

Early Modern English Reading Group – Week 1

INSECTS

From Edmund Spenser, 'Muiopotmos: or the Fate of the Butterfly' (1591)

I SING of deadly dolorous debate,
Stir'd up through wrathfull Nemesis despight,
Betwixt two mightie ones of great estate,
Drawne into armes, and prooffe of mortall fight,
Through prowd ambition and hartswelling hate,
Whilest neither could the others greater might
And sdeignfull scorne endure; that from small jarre
Their wraths at length broke into open warre.

The roote whereof and tragicall effect,
Vouchsafe, O thou the mournfulst Muse of nyne,
That wontst the tragick stage for to direct,
In funerall complaints and waylfull tyne,
Reveale to me, and all the meanes detect
Through which sad Clarion did at last declyne
To lowest wretchednes: And is there then
Such rancour in the harts of mightie men?

Of all the race of silver-winged flies
Which doo possesse the empire of the aire,
Betwixt the centred earth and azure skies,
Was none more favourable, nor more faire,
Whilst heaven did favour his felicities,
Then Clarion, the eldest sonne and haire
Of Muscaroll, and in his fathers sight
Of all alive did seeme the fairest wight.

With fruitfull hope his aged breast he fed
Of future good, which his yong toward yeares,
Full of brave courage and bold hardyhed,
Above th' ensample of his equall peares,
Did largely promise, and to him forered
(Whilst off his heart did melt in tender teares)
That he in time would sure prove such an one,
As should be worthie of his fathers throne.

The fresh yong flie, in whom the kindly fire
Of lustfull yongth began to kindle fast,
Did much disdain to subject his desire

To loathsome sloth, or houres in ease to wast,
But joy'd to range abroad in fresh attire,
Through the wide compas of the ayrie coast,
And with unwearied wings each part t' inquire
Of the wide rule of his renowned sire.

For he so swift and nimble was of flight,
That from this lower tract he dar'd to stie
Up to the clowdes, and thence, with pineons light,
To mount aloft unto the christall skie,
To vew the workmanship of heavens hight:
Whence downe descending he along would flie
Upon the streaming rivers, sport to finde;
And oft would dare to tempt the troublous winde.

So on a summers day, when season milde
With gentle calme the world had quieted,
And high in heaven Hyperions fierie childe
Ascending, did his beames abroad dispred,
Whiles all the heavens on lower creatures smilde,
Yong Clarion, with vauntfull lustiehead,
After his guize did cast abroad to fare,
And theretoo gan his furnitures prepare.

His breastplate first, that was of substance pure,
Before his noble heart he firmly bound,
That mought his life from yron death assure,
And ward his gentle corpes from cruell wound:
For it by arte was framed to endure
The bit of balefull steele and bitter stownd,
No lesse than that which Vulcane made to sheild
Achilles life from fate of Troyan field.

And then about his shoulders broad he threw
An hairie hide of some wilde beast, whom hee
In salvage forrest by adventure slew,
And reft the spoyle his ornament to bee:
Which, spreadding all his backe with dreadfull vew,
Made all that him so horrible did see
Thinke him Alcides with the lyons skin,
When the Næmean conquest he did win.

Upon his head, his glistering burganet,
The which was wrought by wonderous device,
And curiously engraven, he did set:
The mettall was of rare and passing price;
Not Bilbo steele, nor brasse from Corinth fet,
Nor costly oricalche from strange Phœnice;

But such as could both Phœbus arrowes ward,
And th' hayling darts of heaven beating hard.

Therein two deadly weapons fixt he bore,
Strongly outlaunched towards either side,
Like two sharpe speares, his enemies to gore:
Like as a warlike brigandine, applyde
To fight, layes forth her threatfull pikes afore,
The engines which in them sad death doo hyde:
So did this flie outstretch his fearefull hornes,
Yet so as him their terrour more adornes.

Lastly his shinie wings, as silver bright,
Painted with thousand colours, passing farre
All painters skill, he did about him dight:
Not halfe so manie sundrie colours arre
In Iris bowe, ne heaven doth shine so bright,
Distinguished with manie a twinckling starre,
Nor Junoes bird in her ey-spotted traine
So manie goodly colours doth containe.

From William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-96?)

