

John Clare, Herbalism, and Elegy

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Abstract:

Discussions of Clare's engagement with botany often trace his fraught relationship with taxonomy, exploring his admiration for common names over the 'dark system' of Linnaean classification. This essay expands understanding of Clare's botanical imagination by considering how he brings his botanical 'taste' to bear on the flower as a key figure of elegiac consolation. I refocus attention on his formative preference for pre-Linnaean herbalism and explore how it informs his engagement with elegiac tradition and imagery, especially in relation to Gray's 'Elegy'. I attend to how herbalism is brought into relationship with poetic representations of the floral, focussing especially on the connection between Clare's preference for herbals and Elizabeth Kent's *Flora Domestica*. I then discuss 'Cauper Green' and 'The Village Doctress' (Clare's most sustained poetic discussions of herbalism) as elegies that try to reconcile the finite temporality of human life with the regenerative life cycles of plants and their flowers.

Keywords:

John Clare; herbalism; elegy; flowers; Thomas Gray; 'The Village Doctress'

Flowers recur throughout John Clare's poetry as important markers of recovery as well as of deterioration. Their presence in his verse reveals a poet finely attuned to the moment of bloom and the inevitable decay that structures the lifecycle of flowering plants. Clare is as quick to praise 'little bits o' bloom' that signal 'happy thoughts to come' in a late work composed in Northampton asylum ('I love the Flowers o Spring', *LP*, ii. 860, ll. 9-10), as he is to mourn the dying snowdrop's 'early tomb' and 'witherd head' in an early poem ('The Dying Snowdrop', *EP*, i. 555, ll. 1, 4). This essay suggests that the poet who declared he was 'still fond of Flowers' in one of the last letters he sent from Northampton asylum, drew on their blooms as a simultaneously elegiac and reparative resource that he returned to across his writings (*Letters*, 677). Exploring how the matter and memory of flowers interact in Clare's poetry and prose, I attend to botanical and poetic practices that can accommodate both loss and recovery, and consider how Clare's botanical 'taste' informs and shapes his participation in the elegiac tradition in particular. In so doing, I refocus attention on Clare's formative engagement with herbalism and consider his two most sustained poetic treatments of that practice, 'Cauper Green' and 'The Village Doctress', as elegies that bring a knowledge of plants as both curative and temporal to bear on the work of consolation.

Many critics have noticed a strong narrative of loss in Clare's work.¹ His sonnets composed upon the deaths of Keats and Robert Bloomfield are perhaps not comparable in length to Shelley's *Adonais* (1821) or Milton's *Lycidas* (1638), but nevertheless they show Clare participating in a distinct elegiac tradition of mourning the death of a fellow poet. More often, though, Clare's elegiac mode is approached not solely in relation to the grief shed over a human individual, but in relation to a 'multiplicity of loss', as Sarah Zimmerman has it (Zimmerman, 153). His elegiac voice is most perceptible when lamenting the losses – personal, environmental, and cultural – brought about by enclosure and agricultural 'improvement', as well as by the inevitable passage of time; poems such as 'Helpston', 'To a

Fallen Elm', 'The Mores', and 'The Lament of Swordy Well', to name a few, are recognised frequently as subjective expressions of grief in response to both environmental destruction and processes of natural change and decay.² For Fiona Stafford, Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) in particular is rooted deeply in the tradition of pastoral elegy, offering a 'lament for a world under threat' as it seeks to memorialise rural knowledge and rituals.³

Alan Vardy has also shown that what we know as Clare's 'natural history prose' (especially his journal writings) brings the human and the rural environment together in the work of mourning. Clare's 'entries on the deaths of people he knew, and who found their individual value in relation to their neighbours and their community, echo in entries on the loss of trees and other features of the landscape, and vice versa'.⁴ In one particular journal entry, from February 1825, Clare records the death of 'poor old John Cue', a family friend and fellow gardener:

Went to walk in the fields & heard Ufford bells chimeing for a funeral when I enquired I found it was for poor old John Cue of Ufford a friend of mine with whom I workd some seasons at turnip hoeing for which he was famous – he knew my Grandfather well & told me many recollections of their young day follys – John Cue was once head Gardener for Lord Manners of Ufford hall – he was fond of flowers & books & possed a many curious ones of the latter among which was 'Parkinsons H' (BH, 210)

