John Donne's *The Flea*, (which, if I were to admit to having a favorite poem of Donne's at this point, is mine), is full of tongue-in-cheek humor and plenty of "bite." This work describes an interaction with this pesky little creature, analyzes its presence, and compares its intrusion with the amorous intentions of the writer toward his lover. *The Flea* is also, in my opinion, the wittiest of Donne's poetry that we have studied during these past few weeks. In the extensive amount of poetry we examined, *The Flea* was the first selection. This poem grabbed my attention and clearly set the standard for the rest of the poetry we were to tackle. During the day we studied *The Flea*, Mr. Nigro made an interesting point during his description of the context of the poem: as a conceit, the flea is not new to Donne. Poems about fleas, he said, were popular during the Renaissance period. I was curious as to see just how many poems incorporated these same ideas, and how/why they did so. I wanted to take a closer look at the poets and their respective poetry that decided to use these small but powerful insects as the subjects of their songs.

It would seem that fleas, little buggers that they are, shouldn't attract the large amounts of attention from poets as they soon will have shown to have gained. After all, these creatures are miniscule and almost imperceptible by nature. Their pesky intentions and desire to harm other humans and animals alike don't really seem as attributes likely to induce a poet to spill ink in metered adoration. But fleas have, over the years, managed to sneak into a poem or two. What is, then, the explanation of this literary phenomenon?

Historically, records show that the flea is perhaps one of the most-recognized insects in the world (…the Black Plague, anyone?) Poetic efforts incorporating fleas were, in this case, preceded by the appearance of fleas in folklore, expressions, proverbs, and sayings. Many of these references have to do with the size of fleas or their pesky nature. For example, the small size of a flea is the key to the following sayings, (some of which I have never heard): "An elephant does not feel a flea bite," "Even a flea can bite," and "The earth does not shake when the flea coughs."

The pesky behavior of the flea and the potential infestations of these insects give meaning to the following sayings: "Those who sleep with dogs get up with fleas," "The fatter the flea, the leaner the dog," or in this version: "The skinnier the dog, the more fleas he has."

So how have fleas been incorporated into the art of poetry, since they seem to be ubiquitous in commonplace expressions? No one has determined exactly when the first flea showed up in an actual poem. One of the earliest "flea poems," which some believe was written by the Roman poet Ovid, was described as a widely popular Latin poem with a flea as its main subject. Apparently, the poem was a trendsetter for fleas and sexual innuendo, because a number of poems from medieval times follow the general theme of Ovid's work.

There exists a genre of poems in which a flea is satirically presented as the rival of the lover, who is jealous of the flea's access to his beloved's body. In Romance languages, French, for example, these poems take advantage of a pun on *puce* ('flea') and *pucelle* ('virgin'). The principal collection of poems in this vein is Étienne Pasquier's *La Puce de Madame des Roches*, which was written as a result of the author encountering Catherine Des Roches, claiming to have spotted a flea on her chest. William Shakespeare did not jump on the flea bandwagon with the vigor and intensity of some of his contemporary laureates, but he does mention them in his works. This may be due to the fact that Shakespeare was probably influenced by the flea-borne plague that was running rampant during his time.

Another "oft-quoted" bit of poetry involving fleas comes from the famous Irish poet Jonathan Swift, the author of "Gulliver's Travels." Swift wrote a poem called "On Poetry: A Rhapsody," in which he commented on some of the issues pertaining to poetry during his time. In this longer poem, Swift refers to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who notes that predator and prey relationships are common in nature. Swift uses this ecological fact as an analogy for ways that poets often relate to each other. According to Swift:

"So, naturalists observe, a flea
Has smaller fleas that on him prey;
And these have smaller still to bite 'em,
And so proceed *ad infinitum*.
Thus ever poet, in his kind,
Is bit by him that comes behind:"

Ogden Nash was another poet who wrote a poem about fleas. His poem, "Fleas," makes the point that humans have had fleas as long as we have existed.

The poem "Adam had'em," the world's shortest poem, refers to the first Man having fleas. Many historical poets build off of this notion, stating that if "Adam had'em," Eve did so as well.

Stemming from commonplace expressions and household sayings, the flea has evolved into a caricature of several subjects and themes found in poetry. It seems as though the concept of the flea has transcended dimensions, (which is appropriate here, after studying Donne,) and thus has affirmed its place in the literary world as a metaphysical conceit.

Blog post by Ben Barkley, "The Flea: A Closer Look Under the Microscope." January 11,2013, reprinted with permission from Chester's Attic.