

Trees, Kings, Christ
 Almanacs, Ballads and the Divinity
 of Matter in *Richard II*

The imagistic language of Shakespeare's *Richard II* is everywhere directed towards the play's central motif: the Plantagenets as plants, Richard as a lopped tree, Kingship as a garden. This particular botanical metaphor, with its investment in the triangulated relationship between plants, humans and the divine, is unique to *Richard II*. And yet Shakespeare's entire corpus frequently explores, at varying registers, the ways in which plants and trees, as the 'ornaments' of the created world,¹ signify and enact the incarnate reality of matter. The play in which Shakespeare poses his most obvious set of questions about the ways in which trees and plants can be said to signify is *As You Like It*. With its ironic perspective on man's longing to experience nature's liveliness, this play's various pastoralisms are clichéd attempts on the part of elite characters to animate the material world of the forest with a divine reality through which they might themselves be redeemed – be it the Duke's 'tongues in trees' or Orlando's bad tree-bark verses. Robert Watson's work on the ironies of similitude in *As You Like It* shows how light-footed Shakespeare's theatre could be in its satire of elite nostalgia for a benign forest world that was in reality a space of economic hardship for commoners. Watson is highly attentive to *As You Like It*'s treatment of the created world as a material reality that can only be understood through the metaphoric veil that is fallen human consciousness.

The pastoral genre is stubbornly artificial, as if to acknowledge that our hunger for simplicity is actually a symptom of sophistication, a self-conscious desire at once expressed and prevented by language. We gaze lovingly at ponds, but so did Narcissus; and the gates of Eden are firmly closed. *As You Like It* begins with that originary exclusion: 'As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion bequeath'd me ...' (1.1.1). Efforts to

¹ Clare Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Brill, 2016).

bridge, through simile, the gap between ourselves and nature, and between our minds and reality, again only confirm that there is really no way back.²

It is true that the elite characters in the Forest of Arden remain woefully separated from the green world they wish to inhabit. But – and here Watson's study is less attentive – the common forest-dwellers are not so abused by unreality. Instead, they are shown to be uninterested in the green world as a simile because for them it is a mere location – a location so clipped around with the bad dealings of their superiors (enclosure, grain inflation, tenancy corruption, vagrancy laws) that the common forest-dweller may at any moment find themselves ejected from the forest or from life.

Richard II is less satirical, but it nonetheless frames the question of how we are to understand the created world as a material reality infused with divine signification, and how this world is perceived and lived within differently by commoners, aristocrats, and the monarch himself as demi-Christ. In effect, *As You Like It's* great satirical feat was already present in *Richard II* but with a significant alteration in tone. *Richard II's* elite characters experience the same naïve desire to have the created world signify, but this condition is presented as a tragic loss rather than a comic deflation. The play's concern with divine right theory's sacralisation of the monarch's human body anticipates *As You Like It's* playful questions about trees as either icons or idols, but expresses them through a more gravely philosophical register. Where the comedy exposes elite fantasies of a green idyll, the history exposes the elite fantasy of royal divinity. But in doing so, *Richard II* asserts as true and right precisely that trust in nature's incarnate reality that is so satirised in *As You Like It* – by granting this view to those of lower status. *Richard II's* common characters – the Gardener and his assistant – are shown to possess an ability to successfully read the created world for its revelation of higher truths. From the Gardener, we learn that the created world does indeed signify, but not in the ways expected by the play's elite characters or described by divine right theory. The singers of ballads, the workers of the land: in both plays, Shakespeare grants these characters a greater hold on reality, and on creation, than their betters. Whereas the elite characters – whose equivalents off-stage are the period's literate political theorists and theological controversialists – are instead shown to fall from their illusions.

² Watson, *Back to Nature*, 78.

From Gaunt's 'blessed isle' speech to the Duchess's extended description of Gaunt's family as a sacred tree hung with vials of blood, *Richard II* shows its characters have a deeply emotional investment in England as an incarnate reality that is constituted primarily through the green world and the blood and tears of the princes.³ This combination of images might not seem to invoke the question of whether or not nature contains either icons or idols until we recognise that the blood and tears of princes are seen by royal characters as the very essence of their own divinity, of that sacramental character that God, in divine right theory, has granted to the human bodies of his royal representatives on earth. The same images can be found throughout the play in the mouths of almost every elite character. Carlisle argues that God is himself the gardener by whom Richard has been 'planted many years' and to depose him will result only in the 'blood of English' 'manur[ing] the ground' (4.1.127–38). The Queen claims to water 'with true love's tears' her 'fair rose', the 'wither [ing]' king (5.1.6–11). Richard comforts the weeping Aumerle: 'we'll make foul weather with despised tears: / Our sighs and they shall lodge the summer corn / And make a dearth in this revolting land' (3.3.161–163). Here are some more: 'Bear you well in this new spring of time / Lest you be cropped before you come to prime' (5.2.50). 'Thou, which knowst the way / To plant unrightful kings, wilt know again . . . another way / To pluck him headlong from the usurped throne' (5.1.62–5). 'My soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow' (5.6.45–6).

Richard himself spends considerable time trying to understand how the divinity lodged in his body by virtue of his coronation can ever be taken away from him. He resists a political interpretation and sees instead that something sacramentally binding is being undone, which is, sacramentally speaking, impossible. Richard's critics, however, describe him as having failed politically to manage England as a garden. (He has allowed the ground to 'choke' with 'weeds' and 'swarm' with 'caterpillars' [3.4.44–46].) But Richard does not blame his deposition on his own failure to properly manage England's trees and plants. In his and the Queen's descriptions of

³ Charles R. Forker (ed.), *King Richard II* (Arden, 2002). All references will be made in the body of the text. For an in-depth study of the relationship between kings and trees in *Richard II*, see chapter 2 of Tigner, *Literature and the Renaissance Garden*, and for a presentist reading of this play's language of maternal earth and embodied plants, see Lynne Bruckner, 'Consuming Means, Soon Preys upon Itself: Political Expediency and Environmental Degradation in *Richard II*', in Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now* (Palgrave, 2013), 126–47.

their tears and blood, the monarchs identify themselves bodily with the English earth while at the same time accusing it of having 'rebelled' or 'revolted' from the cause they deem right: the fostering and protection of kingship. To describe nature as rebellious assumes that it was once under royal control: an assumption that can only be justified by a rather naïve application of divine right theory. *Richard II's* characters do not yearn for a lost Eden: they believe that even the fallen world ought to adhere to the civilised order of divine right monarchy. Their crisis emerges when they are confronted with the reality that nature (like politics) is seasonal, as destructive as it is beneficent, and will not conform to social hierarchies. Richard's extended meditations on the separation of his divinely instituted sovereignty from his earthly, fleshly self, seek to understand how something sacramental and enduring can be severed by men (and ultimately by the God who sanctions men's actions). These are reasonable enough questions for a king facing deposition. Less reasonable is the assumption that Richard's status as anointed sovereign extends to him the same control over the created world as God himself enjoys.

It is the one real gardener in the play who seems most immune to nature's upheavals, or who can, at least, most effectively manage his trees. The Gardener, of course, succeeds within his realm because there he deals only with actual, rather than figurative, plants and is excluded (or protected) from the violent world of politics. And yet he uses the same figurative language used elsewhere in the play and to similar effect: he too thinks through the problems posed by a created world that demands interpretation. Where the Plantagenets describe themselves as plants vulnerable to the violent cycles of the political world, the Gardener describes his plants as political men: his garden is a 'government', his apricots are unruly children; his sprays are too fast-growing and must be cut by his 'executioner' (3.4.29–34). The Gardener's assistant voices frustration that he should so labour to govern nature when those who govern him can bring no order. But the Gardener does not despair of their work. While his own management has no effect on the changing world of politics beyond the walls of his garden, the Gardener can nonetheless assure his assistant that no such chaos as that which has been suffered under Richard would ever endure in his domain.

In fact, through his successful use of simile, the Gardener emerges as the most powerful character; he is the one who can best deploy the figures of speech that woefully frustrate elite characters, just as he can properly read

and enter into the divine power which governs and destroys kings. The Gardener's plants, like his frustrated workmen, are nothing if not subject to him. Where the Plantagenets worry that they cannot fully possess or control the created world they were born to govern, the Gardener's 'skill' in managing nature is instead largely invulnerable. His skill is not even 'subject' to a queen's curse. Rather, in the very plot of earth where the Queen acknowledges her fall from power, there the Gardener plants his rue, transforming her bitter tears into his 'herb of grace' (3.4.105). And yet, despite his sovereignty over the small 'compass' of his 'pale', the Gardener acknowledges that the political turmoil beyond his walls is ultimately ensured not by the actions of individual men but by the continued cycles of nature and its demands for change: Richard, who has permitted such a 'disordered spring', has now 'himself met with the fall of leaf' (3.4.49). Unlike Richard and the Queen, the Gardener's skill is his ability to read and interpret a power much greater than his own. He anticipates nature's cyclical movements and acts in sympathy with them: he cuts back wherever there is too much growth and supports where there is 'oppression' (3.4.31).

The Gardener's ability to read the political and divine reality of Richard's fall through the symbolic language of his garden is questioned by the Queen, who points to the Gardener's social status: 'Though, old Adam's likeness set to dress this garden, / How dares thy harsh rude tongue sound this unpleasing news?' (3.4.72–3). For the Queen, the Gardener's lowness ought to exclude him from the interpretative activity in which she and Richard are continually – and unsuccessfully – engaged. 'Dar'st thou, thou little better thing than earth, / Divine [Richard's] downfall?' (3.4.78–9). For the Queen, the Gardener is himself little better than the earth, but it is this very fact that signals the Gardener's expertise in reading trees for divine Revelation. The crucial role of this scene is to show that the Gardener's reading of nature is correct, while the monarchs are misguided. Their over-investment in the reality of divine right theory, or, more broadly, in the sacramental and therefore binding nature of kingship, has blinded them to the political truth, as demonstrated by the divine reality lodged in nature's forms. The monarchs must face an unwelcome iconoclasm as it pertains to their own selves, precisely at the moment when they are confronted by the Gardener's correct reading of trees as true similes for the divine will.