If this entry, as Vardy has it, tells us much about how Clare expands 'the literary scope of the elegy' by conflating grief for the loss of a person with the loss of their social, cultural, environmental, and economic importance (Vardy, 140), then it also points towards an as yet unexplored element of Clare's elegiac imagination. The 'curious' book that Clare recalls here

is an abbreviated reference to what he elsewhere calls ‘Parkinsons Herbal’, meaning John Parkinson’s *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640) (*BH*, 51). This turn suggests, in one sense, that Clare includes Cue’s knowledge of herbal lore in his elegiac journal entry in order to memorialize and conserve it. In another, related sense, it suggests that herbalism plays a significant role in the work of elegiac consolation for Clare. His recollection of Cue’s fondness for flowers is a personal detail about his friend but, in this context, also resonates with a stock elegiac resource; as Fiona Stafford writes, ‘confronting death with flowers is a universal impulse’, and one that she reminds us, with reference to *Lycidas*, has a firm place in ‘the long tradition of elegies that have exhorted mourners to “strew the laureate hearse” with “bells and flow’rets of a thousand hues”’.⁵ Clare does not call out for specific blooms here, but instead directs his attention to a botanical text that preserves Cue’s living and intimate knowledge of flowers and contains instructions about when and where they can be found. As a herbal, Parkinson’s text is also primarily concerned with plants and their flowers as a curative resource. Elegies are founded on the work of mourning and consolation, as Peter Sacks and many others have discussed, and representations of flowers are often central to this work, where ‘the relation between cut and returning flowers reflects that between castration and the emblem of immortality’ and ‘both these relations in turn reflect the very process of consolatory figuration’.⁶ It is fitting, then, that Clare invokes Parkinson’s herbal as a kind of textual remedy for his loss. He forges a kind of elegy where ‘flowers & books’ converse, which invites consideration of how herbal, medical lore and the figure of the flower might interact in some of his elegiac poems.

Another key reason why Clare may have been moved to remember Cue’s herbal knowledge is that ‘Parkinson’s herbal’ was among a group of texts that sparked his own botanical interest. Many critical accounts of Clare’s engagement with botany trace his fraught relationship with Linnaean taxonomy, and his celebration of the ‘linguistic variability’ of

common names as a counter to ‘rigid systems for naming’, as Theresa Kelley has it.⁷ Many, too, return to the passage in his autobiographical sketches where he recalls his first forays into botanizing:

Hills Herbal gave me a taste for wild flowers which I lov'd to hunt after and collect to plant in my garden which my father let me have in one corner of the garden and on happening to meet with Lees Botany second hand I fell to collecting them into familys and tribes but it was a dark system and I abandond it with dissatisfaction [...] moder[n] words are so mystified by systematic symbols that one cannot understand them till the wrong end of ones lifetime and when one turns to the works of Ray Parkinson and Gerrard were there is more of nature and less of Art it is like meeting the fresh air and balmy summer of a dewey morning after the troubled dreams of a nightmare (*BH*, 61-62)

Whilst this passage has been the springboard for arguments about Clare’s love of what is ‘wild’ and particular in comparison to the supposed ‘dark system’ of taxonomy, it still has more to tell us about the workings of the poet’s botanical imagination beyond his allegiance to common and unsystematic names.⁸ In the above passage, Clare favours an explicitly reparative form of botany: the herbal catalogues of John Hill that, as he wrote in *The Useful Family Herbal* (1754), prioritise the ‘search of remedies’, are the formative reading experience that shapes the poet’s botanical ‘taste’.⁹ He also cites the herbal works of ‘Ray Parkinson and Gerrard’ as refreshing alternatives to the ‘systematic symbols’ of ‘Lennisis’ (Linnaeus), adding John Ray’s *Historia Plantarum* (1686-1704) and John Gerard’s *Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1630) to Parkinson’s *Theatrum Botanicum*. If, according to Kelley, plants are ‘the occasion and work of verse’ in Clare’s poetry (Kelley, 126), returning

to his preference for herbals provides the opportunity to think more about what that work is, and how his verse might enact it.

The trope of flowers as both reminders of decay and consolatory models of regeneration in elegiac poetry since *Lycidas* is revived (and transformed) in Romantic poetry. In a poem Clare later praised as ‘Wordsworths address to that flower’ (*NHPW*, 41), Wordsworth famously remarks how the celandine ‘cannot help itself in its decay’ whilst reflecting on the process of human aging; Keats, more hopefully, implores ‘Shed no tear – O shed no tear! / The flower will bloom another year’.¹⁰ Charlotte Smith, in one of her elegiac sonnets, strikes an unhappy balance between these two sentiments: ‘Another May new buds and flowers shall bring; Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring?’¹¹ Clare’s works are no less full of appeals to the floral, bearing witness to both the occasional and momentous quality of blooms. His journal contains many entries that mark the season or the month by the flowers that have returned: in October 1824, he observes the ‘Michaelmass daisy is in full flower [...] I love them for their visits in such a mellancholy season as the end of autumn’ (*BH*, 187). In November that same year, he records ‘The Chrisanthums are in full flower what a beautiful heart cheering to the different seasons nature has provided in her continual successions of the blooms of flowers’ (*BH*, 196). There are also countless poems from across Clare’s writings that open with the blooming of a flower, ushering it to our attention in the present tense: we read, for example, how ‘The wood anemonie through dead oak leaves / And in the thickest woods now blooms anew’ (*LP*, i. 497, ll. 1-2), or how ‘Primroses in the woods appear / Their sulphur coloured flowers’ (*LP*, ii. 782, ll. 1-2), or how ‘Violets blue & white in marches hours / Beneath the naked hedges show their flowers’ (*MP*, v. 194, ll. 1-2). In ‘The Pansy’ Clare proclaims how ‘It does me good, thou flower of spring, / Thy blossoms to behold’ (*LP*, i. 8, ll. 1-2). It is fitting that he chooses the flower often known as ‘heart’s ease’ as that which does him ‘good’; there is the promise of emotional rejuvenation here, as well as