O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
On the fore-finger of an alderman,
Drawn with a team of little atomies
Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep;
Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners' legs,
The cover of the wings of grasshoppers,
The traces of the smallest spider's web,
The collars of the moonshine's watery beams,
Her whip of cricket's bone, the lash of film,
Her wagoner a small grey-coated gnat,
Not so big as a round little worm
Prick'd from the lazy finger of a maid;
Her chariot is an empty hazel-nut
Made by the joiner squirrel or old grub,
Time out o' mind the fairies' coachmakers.
And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love;
O'er courtiers' knees, that dream on court'sies straight,
O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees,
O'er ladies' lips, who straight on kisses dream,
Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,
Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are:
Sometime she gallops o'er a courtier's nose,
And then dreams he of smelling out a suit;
And sometime comes she with a tithe-pig's tail
Tickling a parson's nose as a' lies asleep,
Then dreams, he of another benefice:
Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,
And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,
Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,
Of healths five-fathom deep; and then anon
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
And being thus frighted swears a prayer or two
And sleeps again. This is that very Mab
That plats the manes of horses in the night,
And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,
Which once untangled, much misfortune bodes:
This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage.

From Thomas Traherne, 'Commentaries of Heaven' (1660-1674?)

An Ant is a great Miracle in a little room: a feeble Creature made to be an Ornament of the Magnificent Univers: and no less a Monument of Eternal Lov, then Almighty Power. Its Lims and members are as miraculous, as those of a Lion or Tygre. It hath a Soul within it which rules its Members, as great as an Elephants; the five outward and the three inward Sences, all the Passions and Affections of a Man, its Famelies, Relations Pleasures and Provisions, its Estate Interest and Concernment, a Nature capable of Benefits and Injuries, which sees and enjoys the Heavens and the Earth in its proper Mediocritie, as if the Sun and Moon and Stars and all the Elements were made for it alone. Its Conceptions Desires Thoughts and Apprehensions are a mysterious Abyss of Wonders, which may feed the Contemplation of a Serious Person with Delight and Thanksgiving. It is never truly seen till it is seen in its Original uses services Relations and Ends. for which see the Word Insect, that being the general Head of Ants Flies Bees Hornets etc. It also proceedeth from GOD to GOD. It was made by his Power, and endeth in his Glory. It is our fellow Creature, and of far greater Height and value too in some respects then the Sun. yet made by Eternal Wisdom for our Service, and prodigally given by Divine or infinit Goodness to our Pleasure. Without Remorse we kill it, and pass by without Concernment; scorning and neglecting so small a Creature. GOD less needeth us, and there is a greater Distance between us. How infinit therefore is his Goodness, who being so Great and High exalted above us stoopeth down so graciously, and so tenderly regards us! Verily it is as incredible that he should respect us at all, as that he should make us Heirs of Eternal Glory.

An Ant in its Spiritual Capacity is a Symbol of a Wise Laborious Provident Industrious man, and well resembles an orderly Peacefull Christian. For which Cause Solomon sendeth the Sluggard to the Ant, and so may we the Coward. For it is a Creature in all Appearance of an haughty Courage and high Stomach. for he assaults all things, and never rests when Entangled or endangered. In his littleness as well as providence he is the Embleme of a man, and many Ways an Object of Felicitie, since truly an Ant is one of GODs Creatures. I have been informed that their History is very Wonderfull, for they go forth by Bands, have officers, and send Scouts abroad. And perhaps if by some ingenious Virtuoso, that hath time and opportunity. to make an exact and diligent Inspection into their Oeconomie, Politie and order may afford many admirable Rarities not observed hitherto that art worthy of his Curiositie. Their Skill in preserving the Corn they lay up in store against Winter from deceiving their hope by growing in the Earth is obvious, tho the maner is; till discovered, mysterious. Som affirm that they eat of both the Ends of the Grain, and y that means prevent the breaking out of a Root and Stalk. Which tho the softness of the aprts when moistned may invite them to do: yet is not the Providence of the All Wise Disposer of Nature less Wonderfull, then if they did it by som more difficult and hidden means. I have been told by a Knight, and a Traveller, that hath made som Curious Observations, that one single Ant hath been seen coming into a room, and when searching up and down for prey, he had found an Heap of Sugar, that without touching a grain of it, he went awa, as it were to call his fellows; and that within a quarter of an hour after the Chamber was as full of Ants as it could hold: That, to trie Experiments, they took away the Sugar, and by som device fastned