The Gardener's understanding of trees and plants as the symbolic language laid down by God for man to interpret, alongside scripture, had a clear medieval precedent. In its medieval form, the Book of

Nature was understood as a crucial source of Revelation. All of creation was 'a text' which could be 'interpreted, scrutinised, allegorised and investigated for the way it pointed to its exemplar and author: God'.⁴ This conception of the created world changed radically throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But in the middle decades of the sixteenth century, when Shakespeare was growing up, the reformation of nature was only just beginning to advance in the learned and Protestant forums of the sermon and printed tract. It is in these decades that we can trace the escalating divergence between common cultures that remained invested in the potential for trees and plants to possess divine signification, and a reformed, literate disdain for such practices as backward and blasphemous.

The iconoclast Thomas Jackson articulates this disdain most acutely when he denounces certain devotional practices among the illiterate for whom 'the marigold' was sometimes seen as deserving 'divine honour'.⁵ Jackson's choice of this flower in particular is a glance at the long-standing practice among commoners of granting Marian names to local plants.⁶ In one small phrase, Jackson's criticism manages to yoke together Catholicism, paganism and illiteracy as the mutually informing cause of those backward devotional practices that learned reformers were attempting to purge from the English cultural landscape. It is more difficult to recuperate the views of those whom Jackson denounced; they did not possess his literacy or his ability to shape the historical record. But numerous extant materials do attest to the views of commoners: my primary focus here will be on ballads, almanacs and Shakespeare's plays.

Living Trees, Loving Trees

Throughout the middle ages, a persistent visual and literary tradition depicted Christ as a tree. Most widespread in Tree of Jesse images, this trope also emerged in the more limited family tree of Anne and Joachim,

⁴ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (Routledge, 1996), 49. See also Émile Mâle: 'The Christians of the Middle Ages had their souls filled with Jesus Christ. They sought him everywhere and they saw him everywhere . . . Shadows or figures of Christ were found not only in the pages of the Old Testament, but in pagan myth and story, and in the pages of the "book" of nature'. Cited in Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval Religious Lyric* (Routledge, 1972), 77. See also, Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*.

⁵ Thomas Jackson, *A treatise containing the originall of unbeliefe* (London, 1625), 198–9.

⁶ Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 156.

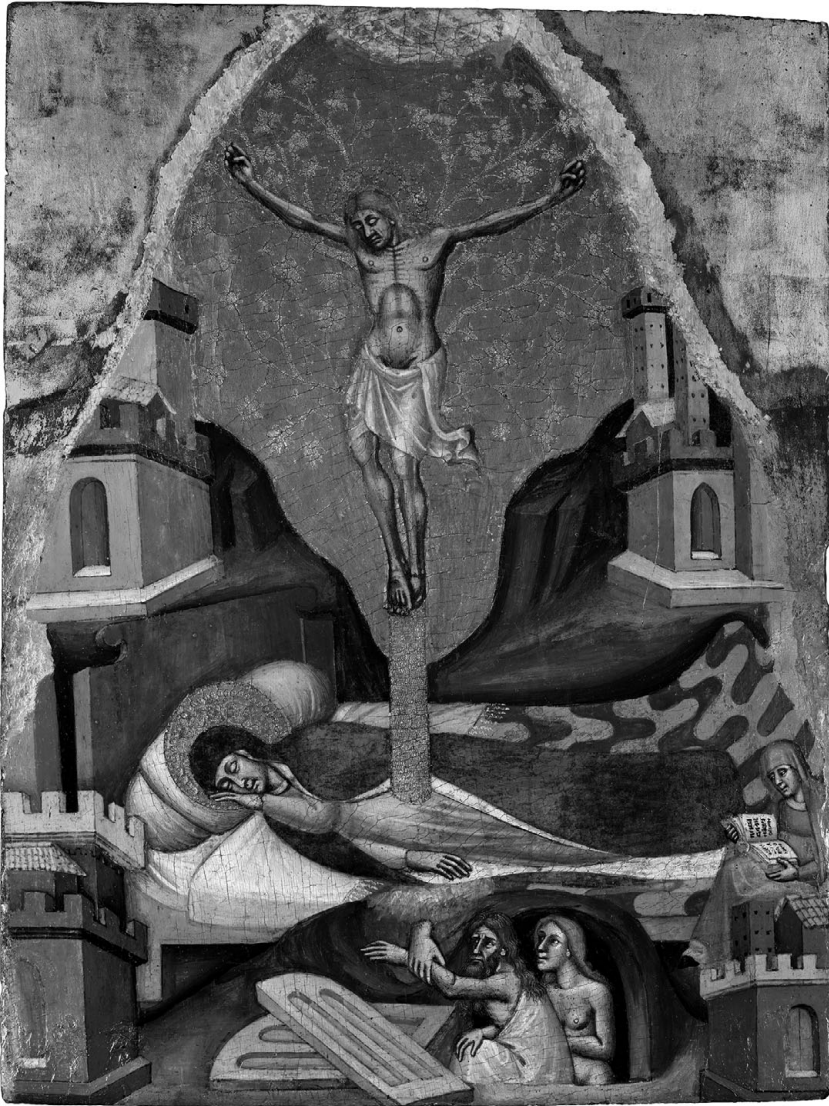


Figure 1.1 Simone dei Crocefissi's *Dream of the Virgin* (c.1355–99).
The Society of Antiquaries of London.

Mary and Jesus. Simone dei Crocefissi's *Dream of the Virgin* (c.1355–1399; Figure 1.1) depicts Christ as both tree and crucifixion emerging out of the pregnant belly of the sleeping virgin. Reaching up from their tomb in the ground below Mary are Anne and Joaquin, whose

arms form the root system from which the tree grows.⁷ The image draws equally upon the sensual, even erotic, dynamics of procreation and the dynamics of growth in the green and growing world: the grandparents are the roots from which springs the flowering child via the fertile body of the mother. But in its foreshadowing of the Crucifixion, the image signals the theological reality that even as Christ is born, or brought into being through Mary's dream, he is always already crucified. These are devotional images, but they are also meditations on the doctrine of the Incarnation: a doctrine that perceives all material life – from trees and plants to human bodies and passions – as a source and sign of divine life. *The Cherry Tree Carol* contains a similar pattern. This ballad (dating from around the fifteenth century) is a folk song that describes a walk taken by Mary and Joseph in a cherry orchard. While walking, Mary asks Joseph to reach her some fruit because she is pregnant and hungry. This is the first Joseph has heard about her pregnancy and, galled by the news, he tells Mary to ask the father of her baby for cherries. So the baby in Mary's belly – both the child and father in this instance – speaks up and tells the tree to bend its branches so that Mary can reach the fruit. The miracle is then the cause of Joseph's conversion and he kneels and asks the baby when his birthday will be.

The Cherry Tree Carol is a folk song, but it draws on a much wider, and often more learned, medieval investment in incarnate matter as a source of divine revelation for those who study and interpret it in the light of doctrine. In Sarah Beckwith's words:

all of humankind strove to recognise, cultivate and restore the likeness to their creator that was always already there. These developments of the implications of the incarnation are then made on the basis of a Neoplatonising Augustinianism which imagined the entire visible world as bearing the traces (*vestigia*) of God. Christ's willingness to be incarnated, his embodiment, is crucial because it is only this condescension to the flesh which will allow other images to signify. It is only his incarnation which, by symbolising and embodying the union of image and exemplar, establishes for fallen man the possibility of a knowledge of God through his vestiges in nature. The world, then, as an image of God, is potent with signification. The material world becomes a text which may be interpreted, scrutinised, allegorised and investigated for the way it pointed to its exemplar and author: God.⁸

⁷ For arguments about the relationship between the Tree of Jesse images, Eden and Marian iconography, see chapter 2 of Tigner, *Literature and the Renaissance Garden* and Margot Fassler, 'Mary's Nativity, Fulbert of Chartres, and the Stirps Jesse: Liturgical Innovation Circa 1000 and Its Afterlife', *Speculum* 75 (2000), 390–1.

⁸ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, 49. See also Paula Findlen, 'Empty Signs?: Reading the Book of Nature in Renaissance Science', *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 21 (1990), 511–18.

This vision of an incarnate material world assumes a communion among all the elements of the created world: plants and animals, humans and the divine. I use the word communion broadly but, as I will argue, it could also be used specifically, in that the medieval Book of Nature assumed a sacramental quality in all matter. That is, the medieval view of nature did not always distinguish between the divinity of nature as such and the uses of nature for devotion. But early modern iconoclasts asserted precisely this distinction – and in the most controversial terms. In the Elizabethan homily against Idolatry, we are told that: ‘The things which were the good creatures of GOD before (as Trees or Stones) when they be once altered and fashioned into Images to bee worshipped, become abomination, a temptation unto the souls of men, and a snare for the feet of the unwise’.⁹ In fact, man is by nature ‘bent to worshipping of Images’ just as he is ‘bent to whoredom and adultery in the company of harlots’ (130–31).

