

LITERACY learning springboards

Pappus

Plant metaphors in Shakespeare

Pupils identify metaphors and improvise a scene

Aim: Pupils discover that in Shakespeare's plays common flowers of the countryside are used. Usually he doesn't mention them simply to describe a scene but uses their qualities and properties as a metaphor to tell us more about the characters or the situation.

1. In *The Tempest*, a play about murderous ambition, revenge and forgiveness, the stinging quality of nettles is used to mirror the natures of the two evil princes, Antonio and Sebastian, who are plotting to kill the Duke and his faithful adviser, Gonzalo. They've been shipwrecked, and Gonzalo tries to imagine what he would plant on the island if he was in charge, but they laugh at him:

GONZALO: *Had I plantation of this isle, my lord –*

ANTONIO: *He'd sow it with **nettle-seed**.*

SEBASTIAN: *Or docks, or mallows.*

When Antonio says Gonzalo 'would sow it with nettle-seed' if he was in charge, he's mocking him. Sebastian joins in, suggesting Gonzalo would sow other vile weeds when he says 'or docks, or mallows' sharing Antonio's contempt for Gonzalo.

Antonio is described by his older brother, Prospero, as '*The **ivy** which had hid my princely trunk and sucked my verdure out on't*' ...vividly revealing his belief that his brother is a parasite, sucking the youthful, green life (*verdure*) out of him. (Antonio steals the dukedom from his brother Prospero, who is the 'rightful' Duke.)

2. In *Cymbeline*, (a play that has a lot in common with *Game of Thrones*), Imogen, the daughter of King Cymbeline of Ancient Britain, is hated by her stepmother who tries to have her killed. The murderer is told to '*Look for thy reward among the **nettles at the elder tree** which overshades the mouth of that same pit...*'

The elder tree, you might know, is connected with the devil in folklore, so the metaphor here is pretty intense: the murderer's reward is hidden 'among the nettles at the elder tree', in other words a poisonous and a treacherous place to match the deed!

3. In Shakespeare's comedy *Love's Labour's Lost*, the witty courtier Berowne slaps down the pompous schoolmaster, Holofernes.

Holofernes: *Begin, sir, you are my ELDER.*

Berowne: *Well followed; Judas was hanged on an ELDER.*

4. In *Henry V*, the Welsh Captain Williams is cynical about the King's promises to stand by his men, and shows this by talking about an ELDER GUN. An ELDER GUN is a pop-gun, made by removing the soft pith from a straight stick of an elder tree and then shooting chewed-up paper pellets through it.

Williams: *That's a perilous shot out of an ELDER gun, that a poor and private displeasure can do against a monarch.'*

ACTIVITIES

In small groups 2 or 3, choose either Activity 1 or Activity 2. Aim to come up with a short scene of about 5 minutes to show to the group:

Activity 1:

You are washed up on an island, starving and thirsty and cold. In groups of two or three, *improvise** a scene where you explore and forage for food... (remember that nettles and elder, for example, can be nutritious).

Activity 2:

*Devise** a scene with two characters, around the words from *Cymbeline* 'Among the nettles at the elder tree'.

Resources:

A useful reference text is *Botanical Shakespeare*, by Gerit Quealy

Key vocabulary:

**Improvise: make it up as you go along (but talk about the overall shape of your piece before you start, and any details you want to include*

**Devise: create a piece of original drama in a group, by responding to a stimulus*

Success criteria:

- ✓ I improvise a performance
- ✓ I can work collaboratively with my peers
- ✓ I can perform a poem by heart.

