

# The Grasse-hopper and Allegory

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IT HAS not been realized how profoundly medieval allegory influenced the imagination of seventeenth-century writers. An awareness of habits of allegorization can throw light on a well-known poem, the meaning of which otherwise is obscure. The poem is Lovelace's *Grasse-hopper*:

I

Oh thou that swing'st upon the waving haire  
Of some well-filled Oaten Beard,  
Drunke ev'ry night with a Delicious teare  
Dropt thee from Heav'n, where now th'art reard.

II

The Joyes of Earth and Ayre are thine intire,  
That with thy feet and wings dost hop and flye;  
And when thy Poppy workes thou dost retire  
To thy Carv'd Acron-bed to lye.

III

Up with the Day, the Sun thou welcomst then,  
Sportst in the guilt-plats of his Beames,  
And all these merry dayes mak'st merry men,  
Thy selfe, and Melancholy streames.

IV

But ah the Sickle! Golden Eares are Cropt;  
*Ceres* and *Bacchus* bid good night;  
Sharpe frosty fingers all your Flowr's have topt,  
And what sithes spar'd, Winds shave off quite.

V

Poore verdant foole! and now green Ice! thy Joys  
Large and as lasting, as thy Peirch of Grasse,  
Bid us lay in 'gainst Winter, Raine, and poize  
Their floods, with an o'reflowing glasse.

VI

Thou best of *Men* and *Friends*! we will create  
A Genuine Summer in each others breast;  
And spite of this cold Time and frosen Fate  
Thaw us a warme seate to our rest.

## VII

Our sacred hartes shall burne eternally  
 As Vestall Flames, the North-wind, he  
 Shall strike his frost-stretch'd Winges, dissolve and flye  
 This *Aetna* in Epitome.

## VIII

Dropping *December* shall come weeping in,  
 Bewayle th' usurping of his Raigne;  
 But when in show'rs of old Greeke we beginne,  
 Shall crie, he hath his Crowne againe!

## IX

Night as clear *Hesper* shall our Tapers whip  
 From the light Casements where we play,  
 And the darke Hagge from her black mantle strip,  
 And sticke there everlasting Day.

## X

Thus richer then untempted Kings are we,  
 That asking nothing, nothing need:  
 Though Lord of all what Seas imbrace; yet he  
 That wants himselfe, is poore indeed.

The ten stanzas of *The Grasse-hopper* divide into two equal halves which in imagery, themes and development are roughly parallel. For example the word 'drunke' (3) is paralleled by 'o'reflowing glasse' (20); 'Winds' (16) by 'North-wind' (26); 'topt' (15) by 'Crowne' (32); 'lye' (8) by 'rest' (24); 'lasting' (18) by 'everlasting' (36); 'goodnight' (14) by 'Night' (33); 'Day' (9) by 'Day' (36); 'teare' (3) by 'weeping' (29); and 'Beames' (10) by 'Tapers' (33). In the first four stanzas Lovelace addresses the grasshopper. He describes its carefree life in the summer sun until winter comes, putting an end to the joys of its existence. In stanza five Lovelace draws a moral conclusion from the previous stanzas. Material joys are transitory and lost with the passing of time. It is necessary to find more permanent pleasures in life. The grasshopper is thus an emblem for unthinking merry-making and provides Lovelace with a symbol for the mutability of sensual pleasures. In the next four stanzas Lovelace addresses his friend, Charles Cotton. The two men will apparently drink together and find in each other's company pleasures which will outlast seasonal

changes. Several analogies are used to develop this theme. They will create a summer in each other's breast and they will turn night into day. In the last stanza there is another moral reflexion on the previous four stanzas. By not asking anything of the world and by containing what they need within themselves they will be more satisfied than kings. In the second half of the poem not only are friendship and conviviality apparently offered as solutions to the transitory pleasures of the world, but also the satisfactions which are found are inward, psychological and are gained by giving up the external world.