It is in this same spirit that Thomas Jackson, hater of marigold worship, denounced common heretics. But Jackson takes his views on blasphemy even further by aligning poets with flower worshippers. He claims that ‘the seminaries of Poetry’ are ‘the chief nurses of Idolatry . . . both lay like twins in the womb of the same unpurified affection’.¹⁰ As Alison Shell has noted, Jackson held the view that simple or ‘uncouth’ minds were as easily disposed to the idolatrous appeal of poetry as they were to the idolatrous worship of nature. ‘Crucifixes and marigolds could both be seen as dangerous because the imaginatively undisciplined observer might commit idolatry by confusing signifier with signified, and carrying admiration too far – but though crucifixes could be confiscated from churches, nothing could be done about the English meadow’.¹¹ The rhetorical collision, used by both the homilist and Jackson, between unchastity and idolatry, is a neat inversion of the devotional sensuality that had once been a standard feature of the Jesse Tree images. Where once Christ as tree was both sensual and spiritual, now for reformists, depictions of Christ could only be truly spiritual if the sensual (the procreative and ornamental, but also the material, biographical, extra-biblical) dimensions were removed.

⁹ *The Second Tome of Homilies* (London, 1571), 33.

¹⁰ Jackson, *A treatise containing the originall of vnbeliefe*, 198–9.

¹¹ Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism*, 72. See Jackson’s twelve-book exposition (1613–57), especially in parts five (*The Originall of Unbelief* [1625]) and six (*The Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes* [1628–29]). On Jackson, see also Sarah Hutton, ‘Thomas Jackson, Oxford Platonist, and William Twisse, Aristotelean’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978), 635–52. On Jackson and idolatry, see Reid Barbour, *Literature and Religious Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 185.

More particularly, any blasphemous matter, even if it is not in itself sensual or erotic, is denounced as though it were dangerously unchaste: poetry and idolatry lie 'like twins in the womb of the same unpurified affection'. Metaphorical depictions of Christ were reinterpreted as blasphemous not just because they associate him with trees or with human sexuality, but because to associate him at all with matter had become a potential source of blasphemy.

Under the pressure of iconoclasm, the tropes of (botanical and bodily) divine generation contained within Jesse Tree images began to separate into two traditions. One of these traditions continued to associate the tree, especially fruit trees, with sensual delight or bawdy pleasure. And the other, more spiritual tradition retained the idea of Christ as a tree but removed any suggestion that Christ might be an actual tree. This second, reformed approach is exemplified by the late-seventeenth-century ballad *Christ Compared to an Apple-Tree*.

The tree of life my soul hath seen,
Laden with fruit, and always green;
The trees of nature fruitless be,
Compared with Christ the Apple-tree.

The ballad is a meditation on what it means to think of Christ as a tree that flowers, thrives and delights in the soul of the speaker. However, the speaker very clearly perceives the image of Christ as a tree only with his soul and not with his eyes. There are no biographical or extra-biblical narrative events in the ballad. Instead the narrative charts the speaker's internal change or conversion from one who does not 'see' Christ with his soul to one who does. Where *The Cherry Tree Carol* explores the doctrine of the Incarnation through a homely, extra-biblical story about the holy family in an orchard (and in doing so recognises the divine potential in actual trees), the reformed ballad draws instead on a learned suspicion of metaphor by building a similitude between Christ and tree that draws purely on the spiritual reality of faith as something that can be described directly as growing, fruiting, shading. It also establishes early in the first stanza that Christ as tree is 'the tree of life', thereby locating the firm biblical foundation for the image. The first stanza also makes clear that to see Christ as a tree with eyes of the soul is itself an act of iconoclast conversion, because it means turning one's worldly eyes away from the beauty of real trees: 'The trees of nature fruitless be / Compared with Christ the Apple Tree'.

Both ballads make a claim for the real – for true divine reality – as something opposed to a purely human or misguided vision of reality, but they do so through opposing interpretations of the role of metaphor and the

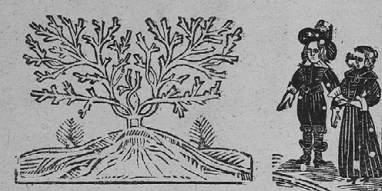
role of matter. *The Cherry Tree Carol* is an entirely ‘fictional’ or extra-biblical narrative and in this sense, an extended metaphor for biblical and doctrinal truths. It also embraces the capacity for the created world to signal and contain divine reality. And it is fully populist, aimed at both illiterate and literate singers: through its tone and its doctrinal orientation towards the common, universal experience of the divine in an everyday setting (a family walking in an orchard). The reformed ballad, however, posits as true the divine reality found in a denial of worldly beauty – which is also common beauty. It claims that metaphorical depictions of Christ are illegitimate, unless grounded in the literate sphere of biblical expression (the tree of life) because then the metaphor is in fact not a metaphor but an actual truth. *Christ Compared to an Apple-Tree* assumes a learned knowledge on the part of singer/hearer whose understanding of the ballad’s iconoclasm is central to its assertions of how the godly ought to view nature’s gifts.

The other form of tree ballad – bawdy and without Christological association – circulated widely in cheap print. The English Broadside Ballad Archive contains numerous songs about lovers meeting under trees or abandoned lovers weeping under trees. In one cautionary version of this form (‘John and Betty, or the Vertue of Cherry-Stones’, Figure 1.2), we hear about a whole group of maids from Kent who fall pregnant after meeting their men under cherry trees. It is in this category of tree ballad that we find Shakespearean lyrics like *The Willow Tree* in *Othello*. This song – one of the rare instances in which we have both the extant printed ballad and its use onstage – is about an abandoned lover who weeps under the willow tree. *As You Like It* contains numerous songs, pitched with various degrees of irony, about love and trees and indeed the whole play could be read as a dramatised version of the form. One bawdy tree ballad in particular deserves attention (‘Wanton Widows pleasant Mistake, or A Wooden Image turne’d to Flesh and Blood’, Figure 1.3). This song tells the story of a lonely widow who dresses a tree trunk in a man’s shirt and hat and takes it to bed with her. She calls the tree Simon. But then a real man from the village steals into her room at night and replaces the tree with himself. For a while, the widow is happy to go along with the pretence that the real man is her wooden man, until the couple decide that they need to light a fire in the room to warm themselves during the night. So they burn Simon. In the final stanza, Simon is denounced as:

A senseless Old Simon, that Wooden dull Tool!
 A silly dry Image, no, Burn the Old Fool:
 With a sweeter soft Armful much better supplied,
 She has warm Flesh and Bones now to lye by her side.

JOHN and BETTY:
 OR,
The Vertue of Cherry-Stones.
 Some Lads and Ladies dwell in Kent,
 To gather Cherries lately went:
 And underneath the Cherry-Tree,
 They were as kind as kind could be.

To the Tune of, I am a Maid and a very good Maid.



Now the weather grows warm,
 Let's laugh and be merry,
 My Betty we'll go
 and we'll taste of the Cherry:
 When he not affrighted,
 For thus I will do,
 When you hate the Cherry
 and Cherry-stones too.

While we not rough,
 but gentle be kind,
 I thought to these words
 that you had not been inclin'd:
 And since you to me
 have the main reason, that
 you walk to the place,
 where the Cherry-stone are.

So sooner they came
 to sit under the Boughs,
 My Betty the said I
 with breaking of Stones
 which he formerly made,
 and as quickly forgot;
 But one Stone he had made,
 that heake he would not.

And this was the Stone,
 he refused to keep,
 When he would have a Shalder-head,
 e're he did sleep,
 Which when he inclin'd her,
 he quickly went home,
 and under the Cherry-tree,
 there it was done.

Some Lads and some Ladies,
 there then was to see,
 And this taking Creatures
 they did over-see:
 And came to behold,
 that which when they did see,
 they were all for a wages,
 or the estate for to be.

When under the trees,
 each had took his Leaf,
 And laid for down his
 upon the green Grass:
 Such work there was done,
 the like was never known,
 My Robert had a Margot,
 then Thomas had a Joan.

And what followed th' next day,
 you may easily guess,
 The Ladies had well,
 as they all did confess:
 Which brought their disgrace,
 by it quickly was known,
 My Robert had a Margot,
 but his husband had none.

Such laughing and gleaning
 amongst them was then,
 They said they would never
 see a Cherry-stone again:
 Especially: Except they like
 per the stones more to please,
 And cause their Ladies
 to dwell by distress.

But when these young men,
 were thus things subjected,

They all did together,
 quite out of the Land:
 And left the poor Widdowes,
 at home to languish,
 Who of their pain follow'd
 did long repent.

you Widdows of Kent,
 take warning by us:
 And be not too forward
 to laugh and to dance,
 Which are the fore-runners
 of mischief indeed,
 And by such like follies,
 our hearts may be deceiv'd.

And were we again,
 as we was heretofore,
 I could give you advice,
 our Widdows to be:
 We'd were to a change,
 and fight to a Widdow,
 But now we pay our
 must be taught to fear.

For sometimes pleasure
 must be paid to pain:
 And what's done in secret,
 is plainly appear:
 And though that at once
 we might venture to do,
 It should have been to last
 on our backs for to fall.

F. N. S.

Printed for P. Colley, T. Worsley, J. Worsley, J. Church, W. Thackeray, and T. P.

Figure 1.2 Ballad. 'John and Betty, or the Vertue of Cherry-Stones' (c.1678). Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge. English Broadside Ballad Archive.

WANTON WIDOWS PLEASANT MISTAKE,
 Or, A Wooden Image turn'd to Flesh and Blood.
 To the Tune of, Let Caesar Live long.



A poor rich Widdow had late laid in her Bed,
 Her Husband Old Simon, her true Obedient and true
 But of the late fall of his estate was dead,
 She left her dear Bed-fellow, & her hand fast,
 With many an agon sigh, the night and the cry,
 She woud her Old Simon she lay by her side,
 So Charles the next morn, resolv'd to go to get her
 A Widdow of Old Simon's, instead of better:
 The Wooden Image bore so piteous make,
 And like the Old Simon, and so his name take,
 For right in her Bed, whatsoever betide,
 This Wooden Old Simon shall lie by her side,
 With a Widdow in his Bed, and a Cap on his Head,
 And having her well laid, up daughters in her Bed,
 She kiss'd and kiss'd him, her arms round him thro'ed,
 And kiss'd him, but all to find, whatsoever betide,
 Yet for dear Husband's sake, whatsoever betide,
 This Wooden Old Simon shall lie by her side.

