says to Enobarbus after the battle of Actium

**On our side like the tokened pestilence  
Where death is sure yon ribaudred nag of Egypt  
Whom leprosy o'ertake! I'th' midst to th' fight  
When vantage like a pair of twins appeared  
Both as the same or rather ours the elder  
The breeze upon her like a crow in June**

**Herists sails and flies. (3.8.20 – 26)**

Shakespeare uses the image of ant on three occasions. In classical times, ant is referred as pismire. In *Henry IV Part I*, there is a reference to pismire,

**Nestled and Stung with pismires when I hear  
Of this vile politician Bolingbroke. (3.1.147 – 148)**

In *King Lear*, there is a reference to ant,

**We'll set thee school to an ant  
To teach thee there's no labouring in the winter (2.4.68 – 69)**

The classic writers and audience imagined that poverty or improper food engendered worms or that they were the offspring of putrefaction. In *King Henry V Part I*, one of the Carrurs says,

**Peas and beans are as dank here as a dog,**

**And that is the next way to give poor jades the bots. (2.1.9 -11)**

In Elizabethan era, the presence of crickets in a house is generally regarded as a good omen and said to spread cheerfulness and happiness. In *Henry V Part I*, Poins answers the Prince's question shall we be merry?:

**as merry as crickets my lad (2.4.101)**

Here in this play, crickets are considered as a good omen. In *O, Lady Macbeth* after the murder of Duncan says to Macbeth,

**I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry (2.2.27)**

Here cricket's cry is considered as an ill omen. In *Cymbeline*, when Iachimo commences his survey of the chamber where Imogen lies sleeping, his words refer to chirping of crickets which is audible throughout the palace. Iachimo says,

**The crickets sing, and man's over laboured sense**

**Repairs itself by rest (2.2.11)**

In *Winter's Tale*, Mamillus who on being asked by Hermione to tell a tale replies,

**I will tell it softly**

**Yond crickets shall not hear it (2.1.29 – 30)**

This shows that being the constant companion of her solitary home without her husband, the cricket becomes the object of her superstition.

Beetles find its place in Shakespearean plays. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Titania and fairies are singing songs. First fairy sings,

**Weaving spiders come not here**

**Hence you long legged spinners sense**

**Beetles black approach not hear**

**Worm or snail do no offence. (2.2.19-240)**

Shakespeare employs the expression of moth to denote something trifling or extremely minute. In most minds of people, the moth insect stands for an insect either compatible from its size and inertness on many articles of clothing. In *King John*, there is a conference between Arthur and Hubert,

**Arthur: Is there no remedy?**

**Hubert: None but to lose your eyes**

**Arthur: O! Heaven that there were but a moth is yours. (4.1.100-102)**

Spider, a little creature which is noticed by everyone daily but generally neglected or not assigned any significance becomes the subject of many curious legends and superstitions. Shakespeare has given many images regarding spiders and their cobwebs. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bottom addresses one of his attendants,

**I shall desire you off more acquaintance**

**Good master cobweb. (3.1.75-76)**

According to the universal belief, spiders were considered as venomous formerly. In King *Richard II*, the King says while saluting earth as,

**But let thy spiders that suck up my venom.(3.2.14)**

Another commonly used insect image in Shakespeare's plays is wasp. Wasp is an insect like bee with a sting. They are of aggressive nature. Shakespeare used the term 'Waspish' in the play *Tempest*, Iris says, **her waspish beaded son has broke his arrows.(4.1.110)**

In *As You Like It* Silvius says,

**I know not the contents but as I guess**

**By the stern brow and waspish action**

**Which she did use as she was writing of it**

**It bears an angry tenour.(4.3.8-11)**

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, there is an interesting argument between Petruchio and Katharina.

**Petruchio: Come, come you wasp? Faith you are too angry.**

**Katharina: If I be waspish best beware of my string.**

**Petruchio: My remedy is then pluck it out.**

**Katharina: Ay, if the fool could find it where it lies**

**Petruchio: Who knows not where a wasp does wears it sting. (2.1.210 -214)**

Petruchio's last reply to Katharina opines the belief that prevailed during the Elizabethan age. The people thought that the sting of the wasp is in its tail. But Mofet, a contemporary of Shakespeare opined that the organ of sound and sting lies in the mouth not in the tail.

The above-mentioned references stand as a proof for a rich treasure of knowledge which Shakespeare possessed. This knowledge is based on mere intuition and observation

not by any training. He embellished his writing a choice store of illustrations descriptive of the period in which he lived. He not only dealt with human beings but also created a vista consisting of birds, animals, plants, insects, natural changes and natural phenomena. Thomas Carlyle remarks about Shakespeare in his work 'The Hero as Poet' as his dramas are products of nature. It grows up from the deeps of nature through this noble sincere soul, who is a voice of nature. Thus, being a nature's keen observer he used exclusive insect images in his works.

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