

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.¹ 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 Boehrer 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

¹ D. Kathman, 'Shakespeare and Warwickshire', in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, ed. Wells and Edmonson, (Cambridge, 2013), 129.

as rotting the sheep, not as bursting them, whereas clover is the wholesomest food you can give them”.²

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.

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² J. M. Mason, *Comments on the Last Edition of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1785), 306.

³ B. T. Boehrer, *Animal Characters: Non-human Beings in Early Modern Literature* (Philadelphia, 2010), 178.