This jolly gay Widdow had her eyes set on her,
 Who poss'd both all the best things that were her
 To have a new Husband to take off her care;
 A Widdow at it, she did all her best to get her
 In vain they all Offer'd, the place was fill'd,
 For her wooden Old Simon shall lie by her side,
 It length a hark speak, before she was arriv'd,
 And wanted rich Widdow to give him a kiss,
 To interbed and kissing the Widdow's hand Spain,
 A little by her Head between them lay his hand,
 One night in her Bed, this brisk Gallant to hide,
 He kiss'd wooden Old Simon to lie by her side,
 While Old Simon had, enough to make of her Bed,
 What a softer young Simon of sweet flesh and blood,
 Who did take the Widdow's love he has long and ill
 & all the while, who heard of poor thing, he was so fill
 As with a Girl, and as gay as a Bird,
 Trips nimbly to Bed, and lies close by his side.

With a Keach and a Widdow, and a fair sight of time,
 As a poor Widdow might very well do,
 She looked the left her fell, all through her eyes,
 Shee breathing of left a hark kiss and an kiss,
 With a plump heaving Breast, and a warm Cheek betide,
 She said to her Simon that lay by her side,
 Of the pale the hand, My Widdow, all on a sudden;
 She thought the count something that did not feel indeed
 For something the felt which was all flesh and blood,
 But, as I left something the too, but thinking no harm,
 She hug'd him full close, resolv'd to be laid,
 What had she'd the wooden old Simon by her side,
 But, to amiable her Widdow's her Arms
 Keck't last in Embraces, all Shape and Charm;
 Till smiling, and kissing, and kissing, and kissing,
 She felt something the too, to her mind all expiring,
 That never, O never, all Widdow's cry'd,
 So dear a hand Simon she lay by my side,
 The Widdow in the morning, but our fill near Edward,
 For fear of dishonouring her Widdow's too soon,
 Came and knock't at the door, for to know of her Widdow,
 What to Simon they were to have her get ready,
 What Bed, Boy'd, or Kist, she'd have her provide,
 'Gainst the rise from the Simon that lay by her side,
 Knock't the Widdow and the Count, the Widdow's Widdow's
 Woud a stout leg of Sparrow, with Widdow's Bed,
 Over a high of plump Widdow's, with a good simper'd
 The first can be purchas'd to be laid to my Widdow's (Gentle
 With a Dish of sweet Custards and Cheesecake betide,
 For me and my Widdow's this day by my side,
 In Widdow's, your will shall be done, says the Widdow,
 But on my Widdow's desire, I'm in my mind,
 She have not at home for Widdow's count her
 To make a quick Fire to burn the Widdow's
 How, Halcyon Widdow's, was Fire for your true
 Widdow's Old Simon, yet I did love your Widdow's
 Old Simon had Widdow's then, and all this time
 Widdow's Widdow's too small for her Sweet fellow bed;
 & finally Old Simon, the Widdow's Widdow's
 as fill up Widdow's, no Widdow's the Widdow's
 With a Widdow's soft Arm'd much better supply'd,
 She has a warm flesh and blood, as ever she lay by her side.

F. N. S.

Printed and Sold by J. Widdow, at the Angel in Ludlow-street.

Figure 1.3 Ballad. 'Wanton Widows pleasant Mistake, or A Wooden Image turn'd to Flesh and Blood' (c.1682). Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge. English Broadside Ballad Archive.

The legacy of iconoclast anxieties can be detected here, if only as a joke. Tree metaphors were widely denounced by reformers as unchaste modes of representation because they were false images. And here the wooden man is a 'senseless', 'dull' and 'silly image'. He is an empty signifier that the lovers burn in the fire of their delight. Without overburdening a comic song with theological implications, it is possible to suggest that the joke in this ballad performs a certain intellectual feat when it keeps open the question of what has happened to the tree trunk. Is the trunk a false image that has been put to the flames of an iconoclast purging or has the tree 'become' the man in an act of sensual reanimation akin to the divine enlivening of matter?

The question of how far these popular ballads can be pressed into the service of theological controversy is important. It is now some decades since Alison Shell called for a deeper investigation into the prejudices held by early modern literates about their illiterate contemporaries – a call that has remained largely unheeded. 'Literates were educated into various kinds of dissociation from illiterates, which fostered the artificially sharp distinctions of polemic, and were fostered by them in turn. Consequently, there could occur a polemical isolation of the educated from the rest; literates' suspicion of illiterates is one of the great underexamined prejudices of the early modern period'.¹² Underwriting all other positions of prejudice held by literates against illiterates (that they were papists, pagans, heretics, thieves) was the more fundamental view that they were unable to participate in any legitimate public discourse and needed therefore to submit to the wisdom of the lettered. However, the veracity of this assumption could be interrogated by looking to the wit of those songs that were usually transmitted orally but which occasionally found their way into cheap print.¹³

The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century development of reformed doctrines on nature became the province of the printed word, which, although mostly written in the vernacular, were composed in a highly learned dialect: the dialect of preachers and theologians, natural philosophers and medical men. The majority of the population had little access to this body of work because they could not read it and quite possibly had no interest in

¹² Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism*, 56. See also Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹³ For a detailed exploration of the interaction between illiterate cultural practice and printed ballads (and other materials) and the difficulties of distinguishing literate from illiterate sections of the population, see Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*.

reading it. Alison Shell and Alexandra Walsham have both shown that in the sixteenth century, popular devotions already embedded in the local landscape were becoming increasingly associated (in Protestant tracts) with Catholic and illiterate practice. For Shell:

Protestantism benefited from the link between print and verifiability, and this in turn encouraged reformers and other Protestant writers to reframe a suspicion of the independent imagination, particularly where the imaginative agents were illiterate. An educated disapproval of religious metaphors developed within oral cultures, and a feeling that discredited techniques within natural science must originally have been disseminated by those interested in promoting theological error, both contributed to a widespread intuition of popish rural idolatry. Efforts to reform botany would have been spurred by the known use of flowers in pagan ritual, and classically educated clergy would have been especially alert to popish uses of flowers.¹⁴

It is therefore possible that we might trace in the ballads a degree of resistance to the views exemplified by Thomas Jackson. That is, many ballads would seem to deny the literate view that the unlettered were too stupid to understand a metaphor and might therefore fall into papist or pagan heresies from which only the lettered could protect them through the enforcement of reform. I suggest that the *Wanton Widow* and her *Wooden Simon* offer precisely this resistance. The ballad's ability to open up an ironic space around the difference between tree trunk and man demonstrates a knowing playfulness, not just around the question of how metaphor works but around the precise terms of iconoclast controversy.

This playfully unresolved question over whether the tree trunk is an icon or idol, flesh or wood, chaste or unchaste, real or false, amounts to a moderate theological position. It is a moderate position because it is one willing to admit uncertainty on a point of such doctrinal controversy that most print commentators instead sought the political security of an immovable iconoclast stance. And yet, a similarly moderate position can be found occasionally in the learned domain of print. Levinus Lemnius' *An Herbal for the Bible* is an early-sixteenth-century Catholic humanist work of biblical exegesis that was translated into English by Thomas Newton in 1587. The translation at times is a straightforward Protestantisation of the original. But at other times, Newton retains potential blasphemies in the original tract by instead explaining or justifying them. So we are told that the Prophets:

¹⁴ Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism*, 74.

use so many similitudes and make so many comparisons of things fetched out of the very secrets and bowels of Nature; as namely, from beasts, fowls, worms, creeping and swimming creatures, herbs, trees, the elements, fire, water, earth, air, rivers, brooks, wells . . . seas, stars, pearls, stones, lightening, thunder, rain, dew, heat . . . and likewise from the humours in a man's body, blood, milk, generative seed, menstroe, woman in travail, child-birth, dross, iron, gold, silver, and innumerable other things, where-with they learnedly beautify their matter, and (as it were) bravely garnish and deck out their terms, words, and sentences with tropes and figurative phrases, metaphors, translations, parables, comparisons, collations, examples, schemes, and other ornaments of speech, giving thereby unto their matter a certain kind of lively gesture, and so consequently attiring it with light . . . and dignity: stirring up thereby men's drowsy minds, and awaking slothful, negligent . . . people to the consideration and acknowledgement of the truth, and to the following and embracing of godliness.¹⁵

Newton is willing to allow metaphors drawn from nature – trees, weather, human bodies and passions – as part of the ‘following and embracing’ of godliness, when the purpose of those metaphors is to stir up the minds of the godly with their lively gesture towards divine truth. Newton here uses the word ‘lively’ as it is used in early modern rhetorical manuals to mean a figure of speech that is well-chosen, well-spoken, full of life, energetic, convincing. But his use of the word also includes a more medieval sense that nature is lively – because it contains divine life.

I want to think for a moment about the capacity for this word ‘lively’ to articulate a specifically historical but changing idea about nature, or about creation broadly defined – both divine creation and the creative (metaphor-making) capacity of humans. The OED records various early modern uses for this word. Three of the most pertinent definitions are: alive or living, as in John Fisher's sermon against Luther, in which he describes Christ as the son of a ‘lively’ God, but also in John Maplet's 1567 natural history called *The Greene Forest*, in which Maplet observes that because ‘the Lodestone . . . draweth Iron to it . . . the common people’ have ‘judged the Iron lively’. A second definition for ‘lively’ pertains to spiritual life. In a 1549 homily, we hear the ‘unfruitfull faith’ or the ‘faith lively’ discussed. This is a similar sentiment to one found in the reformed ballad, *Christ Compared to an Apple-Tree*, in which a truly lively faith is one that recognises that the tree of life is superior to the actual tree. A third definition for ‘lively’ is merely to do with a fertile soil or earth.