While the poem would appear to treat of the greater security found in the pleasures of friendship than in less lasting pleasures, *The Grasse-hopper* must be about something other than friendship and conviviality. In what way can earthly friendship be said to be more permanent than the joys experienced by the grasshopper? Friendship can occur in December while the grasshopper's joys are limited to the summer, but surely that is not the point of the poem. And how do the pleasures found in friendship differ from the pleasures enjoyed by the grasshopper? The grasshopper is drunk every night and the two friends apparently are going to drink themselves into an alcoholic stupour and forgetfulness. How does drink create 'everlasting Day'? Close examination of the second half of the poem reveals that many lines are obscure in their meaning. Why should December in stanza eight first complain that the warmth of comradeship usurps his reign and then apparently celebrate the occasion by crying 'he hath his Crowne againe'? What crown? Whose crown? Is the theme of the second half of the poem drink, friendship, asking nothing of the world, or being lord of oneself? If *The Grasse-hopper* is a poem on any one or a combination of these themes, it would indeed be a strange and irrational poem, developing its argument with unsatisfactory contrasts and generally confused in the values it holds up as a solution to the mutability of the world.

*The Grasse-hopper* is not really a secular poem. In the first stanza 'Heav'n' is mentioned; the large and lasting 'Peirch of Grasse' in stanza five is surely an allusion to 'all flesh is grass' in Isaiah. Other images include 'sacred', 'eternally', 'everlasting' and 'to our rest'. The key to the problem would seem to be the crown in stanza eight. While the crown might be an allusion to Charles I,

it probably refers to the birth of Christ on Christmas day.<sup>1</sup> In 1644 an act of Parliament was passed forbidding any religious ceremonies or merriment on Christmas, as the Presbyterians considered 25 December to be a pagan holiday. If the poem in some way alludes to Christ, it would certainly offer a more satisfactory explanation of the lasting day than the two friends having found drink to be an answer to the passing of worldly pleasures symbolized by the grasshopper's death. The lasting day would in this case be the end of time prophesied in Revelation. The obscure eighth and ninth stanzas would also make sense. In both stanzas Lovelace is using a device which most readers are familiar with in Milton, but which also can be found in the works of other seventeenth-century poets — ambiguous or double syntax. December weeps at the usurping of his Rain, which refers back to stanza five where the speaker says that they will store up their joys in drink and use this to ward off the winter rain. The usurped 'Raigne' is also the reign of Christ whose birthday it has been forbidden to celebrate and whose Church, in this case the Church of England, has been destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Instead of showers of winter rain there will be showers of old Greek wine celebrating the seasonal festival: 'he hath his Crowne againe'. Double meanings are also found in the next stanza which apparently says that the light of the candles (metaphorically a symbol for the flames in their breast) will create a night as clear as the brightest star ('Hesper'). The dark spirits will be driven away and instead there will be everlasting day. Hesper, however, has associations

<sup>1</sup> The crown could refer to both since the King was the head of the Church of England. If so, 'Though Lord of all what Seas imbrace' might include an allusion to the Parliament's control of the Navy.

<sup>2</sup> *The Grasse-bopper* was published in 1649 and is unlikely to have been written before 1644, when the Royalist cause was still hopeful. The religious situation by 1645 was that the Church of England had stopped functioning. Parliament abolished Bishops and confiscated Church lands. Most Anglican ministers were imprisoned, ejected from their parishes, or fled abroad. Laud was executed. The use of the Book of Common Prayer was forbidden in churches and in family worship. The rites and sacraments of the Church could not be performed. Throughout England the parliamentary army had destroyed 'images', crucifixes, vestments, church windows and 'papist' books. 'Protestant' sermons replaced the old catechism. While the Church of England and its liturgy was prohibited, the Presbyterians and independents were unable to agree on ecclesiastical organization or liturgy. Parliament decreed, however, that the communion table should be removed from the east end of the church and the rails destroyed. Ministers had to discard surplices, and substitute extempore prayer and lengthy preaching in place of formal services.

with Paradise (Hesperian Gardens) and must certainly allude to the star of nativity. The 'darke Hagge' is not only stripped from (taken off) the black mantle, but is also unclothed to reveal everlasting day, since 'hag' is a Hebrew word for feast or festival. The friends are celebrating Christmas privately. If we look at the poem with this interpretation in mind, a number of phrases and images are illuminated. The 'old Greeke' wine is an appropriate Eucharistic symbol for Christ, the sacramental grape or vine. The drinking is referred to as an 'o'reflowing glasse' in line 20, because it is symbolic, glass having here the medieval sense of mirror or *speculum*. The two friends create a community which in troubled times must replace communion in the established Church. (In *The Ant Lovelace* again complains of the Puritan banning of holy days: 'But drive on sacred Festivals, thy Plow.')