a stock of herbal lore to draw upon in terms of the pansy's medicinal properties (Gerard alone lists ague, sickness, and 'inflammations of the lungs and chest' as just some of the ailments this flower might cure).¹² Clare combines close poetic attention to seasonal changes, and the flowers they bring, with an awareness of his own mental and physical needs. He greets these blooms as a self-proclaimed lover of wild flowers, but also with anticipation of their reparative qualities. Clare's sense of the 'heart cheering' return of flowers and their capacity to ease his 'mellancholy' bears the traces of an attention trained to watch and wait for flowers as physical, mental, and emotional cures.

Joseph Henderson, head gardener at Milton Hall and a keen botanist with whom Clare often exchanged letters and botanical specimens, frequently wrote to the poet when he was in the midst of mental and physical disorder. Trying to rouse Clare from his 'indisposition' in 1835, he wrote that 'with respect to flowers I have some good things in store for you, which I will send when the season is more favourable for planting, so you must make haste and get better, to be able to attend to them'.¹³ Henderson, like Clare, sensed that flowers would do the poet 'good', and posits the anticipation of their blooms as important for his recovery. If Henderson took a practical approach to Clare's well-being, encouraging the tending of flowers as a form of physical recuperation, then John Taylor also encouraged poetic attention to flowers as reparative. In October 1820, Clare sent James Hessey his poem 'The Wild Flower Nosgay' for comment, as he was preparing his volume *The Village Minstrel* (1821). In 'The Wild Flower Nosgay', Clare's speaker casts his mind back to a childhood spent gathering blooms as 'nature nursd me in her flowery pride', and muses on the renovating power of memory and of flowers as he 'feels a joy in bringing to his mind / The wild flower rambles of his infancy' (*EP*, ii. 409, 412, ll. 2, 79-80). The poem gathers rapidly an impressive catalogue of plants as it follows the speaker's rambles about the fields; 'daisy', 'butter cup', 'cows lip', 'hooded aron', 'white thorn bud', 'Lady smocks', 'primrose',

‘vi’lets’, ‘lily’, ‘ragged robins’, ‘blue bell’, and ‘old mans beard’ – to name just some of the poem’s specimens – all appear in quick succession (*EP*, ii. 410-411, ll. 17-53). When Hessey passed the poem on to Taylor for his opinion, he seemed to respond approvingly to the spontaneous quality of Clare’s blooms as they spring up in successive lines, and wrote to the poet to encourage his progress with the volume:

go on whenever you feel disposed, and *only then*, for at such Times your mind will urge you to compose Verses for its own Relief, and depend upon it I shall be pleased with what you do. I am sure it must have been in such a vein that you composed your Wild Flower Nosegay. (*Letters*, 104)

If flowers are curative here, it is because they have been figured in verse that gives the impression of having been composed explicitly for ‘relief’. Clare referred to this poem as his ‘effusion’ (*Letters*, 104), suggesting an unrestrained, pouring fourth of emotion that might serve a reparative purpose. Clare’s ‘taste for wild flowers’ – cultivated by herbals – leads to the gathering of flowers in verse as means to rescue them from ‘black oblivions shroud’ (*EP*, ii. 409, l. 6), which serves both an imaginative and a material need as the consolatory work of remembrance takes on a curative function.

‘The Wild Flower Nosgay’ shows Clare recalling both a love of flowers and an intuitive sense of their restorative potential as a spontaneous impulse forged in early childhood. It also, through its listing of specific plant names, shows the careful attention of the naturalist being brought to bear on this impulse. It is well-known that, as well as the herbal texts Clare admired, he also possessed volumes on gardening and more systematic floras (such as James Smith’s *Compendium of the English Flora* (1829)) that would have aided his ability to identify local specimens.¹⁴ There is one flora in particular that, whilst not

