

Place and Nature in *Edward II* and *Richard II*

What goes into making a history play's construction of national identity changes, of course, from play to play, and authors have favored tropes and issues. Generally, however, broader issues concerning the emerging national identity of the English/British in the early modern period tend to coalesce around a few particular concerns - not the least of which is the uncertain and overlapping set of meanings attached to the names "English" and "British." Scholarship on nationalism in the period works to expose the underlying assumptions with which Shakespeare and others, mostly Spenser, construct an imagined England.<sup>1</sup> But while doing so is useful, it tends, even when it delves into writings about land, to talk about people rather than place. The focus on Englishness/Britishness as an ethnicity allows us to skip through the descriptions of land and place and get right back to the people.<sup>2</sup> Images of land are crucial to the national understanding of self and placement, and as more than a set of metaphors to use in description.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The workings of English nationalism are also most often explored in service to the issue of how that sense of Englishness plays into imperial discourses, most particularly regarding Ireland and other borderlands in the early empire. This is something I work on myself, and I touch on it here in how the plays develop a sense of mapping through place names. But there should be more work on the place of Ireland in the Britain constructed by *Edward II*—despite Ireland figuring as much or more in *Edward II* than in most of Shakespeare's plays, the major works on Ireland in early modern history play barely mention Marlowe at all. Besides Helgerson, whom I use here, I have found the most useful references for nationalism in Shakespeare to be David J. Baker, *Between Nations: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell, and the Question of Britain*, Stanford UP, 1997; and David J. Baker and Willy Maley, eds., *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge UP, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> I am guilty of this myself, devoting a good deal of energy to unpacking Spenser's description of the Irish people as branches that need to be pruned in order to preserve the health of the tree (empire), but not paying enough attention to the relationship between people and land that the metaphor could allow us to explore. (*Shakespeare and the Cultural Colonization of Ireland*. Routledge, 2008. 23-24).

<sup>3</sup> Investigating the most frequent use of natural images in discourses of kings and power gets us into questions of the Great Chain of Being, a knotty problem for scholars now because of our deep unease with Tillyard's conclusions. However, Chain of Being references are constant in early modern literature, and studies of natural imagery necessitate developing a new and workable sense of that doctrine. Gabriel Egan addresses this in "Shakespeare and ecocriticism: The unexpected return of the Elizabethan World Picture,"

Very familiar with *Richard II*, and not familiar at all with Marlowe's *Edward II*, I decided for this seminar to focus on the two plays together, wondering how the two differently, or similarly, construct Englishness. But upon reading *Edward II*, I was struck more than anything else by the absence of landscape – something I took entirely for granted in Shakespeare before encountering its absence in a play which so obviously influenced Shakespeare's histories and *Richard II* in particular. Attempting to work with this, I quickly discovered that I was in way over my head, and that I would need a larger forum in which to work these issues out. This paper will be a place to lay out an array of issues to be explored further later and elsewhere, and I apologize for the absence of developed conclusions – this is a place of discovery for me.

*Mapping, Land, Nature*

To a story similar to *Edward II* in subject, character types, and even specific locations for setting, Shakespeare added descriptions of England, visual reminders of topography of the land outside urban London. For native Londoners, these descriptions would offer a mental picture of the land surrounding their capital. *Richard II* offers descriptions of England which are poetic and mythic, as well as quotidian topographical references.

A thorough visual description of England had only recently become available to the English, through the Saxton maps. Richard Helgerson describes these maps, generally available around 1579, as offering the English people “for the first time” the ability to take “effective visual and conceptual possession of the physical kingdom in which they

---

*Literature Compass* 1 (2003) 1-13. Indeed, it is possible to consider the doctrine as a set of metaphors available to writers without having to understand it as a universal belief system. In these two plays, for example: Richard consistently articulates himself through the Chain of Being framework, but Edward does so seldom – until after his imprisonment, when his self-expression explodes with these references. I don't know what to make of that. Suggestions about this from habitual Marlovians would be very welcome.