The genuine or eternal summer in their breasts is an analogue for the restoration of Paradise made possible by Christ's sacrifice. 'Our rest' refers not just to sleep and death but also to heaven. Stripping the dark 'Hagge' looks forward to the victory of Christ's eternal kingdom over death. The 'show'rs of old Greeke' may include an allusion to the septuagint. The usurping of December's 'Raigne' and 'he hath his Crowne again' would also look forward to the everlasting day at the end of time. The north wind stretching his frost-covered wings and dissolving and flying from the heat in stanza seven would also seem to be an allusion to the conquest of death. With the 'old Greeke' of stanza eight in mind, we might also note that the Latin words 'Hesper' and 'Vesper' derive from the same Greek root, and that 'Hagge' in Greek means 'holy'. Thus 'our tapers will transform night into Vespers and reveal holy festivals symbolic of the Everlasting Day'.

While an analysis of *The Grasse-hopper* according to four levels of allegorical interpretation has not so far been offered, something of the sort could be done. Biblical events and prophecies, the sacraments of the Church and a spiritual message or moral can be found in the poem. The theme of the passing of earthly joys is set against a recall of Christmas, belief in redemption through the blood of Christ, and the expectation of the Second Coming. Other passages of the poem can now be seen as symbolic. The joys of the grasshopper are, naturally, unthinking, and offer a contrast

to the communion which Lovelace and Cotton will create. The grasshopper, drunk on a delicious tear dropped from heaven and playing upon the oats and corn, provides a contrast to man experiencing the bread and wine of communion. The sun which he welcomes is contrasted to the sun of the everlasting day. The winter rains are described as floods, which is perhaps an allusion to the biblical flood. The point of alluding to Noah is that the evil of the present is similar to the wickedness of mankind when God threatened to destroy the world with rain.

The 'cold Time and frozen Fate' (23) is not just winter and December. It is the 1640's when the Church of England has been destroyed and the King, the head of the Church, has been fought and imprisoned. The two friends are like Noah in his ark, which is a type of the Church, saving the remnant from destruction, the continuing rains of the poem. Their spiritual prudence is suggested by 'Bid us lay in 'gainst Winter Raine'. It is fitting that the two friends should drink, since in Genesis 9:20-21 Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk on wine, which is normally treated as a Eucharistic symbol of the blood of Christ (the 'glasse' of line 20 being a kind of chalice). The 'sacred harthes' of stanza seven might recall the altar which Noah built to sacrifice burnt offerings to God.

The poem contrasts transitory pleasures with the lasting spiritual joys found in the Church in heaven and promised at the end of time. The passing of the grasshopper's days reminds us that although man lives in a world of time and fate ruled over by death, there is another kingdom of everlasting day and permanent summer. The sacraments of the Church are a means of entering this other kingdom; but as the liturgy of the Anglican Church had been forbidden, the two friends must form their own communion of believers who will privately celebrate what is forbidden publicly.

To understand why *The Grasse-bopper* is obscure and difficult it should be remembered that it was circulated and printed during a period when its sentiments would have been considered subversive and punishable; it also has behind it a tradition that gospel and doctrinal pearls should not be cast before swine and that to understand the Bible or even secular literature it is necessary to separate the wheat from the chaff. That *The Grasse-bopper*

demands an allegorical reading is suggested by the great number of biblical allusions which can be found in the poem. There is hardly a phrase in it which does not have a biblical analogue. The most important biblical echoes are from Isaiah, Ecclesiastes and Canticles.

Since the theme of *The Grasse-hopper* is the vanity of temporal pleasures, it is not surprising that there are echoes of Ecclesiastes in it, as Ecclesiastes was read by the Renaissance as Solomon's repentance of his youthful and profane pleasures. *The Grasse-hopper* is, like Ecclesiastes, a consideration of the vanity of worldly things in contrast to the assurance of everlasting happiness. The grasshopper eating, drinking and being merry may remind us of the refrain that runs through Ecclesiastes that there is no better thing than to eat, drink and be merry, which was interpreted during the Renaissance as Solomon speaking in the guise of the sensual man, or as a reminder that the joys of this world are given by God (see Ecclesiastes 8:15). The images of the seasons and time would seem to echo Ecclesiastes 3:1-9, which was taken by Renaissance biblical commentators as a warning of the vanity of expecting happiness in transitory and mutable things. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 treats of the advantage of society and friendship, while Ecclesiastes 4:13 says that it is better to be poor than a foolish king. Both themes are in the second half of *The Grasse-hopper*. The warmth the two friends create in each other's breast perhaps echoes Ecclesiastes 4:11: 'Again, if two lie together, then they have heat,' which is literally interpreted as referring to cold months of the year. (The possible spiritual significance of it will be seen when we look at some of the echoes from Canticles.) The grasshopper is no doubt called a fool because he is imprudent, similar to the fool in Ecclesiastes 10:12-14.

