SHAKESPEARE’S ‘HONEY-STALKS’

David Kathman’s list of dialect words from Warwickshire and the West Midlands in
*Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* includes ‘honey-stalks’ for clover. Closer analysis reveals that
this word is not Warwickshire dialect but was coined by Shakespeare and that it does not have
the meaning commonly assumed.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora says:

> I will enchant the old Andronicus
> With words more sweet, and yet more dangerous,
> Than baits to fish, or honey-stalks to sheep,
> When as the one is wounded with the bait,
> The other rotted with delicious feed.
> (4.4.89-93)

According to the *OED* – and confirmed by a search of digitized works on *Early English Books Online* – Shakespeare is the only writer to use the phrase ‘honey-stalks’ to mean ‘clover blossom’. So how was this meaning derived? Bruce Thomas Boehrner has traced its
origin to Samuel Johnson’s 1765 edition of Shakespeare’s *Dramatick Works*, where Johnson
provides the gloss “Honey-stalks are clover flowers, which contain a sweet juice. It is
common for cattle to overcharge themselves with clover, and so die”. This has been accepted
by both the *OED* and Shakespeare’s subsequent editors, though Johnson’s contemporary, John
Monck Mason, objected:

> “Clover has the effect that Johnson mentions, on black cattle but not on sheep. Besides, these honey-stalks, whatever they may be, are described

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Boehrer’s research into English husbandry manuals of the period reveals that the suspected cause of sheep-rot in Shakespeare’s era was the eating of grass laden with a type of dew known then as ‘Honey Dew’. As he puts it, ‘Honey-stalks’ is “a convenient nonce formulation referring to any vegetation laden with honeydew and therefore noxious to sheep.”\(^3\) That Shakespeare is the only writer to use the phrase is a strong argument for its being his own invention. Its appearance at the end of the nineteenth century in Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary* as a name for “the blossoms of white clover”, and its designation as Warwickshire dialect, thus stems entirely from its use in *Titus Andronicus*, Samuel Johnson’s (mistaken) gloss, and the general presumption that the author hailed from Warwickshire. To refer to the *EDD* as proof that the word is Warwickshire dialect constitutes circular reasoning.

ROSALIND BARBER
Goldsmiths, University of London.