listed in Clare's library, he is likely to have been aware of, and is worthy of discussion here because of how it frames close attention to plants and flowers. Thomas Ordoyno was a Newark nurseryman, and it is possible that Clare would have come across his *Flora Nottinghamiensis* (1807) (a guide to the local flora of Nottinghamshire) when he was working for the nurseryman George Withers in Newark in 1808.¹⁵ Ordoyno's flora not only claims a sympathy with earlier herbal works by stating that it is a manual for 'all, whom *medicine*, agriculture, or amusement, may incite to the acquirement of an intimate acquaintance with [...] plants' (my emphasis), but also opens with an epigraph from a poem that casts the flower as a central elegiac figure: Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751).¹⁶ Ordoyno's 'preface' begins with two of the most famous lines from Gray's 'Elegy', 'Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air' (*Ordoyno*, i). Gray's 'flow'r' is emblematic of the fate of rural villagers whose achievements might have been overlooked, and therefore not memorialized after their death, because of their relative obscurity; its presence in Ordoyno's flora transforms the act of searching for real flowers – for 'medicine' or otherwise – into a vital practice of memorialization that unites poetic and botanical sympathies. Crucially, Gray's 'Elegy' was an important poem for Clare, and seeing these lines transplanted into a botanical context provides an opportunity to consider how he might have brought his own botanical knowledges to bear on Gray's elegiac image and sentiment. Mina Gorji has done much to show how Clare's poetry is full of 'unseen flowers' that allude to Gray's 'Elegy', especially in relation to Clare's anxieties about being an uncultivated and obscure labouring-class poet: 'Gray's flower became a focus for Clare's reflections on fame and obscurity, attention and neglect'.¹⁷ For Gorji, Clare was ultimately able to turn 'elegy to celebration' by transforming Gray's image of the wasted bloom into 'a robust flower that thrives in neglected ground' (Gorji, 54). What I hope to add to this argument is that there are poems where Clare draws

explicitly on his knowledge of herbalism and the curative potential of plants, that also speak to the consolatory aims of Gray's 'Elegy'. In these poems, however, the danger is that flowers and those who possess an intimate knowledge of them might still be 'wasted' if the rural practice of herbalism is not memorialised in verse.

Alongside the herbals and floras that Clare consulted, the work he admired most for its attempts to unify poetic and practical attention to plants was Elizabeth Kent's *Flora Domestica* (1823). Kent's text was a celebration of the flowers that appear in poetry, and situated her within the 'culture and personal networks of Romanticism', as Ann Shteir argues.¹⁸ It is well known that Kent praised Clare in her preface – claiming that 'None have better understood the language of flowers' – and that she chose select passages from his verse to supplement some of her entries.¹⁹ Clare, in turn, enthused about *Flora Domestica*, writing that it would make botanical study 'delightful' and full of 'pleasure', as well as 'popular' (*Letters*, 284). The two writers shared a passionate interest in natural history, and critics have been drawn to the mutual influence they had on each other's work. Uncovering Kent's text as an 'unlikely network of literary interaction and exchange', Daisy Hay discusses Clare as Kent's 'most consistent and important literary supporter in the 1820s', whilst Robert Heyes explores in unprecedented detail the correspondence between Kent and Clare concerning their plans for a collaborative book on birds (which never materialised).²⁰ Although one was a labouring-class poet and the other a writer situated firmly in the culture of the Cockney school (Hay, 273), Clare and Kent shared certain botanical sympathies. Writing as a resident of the 'town', but a 'lover of the country', Kent states that plants and their flowers were an important source of 'consolation' for her, and her preface is playfully elegiac as she mourns those specimens kept in flower-pots and on balconies that have 'met an untimely death from the ignorance of their nurses' or, more worryingly, been the victims of 'plant-slaughter' (Kent, xiii). As a volume intended to correct such negligence, *Flora Domestica* equips its

readers with the knowledge they need to tend to their ‘portable garden’ and to help it thrive (Kent, xiii).

Clare, as a keen gardener himself, would have appreciated Kent’s careful guide to plant cultivation. However, there is an important element of Kent’s approach to her material that has been overlooked as a motivating factor for Clare’s enthusiasm for her work. The entries in *Flora Domestica* refer frequently to the medicinal qualities of plants that are interwoven with poetic references and instructions for their care. Her entry on a species of crocus called the ‘saffron’, for example, claims that it can be ‘worn at the pit of the stomach’ for it ‘has been lately said to be an effectual preventive of sea-sickness’; the ‘houseleek’ affords ‘immediate relief in burns and other external inflammations’; the fruit of the ‘Dog-rose’ is ‘a good vehicle for many nauseous medicines’ (Kent, 112, 186, 313). Kent would go on to write in detail about the medicinal (and pathological) properties of plants in a series of articles on ‘An Introductory View of the Linnean System of Plants’.²¹ Her knowledge of herbalism also appears to share some of its textual roots with Clare’s; in 1826 Kent wrote to him concerning, presumably, their plans for the book on birds, and concluded a paragraph about the folklore surrounding the Barnacle Goose (this species of goose was often claimed to grow out of barnacles or shells that cling to trees and driftwood) by exclaiming ‘What a collection of absurdities, yet the writer, Old Gerarde, the Herbalist, stakes his credit upon their truth’.²² Kent may, understandably, have been wary of the more ‘absurd’ claims to be found in herbal texts but Gerard, as for Clare, must have captured her interest in other respects; Shteir shows how Kent quoted from his *Herball* in her articles for the *Magazine of Natural History* in particular, and so she certainly did not discount herbalism altogether.²³ In the case of *Flora Domestica*, Kent consistently works herbalism’s influence into her prose, and as a work written explicitly for the ‘domestic’ care of plants, her discussions of their curative properties liken her text to the pre-Linnaean herbals and ‘huswife phisic’ that Clare

recalls fondly in his autobiographical fragments and prefers to the more systematic treatment of plants (*BH*, 51).