The theme of *The Grasse-hopper* with its contrast between unthinking feasting and spiritual awareness is similar to Chapters 11 and 12 of Ecclesiastes where we are told that life is sweet, but death is coming, and young men are exhorted in the midst of their delights to think of the day of judgement. The contrast between the days of sunlight and those of darkness in the poem can be found in Ecclesiastes 12, where it stands for youth and old age: 'and the grasshopper shall be a burden' (Ecclesiastes 12:5). The possible echoes of Ecclesiastes emphasize the theme, the

vanity of transitory pleasures. The contrast between the unthinking pleasures of the first half of the poem and the religious awareness shown in the second half of the poem is, as we have noticed, obscure and requires some knowledge of Christian symbols and allegorical methods of interpretation. The echoes of Ecclesiastes with their warnings against the indulgence of sensual pleasures at the expense of spiritual awareness help us to see the point of the last five stanzas of the poem more clearly.

If echoes of Ecclesiastes in *The Grasse-hopper* help orient the reader to a religious contempt of things of the world, echoes of Isaiah give the poem a specifically Christian mode. Isaiah was often called the fifth evangelist, because of the extent and variety of his prophecies, which appeared to foretell the coming of Christ. For this reason there are more testimonies and quotations taken from Isaiah in the New Testament than from all the other prophets. In Isaiah 5: 11-12 are described God's judgements upon drunkards and those who are not spiritually aware that their well-being comes from His mercy: 'Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!' (Isaiah 5: 11). The grasshopper is 'drunke ev'ry night' and welcomes the sun only so that he can be merry. He has no consideration of the source of his joys although they are dropped from heaven. Since the grasshopper has many associations in classical poetry with singers and dancers he is an appropriate symbol for those who in Isaiah 5: 12 enjoy the harp, pipe, viol and wine, without consideration of God. He does not necessarily need to be a Cavalier. He could be any person who was unaware of the source of his pleasures and unafraid of God's judgement.

Isaiah 7: 12 helps to explain the 'untempted Kings' of stanza 8: 'But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord.' This is usually interpreted as a sign of pride rather than humility. Ahaz will not rely upon God and neglects the means necessary for his preservation. The sign which God offers is usually seen as a promise of Christ. Lovelace is richer than untempted kings because he believes and has faith. The allusion to Ahaz is also interesting because Ahaz was a wicked king. In Matthew Poole's *Commentary on the Holy Bible* I find: 'yet no prophecies are more comfortable than those which were delivered in his time; God so



ordering it, partly for the encouragement of the faithful that lived under his tyrannical and impious reign; and partly to manifest the riches and freeness of his grace, in conferring such favours upon a most worthless generation.<sup>1</sup> The two friends in *The Grasse-hopper* are richer than kings because they have been tried by the wickedness of the time and still retain Christian hope.

Another echo of Isaiah is in:

Poore verdant foole! and now green Ice! thy Joys  
Large and as lasting, as thy Peirch of Grasse

which alludes to:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. (Isaiah 40: 6-8)

As a result of meditating upon the impermanence of the grass-hopper's perch of grass Lovelace turns to the overflowing glass, recalling Christ's love as expressed by His blood in the chalice. The dying flowers and winds of stanza four are the flower which fades because the spirit of the Lord blows upon it in Isaiah 40: 7. The image of the scythe may be suggestive of Isaiah 18: 5 'he shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks and take away and cut down the branches,' also a sign of judgement. An exact source is not needed, as throughout Isaiah the harvest image symbolizing judgement can be found: 'Therefore the Lord will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush, in one day' (Isaiah 9: 14). A similar pattern of imagery to that in *The Grasse-hopper*, expressing judgement on the unthinking, can be found in Isaiah 28: 1-2:

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine! Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which as a tempest of hail and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (first published, 1685), London, 1962, II, 339.

The passages in Isaiah all refer to Israel specifically, as well as mankind in general. The grasshopper is, I suggest, a symbol for England which unthinkingly enjoyed itself until God punished it by making it endure the winds and tempests of His judgement. The political situation and the state of the Church both suggest the kinds of tribulations found in Isaiah 40: 21-2:

Have ye not knowen? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers.

