

Labour, Class, and the Edenic Gardener in *Richard II* and *Hamlet*

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Abstract: This essay examines the biblical contexts surrounding the gardener-figures of William Shakespeare's *Richard II* (c. 1595) and *Hamlet* (c. 1599–1602). In these plays, gardeners and gravemakers are associated with Adam, the steward of Eden appointed by God. These rustic figures are simultaneously elevated and debased by their connection to their ancestor, owing to his curious position as both the original sinner and the first progenitor of mankind. This essay shall concentrate on the various historical and historiographical contexts of Adam, Eden, Genesis, and their relationship to labour and social class, locating Shakespeare's characters in a historical continuum in which authoritative texts are ubiquitous and significant.

In his study of politics and economics in Renaissance commentaries on Genesis, Arnold Williams writes that “praise of agriculture ... is conventional. Farming, many of the commentators write, is the most ancient and best of occupations. Adam, even before his fall, was a farmer, for God put him in Eden to ‘dress it and keep it’” (209). This theological respect for tillers of the earth is reflected in William Shakespeare's tragedies *Richard II* (c. 1595) and *Hamlet* (c. 1599–1602). In these plays, labouring characters—gardeners and gravemakers, in particular—are associated with Adam, the steward of Eden appointed by God. These rustic figures are simultaneously elevated and debased by their connection to their ancestor, owing to his curious position as both the original sinner and the first progenitor of mankind. Shakespeare, a meticulous arranger of meaning, was aware of Adam's many significations

(sin, disgrace, fatherhood, history, and not least of all manual labour) and of their presence in the historical texts from which he draws his sources and the contemporary atmosphere in which he works. Shakespeare manipulates this fertile intersection of text, history, and theology to animate these small roles with a uniquely dignified religious lineage. This essay shall concentrate on the various historical and historiographical contexts of Adam, Eden, Genesis, and their relationship to labour and social class, thus locating Shakespeare's characters in a discrete historical continuum in which authoritative texts are ubiquitous and significant.

Though the gardeners of *Richard II* are supposedly relegated to rustic ignorance by their class position, the simplicity associated with their profession belies a greater political conscience than figures of their status are typically given credit for. The gardeners first appear in the Duke of York's garden, where they intrude on the melancholic Queen and her ladies. The women hide themselves in the shadow of a grove, and the Queen listens attentively to the men's conversation, especially when it explicitly concerns her husband. She becomes furious when one gardener suggests that "depressed [Richard] is already, and deposed / 'Tis doubt he will be" (3.4.69–70) and reveals herself to berate him:

Thou, old Adam's likeness, set to dress this garden,
How dares thy harsh rude tongue sound this
unpleasing news?
What Eve, what serpent hath suggested thee
To make a second fall of cursèd man?
Why dost thou say King Richard is deposed?
Dar'st thou, thou little better thing than earth,
Divine his downfall? Say where, when, and how
Cam'st thou by this ill tidings? Speak, thou wretch!
(3.4.74–81)

The Queen scathingly invokes Adam's name and hyperbolically suggests that the gardeners' knowledge of her husband's political circumstances and Adam's consumption of the fruit of knowledge are comparably grievous sins. Such a comparison is decidedly paternalistic.

She weaponizes Adam's prelapsarian innocence to imply that the servile gardeners cannot have a sociopolitical consciousness independent of a tempting Eve or serpent. However, their knowledge of political affairs, which springs from the Gardener's "harsh rude tongue," is more accurate than even the Queen's, indicating a keen awareness of the machinations of the state. In fact, these manual labourers seem to understand more about the management of the body politic than does King Richard himself—by dint of their particular profession. The Gardener instructs his Second Man to

Go thou, and, like an executioner,
Cut off the heads of too fast-growing sprays
That look too lofty in our commonwealth.