Kent's interest in the reparative properties of her specimens is often borne out by the poetic extracts she chooses. Her entry for the 'rose-bush' is, unsurprisingly, full of verse quotations, including lines from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590): 'Like roses in a bed of lilies shed, / The which ambrosial odours from them drew, / And gazer's sense with double pleasure fed, / Able to heal the sick, and to revive the dead' (Kent, 318). In a subsequent edition of the work, Kent's discussion of the suspicious lack of flowers in Pope's verse led her to declare that 'there are few even among ungifted individuals totally insensible to the soothing influence of flowers and trees', before turning to lines from Garcilaso de la Vega: 'The odours wafted from the mead, the flowers / In which the wild bee sits and sings for hours; / These might the moodiest misanthrope employ, / Make sound the sick, and turn distress to joy'.²⁴ I include this discussion of *Flora Domestica* here in order to show how Kent situates Clare's verse in a text that displays a form of practical imagination in making connections between plants and flowers as mental, physical, and emotional cures. Kent, like Clare, is attuned both to the medicinal and to the consolatory virtues of flowers, and works these virtues together in her carefully chosen passages.

Significantly, the lines that Kent chose to showcase Clare's 'language of flowers' in *Flora Domestica* are taken from 'Cowper Green' – also known as 'Cauper Green' – ostensibly because they celebrate 'plants that seldom find a bard to sing them' (Kent, xxii). Their shared interest in herbalism may indeed be what drew Kent to this poem in particular (concerned as it is with the healing properties of plants), but her attraction to the unsung and unnoticed flowers in Clare's verse also speaks strongly to Gray's elegiac figure, and 'Cauper Green' is, in many respects, an elegy, too. In the poem, Clare enumerates the wild flowers, such as 'Primrose', 'Violets', 'anemonies', 'dandelion', 'Hare bells', and 'cuckoo flowers'

that grow in the titular landscape, lauding them as ‘flowers of wastes’ – an echo and transformation of Gray’s image – far superior to those of gardens and the ‘Tastless samness’ of prospects (*EP*, ii. 180-186, ll. 88-100, 105, 50).²⁵ Crucially, these flowers grow alongside ‘medicinal betony’ (l. 102) and, as later noted, other ‘herbs’ that are ‘Food & phisic doubly found’ (ll. 175-76), an observation that invites a reading of all the aforementioned plants in a curative context. An avid reader of Gerard, Clare would likely have come across his suggestions, for example, that primroses ‘purgeth the brain, and qualifieth the pain of the megrim’, as well as ‘cureth all scaldings or burnings with fire’, whilst violets ‘take away the hoarseness of the chest’ and also ‘comforteth the heart and the other inward parts’ (*Herbal*, 179, 200). Many of the flowers that are not named as explicitly ‘medicinal’ in this poem still have their resonance in Clare’s knowledge of herbal lore, a resource that permits him a special attention to and communion with the current flora of Cauper Green, but also with its botanical history. The poem turns on a wider historical viewpoint that becomes an important elegiac moment. The speaker’s own daily wanderings in this place offer ‘a glimpse to see / Of hoary bald antiquity’ (ll. 149-150), and by ‘carless pulling weeds’ (l. 163) the ‘Relics’ (l. 166) of the past are revealed:

Hermits once from worldly care
 Fled & mossd a cottage there
 Livd on herbs that there abound
 Food & phisic doubly found
 Herbs that have existance still
 In every vale on every hill
 Whose virtues only wi em dyd
 As rural life gave way to pride
 (ll. 173-180)

Plants and their flowers form a crucial historical connection here, accessed via knowledge of their ‘virtues’. The ‘Hermits’ who embodied this knowledge lived in relative obscurity when they were alive (away ‘from worldly care’), and are now long dead. Their trace, however, is both past and perennial, there to be discovered anew by those who have the ‘zerning eye’ (l. 107) to recognise the recurring curative blooms on Cauper Green. Clare’s speaker is able to resurrect the ‘virtues’ of the plants in this place, and therefore the memory of the hermits, because of his own ability to identify medicinal herbs as well as his elegiac impulse to remember and reflect on the landscape’s past inhabitants. The poem’s temporal elasticity – its nimble flickering between what was ‘there’ and what is ‘still’ here – suggests that herbalism might, for Clare, have as much to do with elegiac consolation as with the curing of illness, and that these poetic and medical impulses are intertwined in his verse.