¹⁵ Thomas Newton, *An Herbal for the Bible* (London, 1587), 6–7.

In Golding's 1564 translation of *Metamorphoses*: 'the fruitful seed of things well cherished in the fat and lively soil began in length of time to grow'.

Throughout the ballad tradition, 'lively' often means bawdy or ready for love, as in the lively lads and lasses who meet under fruit trees. And in Shakespeare's work we find this same definition used, as well as all the others listed above. Shakespeare's frequent use of 'lively' also includes a definition that is perhaps not covered by the OED's current provision. In at least two instances, Shakespeare uses 'lively' to distinguish a living body not from a dead one but from an inanimate object, in a kind of reverse iconoclasm. For instance, after Lavinia is mutilated she is described as a lively body, even though she has no hands or tongue. She is said to look like a lopped tree, but she is still a living human body. And in *The Winter's Tale*, Paulina observes of Hermione's statue, that it is 'life as lively mocked as ever'.

It is curious that 'lively' seems to carry an almost universally happy association – except in anti-theatrical writing. In Stephen Gosson, for instance, we hear first that we ought to trust the 'the word of God, for it is lively'. But then we are told that poetry and plays contain such 'Metaphors, Allegories and action so smooth so lively, so wanton, that the poison creeping on secretly without grief chokes us at last, and hurleth us down'.¹⁶ And for Rainolds, actors offer such a 'lively' representation of 'lewd' and 'bad persons' that they themselves become bad, if they were not already.¹⁷ It is perhaps not surprising then that 'lively' and 'quick' were the terms often deployed in late-medieval writing – both the writing of affective piety and in the emerging fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writing of anti-theatricalists. In both forums, idols were perceived as objects whose 'quickness' or liveliness were being negated, while icons were works 'quick' with divine reality.¹⁸ Where once biblical drama was defended on the grounds that it was a lively or 'living' form of biblical exegesis, this very liveliness (the actor's body, the extra-biblical narrative events) quickly became suspicious to iconoclasts.¹⁹

All of the above suggests that for early modern reformers, God's word alone could be 'lively' or enlivening, while the capacity for poets and

¹⁶ Stephen Gosson, *Plays Confuted* (London, 1582), unnumbered pages.

¹⁷ John Rainolds, *The Prophecy of Obadiah* (London, 1584), unnumbered pages.

¹⁸ Fradenburg, 'Making, Mourning, and the Love of Idols', in Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson and Nicolette Zeeman (eds.), *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

¹⁹ Dimmick et al., *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, 26; Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 77.

players to animate reality with a lively poetry was increasingly seen as dangerous. This position is a direct reform, developed and strengthened over the previous century, of medieval affective piety with its desire to see the material representations of Christ – blood, tears, flesh – animated or enlivened by the faith of the onlooker.²⁰ Certainly, reformers would attribute nature a certain liveliness, as long as it wasn't used for devotional purposes. If we return to the ballad of the Wanton Widow and her Wooden Simon we see that it is, perhaps, sexual delight that 'transforms' Simon from a tree into living flesh, just as in the medieval Jesse tree images it is the Incarnation that enlivens all human passion and all of the trees and plants, ensuring that creation as a whole – be it human or botanical – is lively with divine reality. It is this enlivening of matter that reformers – with the exception of Newton, translator of Lemnius' biblical herbal – were almost uniformly worried about. For them, liveliness must necessarily be confined to purely spiritual experience. Crucially, I think that it is this reformist mistrust of the material world that both Shakespeare and the ballad tradition were resisting.

Trees as Idols in the Theatre

Peter Harrison's work on the emergence of natural philosophy and biblical literalism as the two 'reformed' intellectual projects of early modernity explores the ways in which these new literate modes of interpretation were co-informing and mutually instrumental, however unwittingly, in emptying the incarnate world of its divine signification. In line with Beckwith's description of the incarnate world as a 'text' to be interpreted and scrutinised for signs of its author, Harrison narrates the long history of this developing perception of the created world from early writers in the Hexameron tradition – Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Hugh St Victor – to seventeenth-century reformists. Harrison notes that all of the elements of the visible world 'are "figures", which have been invested with divinely instituted significance'.²¹

²⁰ The medieval concern with matter that is 'lively' with divine potential has been well documented. See Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Power of Objects', in *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (Zone Books, 2015), 125–75; William F. Hodapp, 'Richard Rolle's Passion Meditations in the Context of His English Epistles: Imitatio Christi and the Three Degrees of Love', *Mystics Quarterly* 20 (1994), 96–104; Beata Fricke, 'A Liquid History: Blood and Animation in Late Medieval Art', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 63 (2013), 53–69.

²¹ Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, 3.

The creatures, then, are natural signs. It is this hieroglyphic conception of nature which undergirded the medieval belief that there were two books – the book of nature and the book of scripture. The interpretation of the two books, moreover, took place as part of an integrated hermeneutical practice, premised on the principle that the meaning of the words of scripture could not be fully known until the meanings of the objects to which the words referred were also known. Linking the words of scripture with the objects of nature was the universal medieval practice of allegorical interpretation. Allegory was not, as we sometimes tend to think, a strategy for reading multiple meanings into the words of texts, but was rather a process through which the reader was drawn away from naked words to the infinitely more eloquent things of nature to which those words referred.²²

The Augustinian and Thomistic development of a four-fold interpretive model (literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical) was developed in order to fruitfully identify divine Revelation within those elements of scripture (and nature) that, when read literally, appeared nonsensical. Of relevance to this study is the fact that while this interpretative system was developed by theological heavyweights, it was in practice a view of the world from which the illiterate populace was not excluded.²³ But as the seventeenth century approached, a greater divide opened up between the literate and illiterate – through which the literate were increasingly drowned out of a public forum dominated by print.

However, the ballad tradition and Shakespeare's theatre point to some of the ways that illiterates were active in the early modern cultural and theological developments, rather than mere passive recipients of a changing world view. The texts examined here suggest that illiterates may have been resistant to learned reforms. Indeed, through the popular forums of singing and playing, illiterates might have participated in debates in ways that showed they were neither simply receiving nor actively resisting change but instead engaging closely with, and remaining uncertain about, the most pertinent questions of their generation. The early modern theatre's role in controversy is widely recognised. 'The attacks upon the beginnings of the public theater and its fate in 1642 make amply clear that the stage was not viewed solely as a neutral cultural institution, purely secular and aesthetic. To an influential part of the intellectual elite it was an antagonist of and

²² Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, 3.

²³ I am here following the broad consensus of scholars from Eamon Duffy to Keith Thomas, and the widespread visual interpretive schema available to lay people before the ascendancy of official iconoclasm. Alexandra Walsham might challenge this view: Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and the Disenchantment of the World Reassessed', *Historical Journal* 51 (2008), 497–528.

competitor with the progressive religious culture' of reform.²⁴ That progressive, elite culture helped to shape the conditions of the professional early modern playing houses through its role in the suppression of biblical drama. It then became highly attuned to perceived iconoclasm emerging in the work of Shakespeare and his peers.

The popular mediums of ballad and play inverted this dynamic, narrating instead the commoners' view of the elite. Watson's work on *As You Like It* argues forcefully that this comedy was satirically attuned to the idolatry of its elite characters. However, *Richard II* is not concerned in the same way with nature as an Edenic or lost domain whose objects are inscribed by humans with a divine meaning from which they are forever separate. Certainly, the elite characters interpret their England as an Eden from which they have been ejected, and their factious infighting exposes their own acts of interpretation as partial and incomplete. Divine right theory cannot hold in the face of successive depositions. The Gardener, however, offers an interpretative framework for his garden that is proven by the events of the play to be correct. Unlike the common characters in *As You Like It*, the Gardener participates in an interpretative system that the elite characters assume is theirs alone. His allegorical reading of trees and plants is political in its analysis, but it nonetheless deploys the interpretative methods of any exegete. *Richard II* stages the very real dynamics of a world whose signs are being emptied of their divine signification – at least where the elite class is concerned. While the 'rude' and 'mean' characters are shown instead to hold the interpretative faculties through which the divine signification of the world might be restored, or through which it might never have fallen. King Richard sees himself as the subject of an iconoclast undoing; the gardener restores the world of trees and plants to that level of legitimate iconography.

The theatre itself was uniquely able to explore late-sixteenth-century concerns over the desacralisation of nature. Second only to liturgy, the theatre was the most prominent space in which early modern people from every social group came together to experience an embodied performance that had, since the reform of biblical drama, been emptied of its sacramental reality. We know from anti-theatrical writing that the theatre continued to be associated with idolatrous practices, even after it had ceased to depict any explicit biblical or sacramental material. 'Not content simply to insist on the immorality of the stage, the anti-theatricalists use the term idolatry to suggest that theatre has something of the status of false

²⁴ O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye*, 63.

religion'.²⁵ For this reason, we must take account of how nature's forms are treated onstage and how this treatment can be understood as a participation in those doctrinal controversies whose impact on the lives of the common populace, outside the theatre, would most certainly have ensured they were raised as pertinent questions inside the theatre. 'Drama became the most culturally potent artistic medium in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods; no other art, even those with greater prestige, could compete with it as the medium through which values were tested and inscribed'.²⁶ In Shakespeare's lifetime, the theatre occupied a unique position as a space in which ideas held by both literates and illiterates were explored. Shakespeare's plants (like those in ballads) offered playgoers a chance to re-enter, as one corporate body, a world that was disappearing under the pressure of reform. After all, the sacramental logic of the medieval cycle drama, out of which Shakespeare's theatre emerged, did not depend upon a naïve belief in the efficacy of devotional images. Instead, it animated 'the intersubjective dimensions of theatre' to show that 'the presence of Christ and his absence are utterly bound up with our presence to each other'.²⁷ If Elizabethan men and women were becoming steadily alienated from the mystical reality of the created world, they could perhaps still find that divine reality – even if only partially, satirically or questioningly – in the corporate experience of Shakespeare's theatre and the liveliness of his divine plants.