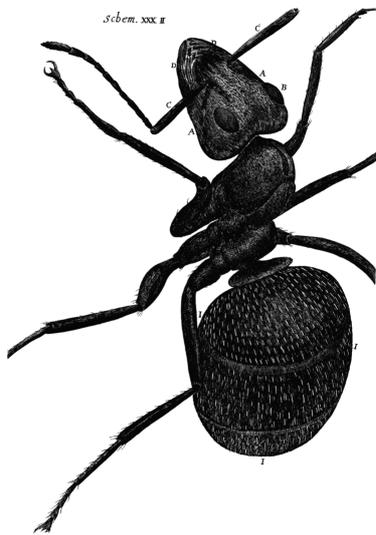
a little of it to the Roof of the Chamber over head, letting down only a Silken Thread from the Sugar to the floor, that one of the Ants going up the Thread by chance and finding it came back immediately, and told his fellows. by what Language I cannot tell, but probably by some Sign he made of his Success, and walking before them; that they came in multitudes up the string and with so much foresight and Exactness, that to remedy the inconvenience of so small a Passage they all went up on one side the string, and came down the other, to prevent the impediment of meeting and jostling, never leaving off till they had carried away every Crumb of their Prey: That also they put a little of the Sugar in a porringer, and that in the midst of a flatter Dish filled with Water: and that these Wonderful Creatures discerning it to be there, (whether by Instinct or Smell I cannot say, or by Some Collection of Reason, not finding it in the other parts of the Room,) they came about the Dish, and at last put forward into the Water, till so many were drowned that they made a Bridge with their Bodies for their fellows, over which they went to and fro till they had carried away the Sugar. This another Knight, his brother, and all the Family testified. Which if true, it shews these little Generous Creatures to be very resolute in Sacrificing their Lives for the Benefit of their Country, and very magnanimous in despising their private Satisfaction, in comparison of the Advantage of all the Society, as well as faithful in their Trust, and of the great and publick spirits: being free from that vice whereby men are apt having found a Treasure to appropriate it all by stealth to themselves, and to envy others the Enjoyment of it. These imply many other admirable Endowments, and Qualities in the Creature: all Magnifying the Wisdom and Power of the Creator.

Bright Apprehensions and Angelical
Make a Sublime Thing of a very small.
And to speak truth there's nothing which indeed
That little is, but doth it self exceed.
There is a Court within conceal'd from sense
And open only to th' Intelligence
Full of Divine and Heavenly Wonders, which
The Inside of that Glorious Work enrich,
Meet to delight, transport and entertain
The Eyes of Angels. which in Heaven reign,
And thence look down, to see the Glorious Ways
Of God on Earth, which are Celestial Joys.

From Robert Hooke, *Micrographia* (1665)

Observ. xlix. *Of an Ant or Pismire.*

This was a creature, more troublesom to be drawn, then any of the rest, for I could not, for a good while, think of a way to make it suffer its body to ly quiet in a natural posture; but whil'st it was alive, if its feet were fetter'd in Wax or Glew, it would so twist and wind its body, that I could not any wayes get a good view of it; and if I killed it, its body was so little, that I did often spoile the shape of it, before I could throughly view it: for this is the nature of these minute Bodies, that as soon, almost, as ever their life is destroy'd, their parts immediately shrivel, and lose their beauty; and so is it also with small Plants, as I instanced before, in the description of Moss. And thence also is the reason of the variations in the beards of wild Oats, and in those of Musk-grass seed, that their bodies, being exceeding small, those small variations which are made in the surfaces of all bodies, almost upon every change of Air, especially if the body be porous, do here become sensible, where the whole body is so small, that it is almost nothing but surface; for as in vegetable substances, I see no great reason to think, that the moisture of the Aire (that, sticking to a wreath'd beard, does make it untwist) should evaporate, or exhale away, any faster then the moisture of other bodies, but rather that the avolation from, or access of moisture to, the surfaces of bodies being much the same, those bodies become most sensible of it, which have the least proportion of body to their surface. So is it also with Animal substances; the dead body of an Ant, or such little creature, does almost instantly shrivel and dry, and your object shall be quite another thing, before you can half delineate it, which proceeds not from the extraordinary exhalation, but from the small proportion of body and juices, to the usual drying of bodies in the Air, especially if warm. For which inconvenience, where I could not otherwise remove it, I thought of this expedient.