All must be even in our government. (3.4.34–37)

The Gardener here abstractly refers to the sycophantic courtiers Bushy, Bagot, and Green, each of whom manipulates his intimacy with Richard to obtain prestige; indeed, when Bolingbroke assumes control of England, he cuts off Bushy's and Green's heads. In fact, the entirety of the gardeners' botanical conversation is a thin metaphorical veil for affairs of state. "Garden" serves as allegorical shorthand for "kingdom" in *Richard II*: for example, in John of Gaunt's eulogy of England, he describes his nation as "this other Eden, demi-Paradise" (2.1.42). Such a description positions Richard as a deficient Adam (and Bolingbroke as a successful one, by extension). Like Lear, Richard shies from his vocational responsibility as the keeper of the garden of the state. Clayton G. MacKenzie writes of the speech, "Gaunt's second Eden ... remains merely a latent paradise unless those who live in the present can enliven it, refurbish it, build upon it" (27). MacKenzie's interpretation of Gaunt's remarks points to the necessity of labour to maintain paradise: just as Eden cannot thrive without the stewardship of Adam, England stagnates without an industrious king to refrain from excess, distribute wealth fairly, and refuse the advice of flatterers. Work is thus intrinsically linked and ethically fundamental to England, and Richard's failure to labour in the garden—to rule judiciously—is the Aristotelian

hamartia that ends his reign. The gardeners, then, are by contrast admirable figures. Their prudent eye for order in the natural world distinguishes them from Richard, who has “not trimmed and dressed his land / as [they] this garden” (3.4.57–58). Both the gardeners and Richard are types of Adam, but only the gardeners succeed in Adam’s directive from God.

To associate both a king and some of his lowliest subjects with Adam is a populist gesture, especially in reference to Richard’s reign, a period in which the public posed a palpable threat to hierarchy. Hamlet remarks on this threat when conversing with Horatio and the gravemakers and identifies the growing intellectual sophistication of the peasantry: “By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken note of it. The age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe” (5.1.134–37). In both plays, the aristocracy is threatened by an increasing terror of the socioeconomic other—and in *Richard II*, Bolingbroke takes advantage of this terror when he legitimizes the concerns of the dissident public by overthrowing Richard. He is a people’s monarch, most vehemently beloved by citizens of the gardeners’ social class. If Richard rules by the divine right of kings, his deposition then represents divine order—the ordained will of God—overturned with the endorsement of the English masses. This kind of sociopolitical unrest characterized the early reign of the historical Richard II as well as its final days. Having ascended the throne in 1377 at age ten, Richard was fourteen years old during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, an event extensively recorded in the principal source of Shakespeare’s histories, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), and which forms the basis of the Cade Rebellion in *2 Henry VI* (c. 1591). Proponents of the revolt used biblical rhetoric to appeal to “the common uplandish people” (Holinshed 430). The Lollard priest John Ball mobilized Adam and Eve in particular: in a public sermon, he famously asked, “When Adam delled, and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?” (qtd. in McIntire 104). Thomas Walsingham, in his *St Albans*

Chronicle (1328–88), reports that Ball “endeavoured ... to introduce and prove the notion that all men were by nature created equal from the beginning, and that servitude had been brought in wrongly by the unjust oppression of human beings, contrary to the will of God” (547). Ball’s invocation of Adam was wildly successful among the English peasantry because it sanctified manual labour and honoured those socially obligated to perform it for survival. Ball’s sermon also portrayed the earliest moments of human history as an idyllic age of equality, a notion to which Shakespeare repeatedly refers throughout his corpus (in *As You Like It* [c. 1599] it is called “the Golden World” [1.1.114], for example). The leaders of the Peasants’ Revolt held that this democratic epoch could be restored by force, and thus proved profoundly destabilizing to the aristocracy that controlled the boy-king’s realm. The fictionalized Bolingbroke’s popularity among England’s citizenry is similarly threatening to Richard because Bolingbroke promises a similar restoration or refurbishment of the state, a return to Edenic equality antagonistic to the existence of a monarchy or an aristocracy. England is poised between two reigns, much as Adam is situated between two human epochs. His actions uproot order and consequently dictate the fall of mankind from bliss to suffering. He is thus a figure of temporality, transition, and change, and by associating the gardeners with Adam, Shakespeare makes his servile characters harbingers of possibility and fruitful subversion.