The Political Garden, Almanacs and the Jesse Tree in *Richard II*

Richard II's Duchess implores Gaunt to avenge her husband by reminding him that he is one of the 'sacred' branches of Edward's family tree. But the tree she describes is hung with vials of sacred blood. If Gaunt remains passive in the face of Richard's treachery, she argues, then the sacred vials of blood will all be smashed as the branches of his family tree fall to the ground in ruin. The Duchess' imaginary tree is a highly vivid attempt to animate Gaunt's dynastic and national pride. It might appear novel in its imagery (glass vials of blood hanging from tree branches), but in many ways the tree she evokes is simply the Jesse Tree, often depicted as a tree or vine from whose limbs a human body is suspended. Like any family tree,

²⁵ O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye*, 33. ²⁶ O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye*, 18.

²⁷ Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago University Press, 2001), 101.

the Jesse Tree is a botanical motif made up of shared blood lines. *Richard II* is a play in which trees bleed, in which bodies bleed into the dirt and in which the dirt brings forth sacred life. It is a play dense with images of the English soil manured, watered and planted, but also touched, kissed, mourned and praised. Through their actions and their figurative language, the play's characters at once work and cherish the land because they view it as both a garden and as a body that gives birth, nurses, weeps, bleeds, is bled, drinks and swallows her dead in fleshy graves. No other play by Shakespeare is so interested in embedding these two figurative systems within each other to the extent that they become the one sign system: earth as mother, blood and tears as rain and water, soil as skin. The interconnectedness of these sign systems is most pronounced at those moments when fortune's wheel is turning: the tears of a weeping queen water the rue that grows up in testimony to her grief and, in an act of cruentation, the earth itself is said to bleed afresh for the murdered Gloucester.

Amy Tigner has recently charted the early modern interest in the garden as a figure for the sexualised female body: a trope with classical and biblical precedents.²⁸ But the insistence with which *Richard II* views the earth (within its seasonal and horticultural cycles of growth, change and decay) as a fleshy body governed by the humoral, biological and seasonal movements of blood, tears, digestion and spirit needs to be understood as part of the play's broader concern with the human desire to regulate and control the turbulence of nature. This chapter situates *Richard II*'s horticultural and therapeutic language within the immensely popular practice of almanac reading: the one early modern cultural practice that drew on the human desire to control both body and earth through the same seasonal and astrological mechanisms. Wendy Wall's 1996 study of Gervase Markham's husbandry manuals as crucial forms of early modern nationalism argued that the Englishing of the landscape was enacted as much through the high georgic of writers such as Edmund Spenser as through 'low' forms of household reading such as Markham's manuals. England's emerging national identity was in this way a cherishing of the land enabled as much by working the earth as by reading about garden work.²⁹ The almanac, however, was a text that never aspired to the heights of the georgics and yet it was read by members of all social strata.

²⁸ Tigner, *Literature and the Renaissance Garden*.

²⁹ Wendy Wall, 'Renaissance National Husbandry: Gervase Markham and the Publication of England', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (1996), 767–85.

The almanac was always a text whose existence depended on its relationship to the natural world: readers did not consult almanacs for pleasure but for practical information, primarily about garden and body management. In doing so, however, almanac readers were also participating in a specific form of nationalism, which understood the English soil and English bodies as sites in which history and prediction converged. The content and organisation of almanacs invited readers to encounter the vast expanses of the past and the future through the mundane and material reality of their own short lives. By reading *Richard II's* interest in soil as part of the play's replication of almanac practices, I suggest a new model for thinking about the generic nature of Shakespeare's history plays: one in which the soil itself is the material 'ground' for those historical and political processes whose relentlessly cyclical nature so confounds *Richard II's* characters. The material cycle through which the mournful tears of Richard's Queen are transformed into a rue is not simply a metaphor for the political cycle of Kings over which she weeps but a recognition (by the Gardener and the world view he represents) that all human life, however noble or obscure, and all political manoeuvring, comes from and will return to the earth. In this sense, the soil is history: it receives the blood and bones of all men. But the soil is also political: out of the manure of history, it nurtures future kings, both righteous and corrupt, with the seemingly indiscriminate care of a mother.

Many of *Richard II's* characters express an awareness of – and usually a deep emotional investment in – the link (both metaphoric and actual) between the soil and the body. Having interrupted the lists at Coventry, Richard warns against civil war, describing it as 'civil wounds ploughed up with neighbour's sword' (1.3.125–8) and on receiving his punishment, Bolingbroke equates the separation of a banished man's body from his land with the separation of the soul from the body (1.3.194–6). He goes on: 'then England's ground, farewell! Sweet soil, adieu, / My mother and my nurse that bears me yet' (305–6). The sentiments expressed by Richard and Bolingbroke in this pivotal moment use the body/garden figure as a means of articulating unnatural actions: civil war is a diabolical 'farming' of both the soil and the skin of one's neighbour; the separation of an Englishman from his land is both a murder (a division of soul from body) and a separation of child and mother. By using the body/garden figure to depict the unnatural, Richard and Bolingbroke signal their view of natural order. In his study of the play's investment in local debates over land enclosure, James R. Siemon has outlined *Richard II's* contested vision of the best and most natural relationship between Englishmen, the English

soil and God.³⁰ Siemon traces in the language of individual characters a number of different local arguments, but by following the full range of the play's many uses of the body/garden figure across all the characters who articulate it, a more general and idealised picture of natural order emerges: one that expresses a conservative and very personal desire for certainty and continuity. That order, so threatened by the events of the play, ensures a benign God in heaven, a nurturing maternal ground, and a stable, hierarchised social order (extending from anointed king down to assistant gardener) that exists without unrest or rebellion.

This idealised vision of England is held as much by the play's aristocratic characters as it is by the Gardener. As I hope to show, it is this conservative desire for hierarchised order that underpins the almanac-reading practices that the play's characters replicate in their attempts to control the future. Believing in a divine ordering of the created world, *Richard II's* characters seek to minimise the chaos around them and to avoid their own destruction. This desire is, however, ultimately exposed as naïve and tragic but also as very human and thus in itself a 'natural' instinct: one right and proper to the human condition, however flawed it may be. In this way, my reading locates in the play an early modern attitude to the natural world that differs from that which Robert N. Watson identifies as an infatuation 'with hopes of recovering some original and authentic reality', and a nostalgia for 'unmediated contact with the world of nature'.³¹ *Richard II's* characters do not yearn for a lost Eden: they believe that even the fallen world ought to adhere to the civilised order of primogeniture, divine right monarchy and a nurturing ground. Their crisis emerges when they are confronted with the reality that nature (like politics) is seasonal, as destructive as it is beneficent, and will not conform to social hierarchies. I find in *Richard II's* almanac vision a tragic note that depicts such struggles against nature's chaos with tenderness; it therefore differs again from Simon Estok's 'ecophobia'.³² *Richard II's* characters do not express fear or contempt for the earth as such. Rather, their idealisation of and disappointment in nature express a belief that England's soil ought to care for their particular cause, that it belongs to them and a simultaneous anxiety that in fact nature controls man. This anxiety is most evident through the play's

³⁰ James R. Siemon, 'Landlord Not King: Agrarian Change and Interarticulation', in Richard Burt and John Michael Archer (eds.), *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1994), 17–33.

³¹ Watson, *Back to Nature*, 77. ³² Simon C. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* (Palgrave, 2011).

interest in the body/garden figure: while a garden can to a large extent be tamed, a female body can never be fully controlled.

The idealised form of social order expressed by the play's characters suits the motif of the political world as garden. Peter Ure has charted the didactic function of the motif in classical treatise, medieval preaching and in early modern guides to princes:³³ texts that are shaped by the identification of specific 'weeds' in the contemporary world and the comparison of the rot they have engendered with that ideal or heavenly garden to which the contemporary world ought to aspire. In describing the political world as a fallen garden, the literary and polemical tradition of this motif also describes it as a body: a conjunction of images that draws on the long Christian history (extending back to the "Song of Songs") of depicting the Church as both mother/lover and Edenic garden. Shakespeare brings to the bodily element of the motif a more thoroughly early modern awareness of the anti-feminist anxieties that surrounded any attribution of universal power to a figurative body gendered female. As Richard's 'ploughing with neighbour's swords' image demonstrates, the reversion of the play's idealised natural order is often expressed with reference to the interruption of the soil's fleshly (female) capacities; such reversion not only brings weeds to the 'garden' but degeneracy to the female 'body'. Again arguing against civil war, Richard worries that 'our kingdom's earth should not be soiled / With that dear blood which it hath fostered' (1.3.125–6). Richard's play on 'soil' as both literal soil and soiling recognises that war is a kind of infanticide that sullies the ground (as idealised mother) by making her absorb the blood of her children. However, a third definition of soiling as feeding with fresh or raw food complicates Richard's idealisation. Lear uses this definition of soil in his mad musing on lechery: he refers to the 'soiled horse', which, fed with fresh grass, is skittish and wanton (4.6.120). In her perfect state, Richard's England is an unsullied maternal body, but once soiled her fall is catastrophic: taken together, the images of diabolical femininity in Richard's play on 'soil' constitute a formidable personification of the ground transformed by civil war into a wanton, cannibal infanticide devouring the blood of her children.