lived.”<sup>4</sup> Combined into a generally-available wall map in 1583, they were useful to the chronicle writers, including Holinshed who, along with William Harrison (in the combined publication of the *Chronicles* and *Description of Britain*, 1577), comments on the usefulness of this “delineation” of England.<sup>5</sup> Helgerson argues that this set of maps was massively influential in creating a national consciousness – pointing out that while the minute detail of districts might seem to distract from a sense of the whole, it is instead true that “particularities, after all, constantly remind us of the whole of which they are a part and from which they take their meaning, even if only by difference.”<sup>6</sup>

That sense of the whole is articulated in Gaunt’s “sceptered isle” speech, which initially describes England almost equally in terms of landscape – “earth of majesty,” “other Eden,” “fortress built by Nature for herself,” “precious stone set in the silver sea,” “blessed plot,” “earth” – and in terms of people – “royal throne of kings,” “happy breed of men,” “nurse,” “teeming womb of royal kings,/ Feared by their breed and famous by their birth,” “land of such dear souls” (2.1.40-60).<sup>7</sup> Gaunt ends his rant with emphasis on landscape, however; interesting in the rhetorical situation of the speech, which is a scolding of King Richard for “farming the realm,” or selling to peers the right to collect taxes, a nationwide mortgage the common people have to pay:

[England] Is now leased out – I die pronouncing it –  
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.  
England, bound in with the triumphant sea,  
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege  
Of wat’ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame, ... (2.1.57-61)

---

<sup>4</sup> Helgerson, Richard. *Forms of Nationhood: the Elizabethan Writing of England*. U of Chicago P, 1992. 107. Helgerson points out that, while of course there had been maps of England before, Saxton’s provided remarkable accuracy and detail and the effect of his atlas “was enormous.”

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Helgerson, 108. Helgerson also presents similar praise from William Camden in the preface of *Britannia* in 1586 (109).

<sup>6</sup> Helgerson, 138.

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare are from David Bevington’s 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Pearson/Longman, 2009.

England's land as a sacred trust figures greatly in the rhetoric of Gaunt, but also for Bolingbroke, who ends 1.3 and begins his exile with the statement:

Then, England's ground, farewell. Sweet soil, adieu,  
 My mother and my nurse that bears me yet!  
 Where'er I wander boast of this I can:  
 Though banished, yet a trueborn Englishman. (1.3.306-309)

Richard, despite whatever callousness Gaunt may accuse him of for farming the realm, also displays this sacred-ground rhetoric upon his return from Ireland:

Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,  
 Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs,  
 As a long-parted mother with her child  
 Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting,  
 So, weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,  
 And do thee favors with my royal hands. (3.2.6-11).

Richard's speech continues in that vein, addressing the earth and describing the harm with which it is threatened by the rebels, promising that the stones themselves will rise up "like armed soldiers" in defense of the rightful king (line 25).

More specific in its description of England, however, is the conversation between Bolingbroke and Northumberland at the beginning of 2.3, in which topography and cartography play a more specific role:

Bolingbroke: How far is it, my lord, to Berkeley now?  
 Northumberland: Believe me, noble lord,  
 I am a stranger here in Gloucestershire.  
 These high wild hills and rough uneven ways  
 Draws out our miles and makes them wearisome;  
 And yet your fair discourse hath been as sugar,  
 Making the hard way sweet and delectable.  
 But I bethink me what a weary way  
 From Ravenspurgh to Cotswold will be found  
 In Ross and Willoughby, wanting your company,... (2.3.1-19).