Clare’s most sustained poetic treatment of herbalism, beyond ‘Cauper Green’, is ‘The Village Doctress’. As well as a close examination of rural medical practice, exemplified in the doctress’s knowledge of herbals and the virtues of plants, the poem is also an elegy. Little-discussed by critics, it was part of Clare’s manuscript for *The Midsummer Cushion*, which, after much editing, became his last publication, *The Rural Muse* (1835). ‘The Village Doctress’ was, however, excluded from that final volume. The poem chronicles the life and practice of a ‘doctress’ who administers medicinal herbs to those in her locality and ‘owns / The praise of half the village for her powers’ (*MP*, iii. 330-345, ll. 17-18).²⁶ Leading a humble, ‘unpretending’ (l. 1) existence and possessing an acute sensitivity to the worth and virtues of wild plants that others might dismiss as ‘common weeds’ (l. 112), she is, in many ways, Clare’s ideal botanist. Timothy Ziegenhagen, in the only sustained critical discussion of this poem, remarks how the doctress’s medical knowledge and herb-gathering is ‘linked to local contexts’ in a manner sympathetic to Clare’s poetic investment in the local and the common.²⁷ Much of the poem’s affective power, however, comes from the sense that the

herbal knowledge embodied by the doctress is a vital, but dwindling, rural practice. After praising her skill and extensive reading into ‘herbal books’ (l. 110) such as ‘Culpeppers Herbal’ (l. 46), the speaker goes on to assert the doctress’s established position in the community – ‘She neer missed going to church or foul or fair’ (l. 190) – as well as her extensive knowledge of and sympathetic communion with both herbal plants and the bees that co-exist with them (‘& she by certain signs few else could see / Knew when they were in liklihood to swarm’ (ll. 158-159)). The final stanzas then suddenly anticipate her death, simultaneously commemorating and mourning the loss of her skills:

& when she dies no doubt fames latent spark
Will light up epitaph her powers to tell
& warm the muse of worthy parish clerk
To chime a stanza while he chimes the bell
& unto all the world her praises tell
If all the world would read her humble stone
For twere a burning shame & sin as well
That one who hath such cures & wonders shown
Should leave the world for aye & be for aye unknown
(ll. 253-261)

There is a nod to Gray’s elegiac preoccupation with the unsung accomplishments of the lowly in his ‘Elegy’ here, as Clare muses on the doctress’s ‘humble stone’ as the measure of her existence. The speaker’s confidence in the doctress’s posthumous fame (‘no doubt’) gives way to a lingering sense that she may yet be left ‘unknown’ and, consequently, her ‘cures & wonders’, rooted in her knowledge of herbalism, will become forgotten, too (even as they persist in printed texts, they will not be *practised* without her living presence). The speculative words ‘twere’ and ‘Should’ are key here, as they both seem to project to a future where the doctress has died and not been remembered. Faced with this potential threat of

oblivion, the poem becomes a compensatory epitaph, leading us to re-read all of the preceding stanzas as an effort to record the doctress's knowledge and practice for posterity.

Like 'Cauper Green', 'The Village Doctress' brings the human and the plants they tend to together in the work of elegy. The doctress is fictional, but may be based in part on the mother of Clare's childhood friend, Richard Turnhill, who he remembers as 'skilled in huswife physic and Culpeper's herbal' (*BH*, 52). Clare's representation of herbalism in this poem is of a practice that is, alarmingly, on the wane. Indeed, the poet himself, although steeped in the traditions of his rural community, preferred to seek out the advice of his London-based physician, Dr Darling. Nevertheless, he is painfully alert to how the death of the doctress, for whom 'Phisic seemed oozing from her finger ends' (l. 68), would usher in the death of a communal means of cure and embodied relationship with the local environment. His botanical allegiance to herbalism over newer taxonomical systems is, in many ways, a form of conservation, and elegy a means to both mourn and preserve a fading body of local botanical knowledge.

Clare does not simply confine herbalism to the past, however. A closer look at his description of the doctress's work, and the knowledge behind it, also reveals the elegiac dimensions of herbalism as a living, poetic practice. The doctress is a key figure through which to read Clare's botanical imagination, as he figures her as well-versed in the kinds of herbal texts he favoured. The 'Culpeppers herbal' in the poem is most likely a reference to Nicholas Culpeper's *The English Physician* (1652); Eric Robinson and David Powell cite the edition Clare would have been familiar with as the two-volume *English Family Physician* (1792) edited by Joshua Hamilton (*BH*, 292). What Culpeper's work has in common with the writings of Hill, Ray, Parkinson, and Gerard, apart from their use of common plant names and their detailed accounts of the curative properties of each specimen, is that they all foster a profoundly temporal knowledge of the natural world and its flora. Culpeper arranges all of