Crucially, where Bolingbroke uses a number of maternal descriptions for the ground in his mournful departure (England as 'mother', 'nurse' and continued 'bear[er]'), Richard instead refers to the soiled earth as a 'fostere [r]' of men. This oblique reference to the earth's maternity is repeated by others in the play and reveals their uncertainty about the implications of figuring the ground as a female body. In his 'sceptred isle' speech, Gaunt

³³ Peter Ure (ed.), *King Richard II* (Arden, 1956), li–lvii.

describes England in what he sees as her proper state: 'a fortress built by Nature for herself, 'a precious stone set in the silver sea' and a 'nurse' and 'teeming womb of royal kings'. But under Richard's rule, England is 'now leased out . . . like a tenement or pelted farm' (2.1.41–60). By placing the teeming womb of royal kings on the same spectrum as a paltry, rented plot of farmland, Gaunt is describing England as at once feminine, fertile and as soil. In her most 'natural' state, England's fertile soil produces kings and great men, feeds and nurtures them, but is also owned by them since in her debased state she is instead leased for money and worked by less-noble hands. In this way, Gaunt's use of the garden/body figure relies on an implicit comparison between the soil as dignified mother or as prostitute. But the gendering and sexualising of this comparison ought to draw our attention to Gaunt's greater anxieties about possession. While the tenant farm/prostitute figure aptly articulates his fear that the land is debased through possession by ignoble men, the mother/gentle landowner comparison betrays his uncertainty over whether England is possessed by those noblemen who know best how to maintain her dignity or whether all men are in fact the possession of England's 'teeming womb'. Gaunt never uses the word 'mother': his 'teeming womb of royal kings' simply follows a description of England as a 'nurse'. His figurative language only goes as far as personifying the maternal through a description of woman as a hired labourer, carer and feeder of infants before shifting to a description of the maternal earth or 'plot' as the disembodied organ that produces royal infants. Occluding the personified mother to whom both of these descriptions logically point, Gaunt's choice of language suggests his inability to recognise the earth as the one fleshly body that most possesses, by forever repossessing, the children it produces.

Such anxiety about the earth as a powerful, and powerfully destructive, entity that cannot be fully possessed by man also informs Richard's speech on his return to England from Ireland. One of the play's most sentimentalised versions of the earth/body figure, this speech sees Richard caressing the ground. Importantly, Richard figures the earth as a child and himself as the long-absent 'mother'. 'So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth, / And do thee favours with my royal hands' (3.2.8–11). Even before Salisbury's entrance, however, Richard's confident sense of possession over the earth wavers and he instead petitions it to 'feed' only him:

Feed not they sovereign's foe, my gentle earth . . .
Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies;
And when they from thy bosom pluck a flower,
Guard it I pray thee with a lurking adder.

(3.2.12–20)

Richard's appeal to the ground to assist his cause and to damage that of his enemies is an acknowledgement of the earth's capacity to decide the fate of men. It is an appeal built from the language of garden management: by describing the violence of an untended garden, Richard fantasises that he can himself so 'garden' the earth as to weed out his enemies. With the arrival of Scroop, this fantasy gives way to despair and Richard instead sees his own body as the dust it will become, the 'small model of the barren earth / Which serves as paste and cover to our bones' (3.2.153–4). Conceptualising the English earth as both body and garden, Richard begins the scene by casting himself in the role of confident parent, before anxiously descending to the position of one who is instead fed by the soil and eventually to the defeated acknowledgement that he is merely that dust to which his death will return him. While he may fantasise that he is the gardener, Richard is in fact little more than an observer of the earth's patterns: an observer who acknowledges his vulnerability to the inevitable decay brought about by nature's cycles of creation and destruction. Everywhere in *Richard II*, the body/earth figure describes man's desire to control the forces of nature while acknowledging that ultimately nature controls man.

The play's interest in men's desire to control their fate through the language of both garden management and body management finds particular expression in what Andrew Gurr calls the 'submerged metaphor . . . of the Plantagenet name and the Tree of Jesse'.³⁴ Most vivid in the Duchess's 'seven vials' speech, which depicts the Gloucester brothers as both 'seven fair branches springing from one root' and 'seven vials of . . . sacred blood' (1.2.12–13), this metaphor can also be seen working more broadly in *Richard II*'s play on 'Plantagenet' and 'plants'. Men are frequently described as plants in order to demonstrate their vulnerability to others: York warns Aumerle to 'bear you well in this new spring of time / Lest you be cropped before you come to prime' (5.2.50) and, once deposed, Richard warns Northumberland that Bolingbroke shall think that 'thou, which knowst the way / To plant unrightful kings, wilt know again . . . another way / To pluck him headlong from the usurped throne' (5.1.62–5). In his final speech, Bolingbroke implicitly acknowledges the truth of Richard's warning by describing himself as a plant nurtured on blood: 'my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow' (5.6.45–6). Bolingbroke's reference to the horticultural importance

³⁴ Andrew Gurr (ed.), *King Richard II* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 153, n. 63.

of blood draws directly on the image first described in the Duchess's 'sacred tree' speech, but it also extends the play's broader thinking on the earth as both body and garden. Bolingbroke's 'blood' is both the manure that enables his flourishing as a plant in the political garden of England and the actual blood that locates him as a part of the England-as-bodily-system, in which the movement of fluids causes change and upheaval.

In none of these references does the speaker ascribe the role of gardener or physician to themselves; the gardeners or movers-of-fluid are instead cast as powerful and dangerous opponents. Carlisle makes the most explicit claim for the power of figurative gardeners when he argues that God is himself the gardener by whom Richard has been 'planted many years' and to depose him will result only in the 'blood of English' 'manur[ing] the ground' (4.1.127–38). However, such cautious ascription of horticultural and therapeutic power is not usually observed by Richard or his Queen, whose willingness to describe themselves as managing England's body/earth either registers their impending failure to do so or functions as a lament for anticipated pain or loss already suffered. In the play's opening scene, Richard seeks to make peace between Mowbray and Bolingbroke by casting himself as the physician who will 'purge' the combatants' cholera. Unable to do so, he instead assures his court that at Coventry, their 'swords and lances' shall 'arbitrate' 'the swelling difference' of 'their settled hate' (1.1.153–4; 1.1.199–201). At the lists, however, Richard is still unable to manage the humours of his gentry and his banishment of Bolingbroke conversely enacts the course of events by which Richard will himself be purged from the court. The Queen claims to water 'with true love's tears' her 'fair rose', the 'wither[ing]' king (5.1.6–11). Equally despondent, Richard comforts the weeping Aumerle: 'we'll make foul weather with despised tears: / Our sighs and they shall lodge the summer corn / And make a dearth in this revolting land' (3.3.161–163). In these laments, both Richard and the Queen align their own bodies with the body of nature, their tears with the rain that fosters plants in the English ground. But in both instances, the human action (weeping) is muted and ineffectual and offered merely as a griever's alternative to that course of action which nature has already determined.

Richard's critics describe him as having failed to manage England as both garden and body (he has allowed the ground to 'choke' with 'weeds' and 'swarm' with 'caterpillars' [3.4.44–46]), and Bolingbroke's uprising is diagnosed as 'the sick hour that [Richard's] surfeit made' (2.2.78). But Richard does not blame his deposition on his own failure to properly

manage England's soil. In his and the Queen's descriptions of their tears, the monarchs identify themselves bodily with the English earth while at the same time accusing it of having 'rebelled' or 'revolted' from the cause they deem right: the fostering and protection of kingship. To describe nature as rebellious assumes that it was once under royal control: an assumption that can only be read as tragic irony. This is how *Richard II* presents such thwarted human desire for control over the created world. Richard's philosophical grappling with the impossibility of separating his fleshly self from his divinely instituted sovereignty is an attempt to understand how something sacramental can be undone by men. These are reasonable enough questions for a king facing deposition. Less reasonable is the assumption that Richard's status as anointed sovereign extends to him the same control over the created world as God himself enjoys. Just as Gaunt's imprecise descriptions of the earth's maternity revealed his anxious desire to possess the ground and not to be possessed by it, so the monarchs' despondent attempts to replicate the vast powers of the created universe through their own minute biological mechanisms speaks of their utter powerlessness.

Again, it is the one real gardener in the play who seems most immune to nature's upheavals, or who can, at least, most effectively manage the soil. Where the Plantagenets figure themselves as plants vulnerable to the violent cycles of the political world, the Gardener figures his plants as political men: his garden is a 'government', his apricots are unruly children; his sprays are too fast-growing and must be cut by his 'executioner' (3.4.29–34). Unlike Richard, but perhaps like Bolingbroke, the Gardener's skill is his ability to read and interpret a power much greater than his own. He anticipates nature's cyclical movements and acts in sympathy with them: he cuts back wherever there is too much growth and supports where there is 'oppression' (3.4.31).

Viewed through the lens of early modern writing about garden and physiological management,³⁵ the earth and the body are two systems with similar characteristics: both are capable of providing health, life and sustenance, and both are sure to turn towards illness and death. Both follow seasonal and cyclical patterns of growth and decay that can to a

³⁵ For recent work on these fields, see Bushnell, *Green Desire*; Knight, *Of Books and Botany*; Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (California University Press, 2002); Margaret Pelling, *Medical Conflicts in Early Modern London* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1993); Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Mary Ann Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

certain extent be anticipated but are ultimately governed by powers beyond human knowledge. Through its use of the body/earth figure, *Richard II* demonstrates how crucial it is to properly manage both systems. The play also makes clear that those who do rise to power are the men who have best anticipated the signs before them: those who have, unlike Richard, seen that it is indeed the 'month to bleed' and the time to 'lop' and 'bind' (1.1.156, 3.4.64, 3.4.29).