Once Percy appears, repeating the place names in his statement of his own mission, Northumberland asks him "How far is it to Berkeley?" (line 51). Apparently, it is in sight, since Percy's answer is: "There stands the castle by yon tuft of trees..." (line 53). All of

the story information exchanged in these first 50 or so lines of the scene could have been exposed differently, and more simply: Henry is pleasant company (or at least Northumberland wishes to endear himself to Henry), Harry Percy is Northumberland's son and is joining the rebels along with Worcester. But Shakespeare adds this bit of mapping to the opening of the scene, with repeated questions about distance to Berkeley (which Bolingbroke seems to have asked at least once already), and the description of the land as rough and hard to cross. Worth noting here is the fact that traveling from Ravenspurgh, on the Humber River in Yorkshire, to Berkeley in Gloucestershire, would have taken them through Shakespeare's native Warwickshire, described here as a route rough and uneven enough that good company is required to render it pleasant.<sup>8</sup>

In general, Shakespeare likes to tell us where we are. Characters identify our surroundings, telling us that we are going to Coventry, this is Westminster, we are now in Ely House, they will take him to Pomfret Castle (and so the next time we see him we know we are at Pomfret Castle).<sup>9</sup> This specificity is in contrast to *Edward II*, which does name English locations, but less often, and without the emphasis with which it is done in *Richard II*.<sup>10</sup> But the mental map created by all this naming is different in the two cases. In *Richard II*, our mental map is one constructed mostly out of repetition of English place-names. In *Edward II* the focus on England is equal to the focus on the places with

---

<sup>8</sup> It is also interesting to note that Ravenspurgh, in tragic ecocritical irony, is no longer there, having been lost to coastal erosion.

<sup>9</sup> Further development of this study will need to also explore the interesting overlapping meaning for place and person in hereditary titles – this form of naming means we have statements telling us that Worcester is at Berkeley, Hereford is here to claim Lancaster, etc. Family name and estate name become confused over centuries of property transactions, including confiscation and award of the estate to others (see *Richard II*, *plot of*), so when I looked up Berkeley Castle I was surprised to discover that the Berkeleys are still its residents after 900 years. This enduring conflation of family and place is unusual.

<sup>10</sup> What was more interesting to me here was noticing that, while *Richard II* names 15 English locations, and *Edward II* names 13, in *Richard II* those names are repeated such that there are 39 incidences of naming town/locations within England, and 25 in *Edward II*. Yet *Richard II* names non-English locations only 9 times (4 locations total), while *Edward II* names non-English locations 38 times (7 locations total). In both cases, the primary non-English location is, of course, France, and is named largely in connection with the French-born queen and her movements.

which England is in conflict – for every mention of Bristol or Tynemouth or Killingworth, there is a mention of Normandy or France or Ireland. In the 19 scenes of *Richard II*, 9 are clearly stated, 2 are inferred, and 8 are what I call “unspecified court.”<sup>11</sup> In *Edward II*'s 26 scenes, 5 are clearly stated, 8 can be guessed, and 17 are “unspecified court.” The term is the best way for me to describe the scene, as it may be Westminster, but not necessarily, since the court was wherever the king was. In a significant portion of *Edward II*, then, the location is less relevant than the company. Peter Sillitoe draws on the slippery definitions of “court” in the period to demonstrate how the overlapping meanings of court as the location of the king, the location of justice, and the location of the king’s noble entourage complicates the play. Since the king symbolically carries the court with him, his separation from power creates a sense in which the play is “the staging of turmoil and strife at the English court.”<sup>12</sup> Since both plays are about the division of the king from his power, discussing the location allows us to investigate the symbolic dissonance of a king in prison in one location and the court as the seat of power continuing in another.<sup>13</sup>

All this takes place within the confines of the nobility. While there are references to the towns and villages – York is concerned that Bolingbroke and the rebels will disturb the villages, Edward dismisses the villages entirely saying he would destroy them to get his Gaveston back – the common people themselves scarcely appear. Each play,

---

<sup>11</sup> The modern editorial division of scenes, particularly in the case of *Edward II*, makes this method problematic. But it is a useful way to quantify how much of the play is spent in places significant enough to meaning that the characters are clear about where they are.

<sup>12</sup> Sillitoe, Peter. “Where is the court but here?” *Undetermined Elite Space and Marlowe’s Edward II*, *Literature Compass* 1 (2004). 1-15.