The bright light in stanza nine is the light of the righteous and of the Church. The image is common to both Testaments and can be found in Isaiah 62: 1: 'For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.' The recall of the promises of the Church Triumphant may also be suggested by the crown in stanza eight which not only alludes to Christ but also to the crown of glory of the Church and of the saints (see Isaiah 28: 5 and 62: 3).

The echoes of Isaiah are additional evidence that *The Grasshopper* is not a poem about conviviality and drunkenness, but is rather a poem about the Church during a period of darkness and tribulation. 'He / That wants himselfe, is poore indeed' (39-40) can be read in more than one sense. It can mean that the person who does not rule his own feelings is condemned to be disappointed by the vanities of the world. However, it could mean the person who desires himself or is selfish or does not share in friendship and community. It is through friendship that Lovelace suggests community, communion and, by analogy, the Church. This is contrasted in the poem with the grasshoppers of the world who have no understanding of eternal verities.

The pun on wanting himself (desiring himself) brings to mind the many passages in Canticles where the Church's love of Christ is allegorized by the bride's desire for the bridegroom. Use of allegorizations of Canticles was so common in medieval and Renaissance literature that it often occurs in rather sophisticated and unexpected guises. We can see a development of this tradition when Lovelace addressing his friend brings to mind the words of the bridegroom to the spouse. As a shadowing of the Church

addressing Christ such an allegory is appropriate to the kind of themes to be found in the poem, even though it is rather surprising to find the words of the bride put into the mouth of one man addressing another. There is, however, sufficient drinking of wine in Canticles to justify an allegory shadowed in an invitation to drink. The key phrase is Canticles 5: 1: 'O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved,' which is usually applied to believers and members of the Church who are invited to the sacraments. The invitation to Cotton, 'Thou best of *Men and Friends*', to drink, is, as I suggested earlier, a kind of communion. The usurping of the December or winter rain (see stanzas five and eight) is based on Canticles 2: 11: 'For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.' This is usually taken to signify the blessings that the Church received as a result of its tribulations, or is interpreted as signifying that with the coming of Christ the curse of the Old Law has been removed. The genuine summer which the friends create in each other's breast may be reminiscent of Canticles 1: 13: 'he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts,' signifying the Church's union with and affection for Christ. The north wind dissolving and flying recalls those prophecies of resurrection and judgement at the end of time in Canticles 2: 17 and 4: 6: 'until the day break, and the shadows flee away.' The image of the summer which develops into 'thaw us' and then into '*Ætna* in Epitome' is suggestive of the heat of love: 'the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame' (Canticles 8: 6). 'The light Casements where we play' may allude to Canticles 2: 9: 'behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice.' Whether all the echoes of Canticles and other biblical sources are in fact in *The Grasse-hopper* is unprovable, since many of them have been radically transformed from the original biblical phrases. The transformation occurred during centuries of devotional literature, biblical commentary and in meditative poetry.

Where a poet takes one biblical phrase and expands it throughout a poem, there is no reason to doubt that other echoes from the same books of the Bible are present in the poem. There are, however, many seventeenth-century poems, such as *The Grasse-hopper*, which weave together allusions from a wide range of

biblical sources. Because imagery in both Testaments tends to be recapitulatory, it is often difficult to point to any one passage as being a specific source or gloss on an image found in the poem. In this case we must rely more than ever on our own judgement as to whether the citation of a biblical passage is consistent with our response to the poem's themes, imagery and metaphoric patterns. My impression is that the citing of Canticles helps to explain the spiritual significance of the drinking and the friendship found in *The Grasse-hopper*. If I am correct the poem is related to various poetic meditations upon Canticles 5: 1. If I am wrong, I have at worst acted like a medieval exegete who uses a seemingly appropriate biblical passage as an aid to explain his response to a particular text. While such a method of interpretation may introduce errors in the process of throwing light on a poem, it would seem to me to be close to the way literature was read and written during the centuries when people were familiar with the Bible and studied it for its allegorical meanings.

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The July issue will be devoted to Anglo-Irish Literature, and will contain 'Patrick Kavanagh' by Brendan Kennelly; 'A Lost Abbey Play' by John Kelly; 'Similarities in the plays of Yeats and Beckett' by Andrew Parkin; 'Shaw and Lear' by Stanley Weintraub; 'Callanan's "Outlaw of Lock Lene"' by B. S. Lee; 'Satire and Fantasy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*' by R. Jordan; and 'The Twilight of the Big House' by F. S. L. Lyons. This issue will also include a collection of new Irish poems.