his entries around a tripartite system of ‘time’, ‘place’ and ‘government and virtues’, which provide explicit details about the phases of planets and the moon, and their interactions with the growth and properties of medicinal plants. ‘Common Agrimony’, for instance, is accompanied by these instructions: ‘flowers in July and August, and the seed is ripe soon after [...] Agrimony is an herb of Jupiter, and under the sign Cancer.’²⁸ Gerard also lays out a temporal map of the plants in his *Herball*, organising entries into sections such as ‘The Description’, ‘The Place’, ‘The Time’, ‘The Vertues’; ‘The Time’ is always a guide to when the plant will be in flower, such as his entry for violets, ‘The floures for the most part appeare in March, at the farthest in Aprill’, or for primroses, ‘They flourish from Aprill to the end of May, and some one or other of them do floure all Winterlong’ (*Herbal*, 199, 179). As a practical form of botany that directs the reader to the specimen they require, herbalism does not just teach the common names for plants as a way into decoding their medical properties, but attunes the reader to the lifecycle of their flowers and trains them to watch and wait for the moment of bloom. It is therefore an important botanical lens through which to read the tropes of flowering and decay, and their elegiac dimensions in Clare’s verse.

Robert Mitchell’s study of vitalism in Romantic science and literature considers how Romantic poets are drawn continually to ‘the strangeness of vegetable vitality’, and especially ‘the strange reproductive logic of plants’.²⁹ By this, Mitchell means the ability of plants and their flowers not only to disseminate and scatter their seed, but also to recur and regenerate across time, blooming in cycles of seasonal return. It is to this latter ‘strange logic’ that ‘The Village Doctress’ is sympathetically attuned. Her reading of herbals prepares a heightened attention to the lifecycles of local plants:

The herbs most famous in her skills esteem
Were such as herbal books the most commend
Herbs that in common eyes do only seem

As common weeds unskilled to comprehend
The virtues wisdom in their praise has penned
& but for her & such as her they'd grow
Their little lives away without a friend
One passing glance of notice to bestow
As when they come in bloom or out of bloom they go
(ll. 109-117)

These lines reveal a double impulse at work in the doctress's consideration of plants and their flowers. She has a special sight, gleaned from 'herbal books', that allows her to 'comprehend' the virtues of supposed weeds, but this also permits a different kind of affective attention that she devotes to each worthy specimen. The task of identifying 'herbs' to collect for her medical practice gives way to a wider sense of what is at stake in her daily rounds.

What is figured as a casual, mobile form of looking in 'The Village Doctress' – 'One passing glance of notice', comparable to the 'zerning eye' in 'Cauper Green' – is actually a crucial practice of memorialisation. Without the careful acknowledgement of the doctress, the flowers that return to her local vicinity each season would 'grow / Their little lives away without a friend'. This seems like another echo of Gray's 'Elegy' and its 'flow'r born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness [...]', but Clare partly strips the image of its metaphorical association; he is equally, if not more, concerned with the material blooms in front of the doctress, and makes the lives of plants monumental in their own right, not just a cipher for human mortality. However, the medical utility of herbalism also lends another implication to the sense of 'waste' in Gray's image here too, for if these blooms are not noticed when the time is right, their healing virtues cannot be of benefit to sick individuals, either. Clare also deftly anticipates the more obvious elegiac turn at the end of the poem in a

moment that is easily missed: ‘& but for her & such as her they’d grow’. The doctress is made akin to her ‘weeds’ in this line with its fleeting half rhyme, as both her life and her ‘skills’ become as ephemeral as flowers. Indeed, whilst her herbalism is in one sense a reliable stock of knowledge fixed in printed books, it is in practice reliant on the more sporadic flowering of the real plants, as she watches for the blooms that allow her to identify her cures. The stanza praises a patient attention to the temporality of flowers within the wider context of a human lifespan, and makes this attention fundamental to their reparative work. As a poem that anticipates the death of the doctress and looks to a future in which she might have been forgotten, ‘The Village Doctress’ also focuses on the miraculous lifecycle of plants as they go in and out of flower, and attunes to both as models of elegiac reflection. The last line of this stanza, as it stretches from pentameter to hexameter, attends to and measures out each ‘bloom’ as it arrives and leaves, structuring mourning around the lifecycle of the plant. The doctress becomes reconciled to, and focussed on, the continual comings and goings of flowers and their healing qualities within the wider context of her life and its ultimate end, forging in her patient, daily rounds an elegiac as well as a botanical practice.

