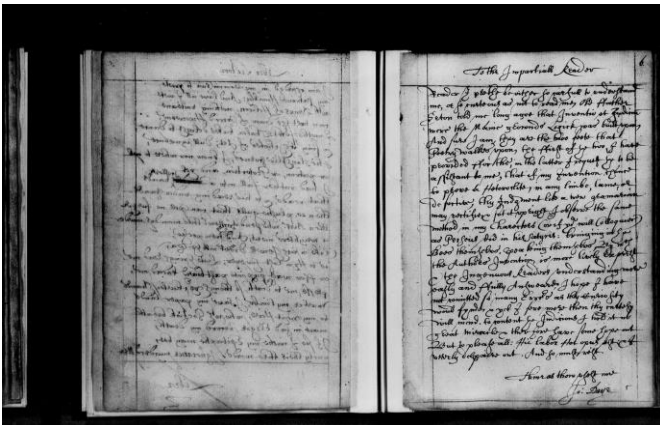


RESEARCH CONNECTION

From the mouths of bees: Transcribing the seventeenth-century manuscript of *The Parliament of Bees*

By Holly Reimer, BA, BEd



Courtesy of the British Library Board (Lansdowne MS. 725, fol. 5v-6r)

Why this research is important

Sometimes called a play, poem, masque, character, or emblem, the manuscript of Day's satirical allegory was written for the "Noble and right worthie Gentle-Man Mr. William Augustine Esquire" (MS fol. 3r) and is dominated by the poetic voices of personified bees. In fact, the author claims he discovered the document "In a Hollow Tree, In a garden at Hibla, / in a strandge Language, And now / faithfully Translated into Easie / English verse" (fol. 2r). Over twelve chapters or colloquies of lyrical dialogue, the patriarchal "commonwealth of Bees" (fol. 7r) debate and discuss unrequited love, warfare, physical disability and

What you need to know

They dance, pollinate, and buzz—but what are they saying? Dramatist John Day did not have to guess, and now neither do we.

A new, comprehensive semi-diplomatic transcription of the seventeenth-century handwritten manuscript of Day's *The Parliament of Bees* reveals several surprising differences from the later, printed version of the text.

The transcript allows for more nuanced ecocritical research into honey bees as literary symbols.

illness, death, artistic expression, poverty, and power inequity.

Earlier critical editions of *The Parliament of Bees* rely more heavily on Day's popular "quarto" published in the 1640s than on the manuscript written in 1633-34. This new transcription is vital for Dr. Deanna Smid's new critical edition of the text, which will employ the manuscript transcription to better understand how honey bees operate as literary signifiers.

How the research was conducted

After completing a course on fifteen- to seventeenth-century paleography and typesetting conventions, I began examining the manuscript's more legible pages (like the one above) to build an alphabet of the scribe's hand—

presumably Day's. Then, using semi-diplomatic conventions, I represented the text word-for-word as it appears within the document.

Although seventeenth-century English had few formalities in spelling and punctuation, the scribe's hand-crafted words and phrases bear phonetic resemblance to twenty-first century English. The manuscript's elegant handwriting shifts between secretary hand and italics for titles or emphasis within the body of the text, but much of the manuscript is challenging to decipher due to ink-blotting or bleeding. "To the Impartiall Reader," one of the manuscript's first pages, states, "Reader I prethe be either so carfull to vnderstand / me, or so curteous as not to read me," and prepares readers for satirical "Bees themselves: speaking themselves." The scribe employs common contractions, like "yow" for "you," and omits letters, like the "e" in "request." Such contractions and omissions are silently expanded or supplied in the transcription to aid modern readers through the work. All inconsistencies in spelling and letter usage, letters lost to ink blotting, and additions or deletions made in the process of revision are included in the transcription to enable researchers to compare the manuscript against the later-published quarto.

What the researcher found

Many of the manuscript's central conflicts and characters remained in both the manuscript and quarto of *The Parliament of Bees*. Modifications in language use or sequencing of colloquies, or chapters, were minor, suggesting a certain staying power to Day's charming text. However, a swarm of differences emerged between the lover Stuprata and her rival Rivalis, the manuscript's only depiction of female-gendered bees. Their precious few lines detail their dotting over the beautiful, tenacious warrior Relictus and female deception through mistaken identity. Day's satire calls into question the true nature of Stuprata's affection while offering a stinging critique of

femininity and its varied representations, especially those penned by male writers.

How this research can be used

The Parliament of Bees is the work for which Day is best known, yet little scholarship on the text's genre and characters has been published. Translation is inherent to Day's text—from its humble origins as alleged bee-speak to early modern English, and then modern English—and a new critical edition with use of the transcribed manuscript enables continued discussion surrounding fictional, historical honey bees. The text also offers a glimpse into seventeenth-century language conventions and the evolution of Day's work during his lifetime as the bees of his poetry came to better delight, represent, and reflect changing audiences and societies.

About the researcher

Holly Reimer was a research assistant for Dr. Smid in the summer of 2023. She has Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees from Brandon University and is a high school English teacher in Brandon, Manitoba.

Keywords

Seventeenth-century, early modern, John Day, The Parliament of Bees, manuscript, transcription

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