<sup>13</sup> Yet another track I wish I had time/space to delve into here is the fact that, despite a quick change in moving Richard to Pomfret, the change is done quickly and clearly. This is a development from *Edward II*, in which Edward is deliberately dragged back and forth between Killingworth and Berkeley in order to create confusion and exhaustion. The result is confusing for setting as well, since an audience member who knows the history (or a reader with access to notes) would know that Edward died at Berkeley Castle, but the text does not specify at which castle he meets his horrifying end.

however, has an incident in which a lower-class figure with natural associations intervenes in or comments on the change in power.

In *Edward II*, this is the Mower. When Edward is arrested at the Welsh Abbey,<sup>14</sup> he is identified to his pursuers by the Mower, a figure Spencer describes as “a gloomy fellow in a mead below” who “gave a long look after us.” Spencer acknowledges that “all the land is up in arms,” a reference to the people in the area, but figured metaphorically, and appropriately here, as “the land” (4.7.29-31).<sup>15</sup> The Mower is an interesting figure, making a brief appearance, and whose scythe allows him to function as a reminder of Death. But as a Mower, as one who works cultivating the land, he is also a reminder of the land itself, and here it is as though the land, “up in arms,” betrays its king who so badly neglected it in favor of his favorites. The play then gives us the opportunity to understand the Mower as the land, and as Death, so that the land itself delivers him into the hands of his enemies who will destroy him.<sup>16</sup>

In *Richard II*, the land does not betray the king, but, in the figure of the Gardener, it does have some choice remarks about the king’s neglect and misuse of the land.<sup>17</sup> Like the Mower, the Gardener is one who cultivates the land, but who, from the perspective of a court-figure, would be a pastoral figure. The Gardener’s instructions are to “Cut off the heads of too-fast-growing sprays/ That look too lofty in our commonwealth./ All must be even in our government” (3.4.34-36). The ensuing dialogue overtly equates the garden

---

<sup>14</sup> Neath, but not named as such in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Quotations from *Edward II* are from *Dr. Faustus and Other Plays*, eds. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen, Oxford UP, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare’s only Mower appears in *Troilus and Cressida*, in a mention by Nestor: “Fall down before him, like the mower’s swath” (5.5.25) – as in *Edward II*, a figure related to fear. Robert Watson explores the figure of the Mower as a pastoral image in Marvell’s Mower poems at length – parts of his study may be helpful to me in exploring Marlowe’s Mower further. Watson, Robert. *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Renaissance*, U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Richard certainly struggles with feeling betrayed and expresses anger at the people, extending at first to finding fault with his horse, Barbary, for seeming proud to carry Henry. Richard reminds himself that a horse’s job is to carry his rider, and in fact relates himself to the horse, saying that he has allowed himself to be ridden by Henry as well. Nature is exonerated, the blame falling entirely on people.

with England, discussing keeping natural order in the garden when it has been upended in the nation. The Gardener, unlike the Mower, is not a sinister figure, and speaks kindly to the Queen when he discloses the news of the deposition. The Mower, however, as both the land and Death, gives the land a sinister feel, as though it is taking its revenge on the king who failed it.

*Something Like a Conclusion*

I set out to investigate how the two history plays, with such similar kings, constructed the England under contention, and I do not feel I understand this any better now than I did when I started. I do, however, have a sense that Shakespeare started with character types inspired by *Edward II*, and developed his construction of England in *Richard II* by exploring and complicating the relationship of the characters to the land. The actual land itself figures more prominently in *Richard II*, though mystic descriptions of the island and of sacred soil, and through more developed descriptions of land and naming of place. Richard sees himself as part of his land, and the play does as well, giving us the garden scene, something entirely unlike anything in *Edward II* – and these developments give Richard's fall a cosmic scope that *Edward II* doesn't have. In contrast, Marlowe's king is thus rendered more human in his failures and his fall. It is a political fall, rather than an overturning of power the providential repercussions of which must be worked out in seven more plays.