Though *Hamlet* similarly associates its gravemakers with social change by suggesting a linkage with Adam, their position as comedic figures somewhat defangs their potential for class disruption. In her study of Shakespeare’s English history plays, Phyllis Rackin observes that “segregated by generic restrictions, the plebeian characters ... can rebel against their oppression, but they can never finally transcend the conventions of comic representation that keep them in their social place and mark their separation from the serious historical world of their betters” (221). This much is true of the gravemakers in *Hamlet*, who claim a link to the distant historical world of Adam in the opening

of the play's final act as they prepare the recently drowned Ophelia's grave:

SECOND CLOWN. Will you ha' the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial.

FIRST CLOWN. Why, there thou sayst, and the more pity that great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even Christian. Come, my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and gravemakers; they hold up Adam's profession.

SECOND CLOWN. Was he a gentleman?

FIRST CLOWN. A was the first that ever bore arms.

SECOND CLOWN. Why, he had none.

FIRST CLOWN. What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says Adam digged. Could he dig without arms? (5.1.23–37)

Though the clowns' conversation falls short of the outright rebellion perpetrated by working-class characters in plays such as *2 Henry VI*, their discussion of inequality is certainly seditious. However, any subversive potential in their speech—along with the professional pride they take in the lineage of their work—is promptly quashed when the First Clown stumbles at the double meaning of “arms” and mistakes a heraldic coat of arms for body parts. The audience enjoys a hearty chuckle at the clowns' expense, thereby returning them to the narrow confines of comedy from which they momentarily stood apart.

In this exchange, the Second Clown gestures toward a feature of institutional inequality: limited access to ecclesiastical rites and the luxury of suicide. Though the Danish aristocracy is as Christian as the peasantry, their socioeconomic status permits them to commit decidedly un-Christian acts, such as suicide, with impunity. Though Hamlet himself is aware that “the Everlasting [has] fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter” (1.2.131–32) and therefore refrains from it, he consistently commits or dwells on other sins. Nevertheless, Horatio anticipates a heavenly final destination for Hamlet's soul. The clowns' discourse,

however, undermines the sense of security with which Horatio beckons Hamlet's "flights of angels" (5.2.360). Their speech exposes inconsistencies in Christian doctrine permissively perpetrated by the Catholic institution and encapsulates the central issue of the Protestant Reformation.

Hamlet takes place in a timeless Danish court, and although this deliberate temporal displacement lends the play universality, it is nevertheless tinged with the very contemporary presence of church reform (the prince attends university in Wittenberg, the birthplace of Protestantism, for example). John Calvin, deceased in 1564, the year of Shakespeare's birth, esteems Adam's profession in his commentary on Genesis: "For the tilth of the earth was commaunded by God: and the labour of keeping and feeding beastes, was no lesse honest then profitable: to be short, the whole life rustike is hurtlesse, simple, and most of all framed to the true order of nature" (127). Calvin's views, both on Catholic hypocrisy and on the virtue of manual labour, align with the gravemakers' simplistic but straightforward assessment of their working existence. Though they do not express specifically reformist views, their speech is critical of the aristocracy as upheld by the Catholic Church and contributes to the Protestant undertones that present themselves throughout the play. Like the gardeners of *Richard II*, their connection to Adam poses a threat to institutional power.

According to Williams, "general concern with society and social arrangements [is] evident in much of the theology of the Renaissance" (221). In *Richard II* and *Hamlet*, theology locates lower-class labouring characters within matrices of power that they often threaten. Both plays represent the lower class as a destabilizing force with historical precedents—the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in the case of *Richard II* and the rise of European religious reform in that of *Hamlet*. However, within the plays themselves, the gardeners and the gravemakers view their professions with gravity and speak seriously about their responsibilities; they are fully aware of a lineage descending from Adam to them and the implications of such an inheritance. For

Shakespeare's characters, Adam is not a static historical figure but a point of intersection of theology, labour, and power that shapes the way they are perceived by others and the way they perceive themselves.

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