Herbalism, as I have shown, underscores Clare’s readiness to celebrate and commemorate flowers as recurrent curative resources that are also tied to the consolatory work of elegy. Significantly, his participation in this tradition is informed as much by his medical botanical knowledge as it is by his inheritance and development of the imagery in Gray’s ‘Elegy’. With its focus on the flower as a key consolatory image, elegy is the poetic tradition that speaks most strongly to Clare’s reparative relationship to the floral. Whilst he may have lamented herbalism as a dwindling practice, the flowers that appear in Clare’s poems, and especially the elegies discussed, continue to enact and commemorate its influence on his botanical imagination, where noticing the commonest weed can bring about the most healing relief.

¹ See especially Mark Sandy, “‘Grief Searching Muse’: John Clare’s Landscapes of Memory and Mourning”, in *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (Farnham, Surrey, 2013), 131-148 and Sarah M. Zimmerman, ‘John Clare’s Poetics and Politics of Loss’, in *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (New York, 1999), 147-184.

² See Zimmerman, 156-157; Andrew Smith, ‘Ruins, Radicals, and Reactionaries: John Clare’s Enclosure Elegies’, *JCSJ*, 29 (2010), 37-50; John Goodridge, ‘Pastoral and Popular Modes in Clare’s Enclosure Elegies’, in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. John Goodridge (Helpston, 1994), 139-155.

³ Fiona Stafford, ‘Pastoral Elegy in the 1820s: *The Shepherd’s Calendar*’, *Victoriographies*, 2.2 (2012), 103-127, 120.

⁴ Alan Vardy, ‘Clare’s Natural History Prose Elegies’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 34.3 (2003), 137-140, 137.

⁵ Fiona Stafford, *The Brief Life of Flowers* (London, 2018), 8.

⁶ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore; London, 1985), 1-2, 33. See also David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London; New York, 2007), 3; Michael Hurley and Michael O’Neill, ‘Elegy’, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Poetic Form* (Cambridge, 2012), 100-119, 101.

⁷ Theresa Kelley, ‘Clare’s Commonable Plants’, in *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore, 2012), 126-158, 128.

⁸ See Douglas Chambers, ‘A love for every simple weed’: Clare, botany and the poetic language of lost Eden’, in *John Clare in Context*, ed. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips, and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge, 1994), 238-258; M. M. Mahood, ‘John Clare: bard of the wild flowers’, in *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge, 2008), 112-146.

⁹ John Hill, *The Useful Family Herbal* (London, 1754), vi.

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- ¹⁰ ‘The Small Celandine’, in William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, New York, 1983), 210, l. 18; ‘Fairy’s Song’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978), 377, ll. 1-2.
- ¹¹ ‘Written at the Close of Spring’, in *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (New York; Oxford, 1993), 13, ll. 13-14.
- ¹² *Gerard’s Herbal: The History of Plants*, ed. Marcus Woodward (London, 1994), 150.
- ¹³ MS Egerton 2249, fol. 297.
- ¹⁴ See David Powell, *Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library: With Indexes to Poems in Manuscript* (Northampton, 1964).
- ¹⁵ See Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York; Great Britain, 2003), 72-73 for a discussion of this part of Clare’s working life. My thanks to Robert Heyes for directing me to Clare’s potential knowledge of Ordoyno’s *Flora Nottinghamiensis*.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Ordoyno, *Flora Nottinghamiensis* (London, 1807), iii.
- ¹⁷ Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool, 2008), 44-56, 46.
- ¹⁸ Ann Shteir, ‘*Flora Feministica*: Reflections on the Culture of Botany’, *Lumen*, 12 (1993), 167-176, 173.
- ¹⁹ Elizabeth Kent, *Flora Domestica, Or, The Portable Flower-Garden: With Directions for the Treatment of Plants in Pots* (London, 1823), xxii.
- ²⁰ Daisy Hay, ‘Elizabeth Kent’s Collaborator’s’, *Romanticism*, 14.3 (2008), 272-81, 279; Robert Heyes, ‘John Clare’s Natural History’, in *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community*, ed. Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron (Cambridge, 2015), 169-188.
- ²¹ Elizabeth Kent, ‘An Introductory View of the Linnean System of Plants’, *The Magazine of Natural History*, vols 1-3 (London, 1828-29).
- ²² MS Egerton 2247, fol. 170v. My thanks to Robert Heyes for directing me to this source.

²³ Ann Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Baltimore; London, 1998), 140.

²⁴ Kent, *Flora Domestica* (London, 1831), xxxv-xxxvi.

²⁵ Further references to this poem are indicated by line number only.

²⁶ Further references to this poem are indicated by line number only.

²⁷ Timothy Ziegenhagen, 'Medicine, Poetry, and Enclosure in John Clare's "The Village Doctress"', *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 42.1 (2009), 179-190, 187.

²⁸ Nicholas Culpeper, *The English Family Physician or, Medical Herbal Enlarged, with Several Hundred Additional Plants, Principally from Sir John Hill*, ed. Joshua Hamilton (2 vols, London, 1792), i, 134.

²⁹ Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore, 2013), 196-97.