I took the creature, I had design'd to delineate, and put it into a drop of very well rectified spirit of Wine, this I found would presently dispatch, as it were, the Animal, and being taken out of it, and lay'd on a paper, the spirit of Wine would immediately fly away, and leave the Animal dry, in its natural posture, or at least, in a constitution, that it might easily with a pin be plac'd, in what posture you desired to draw it, and the limbs would so remain, without either moving, or shriveling. And thus I dealt with this Ant, which I have here delineated, which was one of many, of a very large kind, that inhabited under the Roots of a Tree, from whence they would sally out in great parties, and make most grievous havock of the Flowers and Fruits, in the ambient Garden, and return back again very expertly, by

the same wayes and paths they went.

It was more then half the bigness of an Earwig, of a dark brown, or reddish colour, with long legs, on the hinder of which it would stand up, and raise its head as high as it could above the ground, that it might stare the further about it, just after the same manner as I have also observ'd a hunting Spider to do: and putting my finger towards them, they have at first all run towards it, till almost at it; and then they

would stand round about it, at a certain distance, and smell, as it were, and consider whether they should any of them venture any further, till one more bold then the rest venturing to climb it, all the rest, if I would have suffered them, would have immediately followed: many such other seemingly rational actions I have observ'd in this little Vermine with much pleasure, which would be too long to be here related; those that desire more of them may satisfie their curiosity in *Ligons* History of the *Barbadoes*.

Having insnar'd several of these into a small Box, I made choice of the tallest grown among them, and separating it from the rest, I gave it a Gill of Brandy, or Spirit of Wine, which after a while e'en knock'd him down dead drunk, so that he became moveless, though at first putting in he struggled for a pretty while very much, till at last, certain bubbles issuing out of its mouth, it ceased to move; this (because I had before found them quickly to recover again, if they were taken out presently) I suffered to lye above an hour in the Spirit; and after I had taken it out, and put its body and legs into a natural posture, remained moveless about an hour; but then, upon a sudden, as if it had been awoken out of a drunken sleep, it suddenly reviv'd and ran away; being caught, and serv'd as before, he for a while continued struggling and striving, till at last there issued several bubbles out of its mouth, and then, *tanquam animam expirasset*, he remained moveless for a good while; but at length again recovering, it was again redipt, and suffered to lye some hours in the Spirit; notwithstanding which, after it had layen dry some three or four hours, it again recovered life and motion: Which kind of Experiments, if prosecuted, which they highly deserve, seem to me of no inconsiderable use towards the invention of the *Latent Scheme*, (as the Noble *Verulam* calls it) or the hidden, unknown Texture of Bodies.

[Schem. 32.](#) Of what Figure this Creature appear'd through the *Microscope*, the 32. *Scheme* (though not so carefully graven as it ought) will represent to the eye, namely, That it had a large head AA, at the upper end of which were two protuberant eyes, pearl'd like those of a Fly, but smaller BB; out of the Nose, or foremost part, issued two horns CC, of a shape sufficiently differing from those of a blew Fly, though indeed they seem to be both the same kind of Organ, and to serve for a kind of smelling; beyond these were two indented jaws DD, which he open'd side-ways, and was able to gape them asunder very wide; and the ends of them being armed with teeth, which meeting went between each other, it was able to grasp and hold a heavy body, three or four times the bulk and weight of its own body: It had only six legs, shap'd like those of a Fly, which, as I shewed before, is an Argument that it is a winged Insect, and though I could not perceive any sign of them in the middle part of its body (which seem'd to consist of three joints or pieces EFG, out of which sprung two legs), yet 'tis known that there are of them that have long wings, and fly up and down in the air.

The third and last part of its body III was bigger and larger then the other two, unto which it was joyn'd by a very small middle, and had a kind of loose shell, or another distinct part of its body H, which seem'd to be interpos'd, and to keep the *thorax* and belly from touching.

The whole body was cas'd over with a very strong armour, and the belly III was covered likewise with multitudes of small white shining brisles; the legs, horns, head, and middle parts of its body were bestuck with hairs also, but smaller and darker.