***Richard II's* Replication of Almanac Reading**

I have been describing *Richard II's* awareness of the earth's power to determine events in the lives of men, but clearly these appeals to nature are also appeals to fate and God. Why is this play so interested in addressing the divine through the turbulent behaviour of its created world? One answer is that the body/earth figure is a way of synthesising the play's nationalism (the ground so cherished and feared is England) with its particularly tragic vision of man's desire to control those forces that control him (nature is fickle and unmerciful unlike the Christian God). But there is another explanation for the play's interest in the languages of garden and body management that I want to explore: almanacs. When Richard calls for peace between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, he asserts that his 'doctors' have determined the timeliness of his action. Those doctors are the astrological authorities whose prognostications filled the pages of early modern almanacs. By far the most frequently printed popular texts throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, almanacs were small, cheap, annual volumes containing crucial information for the year to come. Their short life span ensured their low survival rate: at the end of the year, most almanacs were recycled as toilet paper, seals on pickling jars, wallpaper or were simply burnt or discarded. Their information was of local relevance (market days, weather forecasts, maps) and national relevance (news, feast days, the monthly calendar). It was from the astrological arrangements of the year's calendar that almanacs provided their readers with medical and agricultural guidance: when to plant, prune, feed and water crops and plants, and when to bleed, lance, sweat, fast, rest and exercise the body. This advice was most thoroughly detailed in the section for the four 'quarters' or seasons of the year, which provided details on how each coming season would affect crop patterns, bodily humours; which sicknesses would most prevail; and what quality the air will have.

Almanacs often provided the astrological information from which guidance on garden and body management assumed its authority.

However, one of the crucial characteristics of an almanac's function that I think demands attention (especially in relation to *Richard II*) is that they were not handbooks for understanding the movements of the planets as such but, rather, guides on when to do those activities that formed the basis of early modern life in the best and most timely fashion. Put another way: while almanacs were underpinned by astrological knowledge, almanac users did not have their eyes fixed on the stars but, rather, on the ground and their bodies. This is one of the key reasons I read *Richard II* as a play that replicates the experience of reading and applying almanacs: the play's characters do not look to the heavens for answers but instead seek to control the turbulence of their bodies and their gardens.

Elizabeth's reign saw the standardisation of the almanac form and in the 1590s, when *Richard II* was written and performed, the popularity of almanacs began to climb to the heights they would enjoy in the following century. In this decade, almanac reading also became increasingly contested. The 1590s produced a famous Puritan detractor, William Perkins, who put forward those arguments against the practice that would last well into the following century: that almanacs drew men away from God by offering knowledge from a diabolical source; that the practice caused panic; and that almanac compilers were profiteering frauds. The decade also saw the birth of the mock almanac, a genre that enjoyed only a short life and in no way diminished the appeal of the genre it satirised. The 1590s was a decade marked by poor harvests and plague, and controversial prophesies of doom began to emerge from astrologers and almanac compilers (such as Abel Jeffes's 1595, *A Most Strange and Wonderfull Prophecie upon This Troublesome World*).

Literary criticism is beginning to register the importance of almanac reading on the poetry and drama of the period.³⁶ So far, however, this work has dealt only with those texts that overtly narrate their debt to almanacs.³⁷ No almanac is ever brought on stage in *Richard II*, nor is there an almanac on stage in *King Lear* – the other Shakespeare play that is so

³⁶ Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Bernard Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press* (Cornell University Press, 1979) and Louis Hill Curth, *English Almanacs, Astrology and Popular Medicine: 1550–1700* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

³⁷ Abigail Shinn, "Extraordinary Discourses of Unnecessary Matter": Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* and the Almanac Tradition', in Matthew Dimmock and Andrew Hadfield (eds.), *Literature and Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2009), 137–50; Meredith Holly Hand, 'More Lies than True Tales': Scepticism in Middleton's Mock-Almanacs', in Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to Thomas Middleton* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 312–29.

intensely concerned with the thwarted human desire to understand the movements of the natural and cosmological worlds. When Shakespeare does bring almanacs onstage, or references them explicitly, it is always for satirical effect (Bottom must consult one before choosing the night for his performance; Falstaff and Prince Hal call on one for bawdy purpose; and Enobarbus uses one to deride Cleopatra's mutability). Early modern almanac readers were popularly condemned as common and gullible. Yet in reality almanacs were read by members of every social class: from royalty, gentry, priests and physicians to yeomen, artisans and the tenant farmer so despised by Gaunt.³⁸ The popular image of the gullible almanac reader explains the comedic function of the almanacs brought onto the Shakespearean stage, yet I think it also helps explain why two of Shakespeare's great tragic narratives do not make explicit reference to an actual almanac. Instead, *Richard II* builds its tragic vision of man's desire to understand and control the natural world through the everyday experience of reading and applying the particular style of wisdom offered by almanacs: an exacting attention to the details of garden and body management, a desire to perform important acts in the most timely fashion and a sense – a flawed and tragic but ultimately very human sense – that knowing the cycles of the earth and heavens might help one to control their vicissitudes.

Also of interest to *Richard II* is the fact that almanacs provided the common reader with their primary historical education. These small volumes did not only predict the future, they also narrated the past, and (by narrating only those key events that joined England's history with the biblical and classical past) they did so with a view to encouraging precisely the isolationist nationalism that so characterises *Richard II*. The key (and sometimes only) events in the 'histories of the world' section of Elizabethan almanacs were the birth of Christ, the Norman Conquest, Henry's seizure of Boulogne from the French, Elizabeth's coronation and the Spanish Armada. John Dade, one of the most prominent almanac compilers from the 1590s, provided a history of the world that was so truncated that it is difficult to interpret it as historical information at all; rather, his histories appear to operate as frames to augment and situate the cyclical patterns within the single year treated by the almanac. Dade's historical events feature on the same page as his overview of the year's prognostications for when to shear sheep, sell crops and let blood. Rather than record the dates of historical events, Dade provides the number of years that have passed between the event and the year with which the

³⁸ Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press*, 60.

almanac is concerned. In 1602, his list included the creation of the world (5,564 years before 1602), the conquest of England (586) and Elizabeth's coronation (44).

In the years surrounding the performance of *Richard II*, Dade's almanacs, like those of many other compilers, were offering their many readers a vision of time that situated the daily, weekly and monthly tasks of body and garden management within the entire spectrum of Christian history – with emphasis weighed decidedly on the present. There is in the cyclical nature of both the historical and the annual information provided by almanacs something akin to the vision of *Richard II*, which thinks through concerns of great historical importance (royal succession, changing theories of divine kingship, civil war) as though they were in essence simply the mundane work to which every early modern man and woman attended. Richard's awareness that 'the death of kings' is a long history of murder (3.2.156) speaks to the play's awareness that history's cycles come around with the frequency of bodily cycles and the turning of the seasons. Richard's keen sense of tragic self-defeat knows only too well that kingship, like the maintenance of the garden and the body, must be attended to with passion and rigour despite the fact that in due course his sovereignty will, like his body, return to the soil and its 'graves, worms and epitaphs' (3.2.145).

The cyclical nature of time envisaged by almanacs can also be seen in their investment in the political future: almanacs contained prophecies of future doom. In 1595, an almanac translated from the Italian promised divine punishment for Protestant England, claiming that in March 'the main Seas shall be so troubled with mighty tempests and winds, that they shall swell above their banks, and overflow an Island where the double crosse hath government, only because the sins of the Prince is so heinous before the Majesty of God'.³⁹ Political speculation of this kind was a major component of English almanacs in the first half of the sixteenth century (and continued to be on the continent well into the seventeenth century), but it came under strict control in Elizabethan England. The result was a genre of political speculation that was extremely vague. Jeffery Neve, for instance, warned that the 1605 lunar eclipse would bring to the body 'corruptions of the blood' and 'pain about the midriff, but that it would also bring 'among the baser sort of people' 'much mischief', 'untimely births, discord and dissension about patrimonies and the inheritance of

³⁹ John Cypriano, *A most strange and wonderfull prophesie vpon this troublesome world calculated by the famous doctor in astrologie, Maister Iohn Cypriano* (London, 1595).

dead men's goods'. To the better sort, the eclipse would bring 'sorrow, sadness, lamentation, hatred, imprisonment, deceivers, backbiters' and 'envious persons'.⁴⁰ Restricted by Elizabethan sanctions on prediction, almanacs from the turn of the century registered their uncertainty about the future in other ways: they offered *memento mori*, such as Philip Ranger's 'the grass that grows tomorrow is hay / And man that's now as soon is clay'.⁴¹ And (before the civil wars complicated such easy nationalism or affection for monarchs) almanacs condemned traitors and called for prayers on behalf of the sovereign.

There is something in the language of *Richard II* that recalls these vague, predictive claims and moral platitudes, such as York's distressed reaction to Bolingbroke's rebellion and his own inability to take control of the situation: 'by bad courses may be understood / that their events can never fall out good' (2.1.212). Other characters, however, indulge in exactly the political prophesying outlawed under Elizabeth. The Welsh Captain refuses to fight on Richard's behalf because 'the bay trees in [his] country are all withered / And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven. / The pale faced moon looks bloody on the earth'. 'These signs' he determines, 'forerun the death or fall of kings'. Even Salisbury's response to the Welsh retreat is in the same vein, casting Richard's fall as a series of natural signs: 'Ah, Richard! With the eye of heavy mind / I see thy glory like a shooting star / Fall to the base earth from the firmament / Thy sun sets weeping in the lowly west' (2.4.7–24). And Carlisle's warnings about English blood manuring the ground are formed as a political prediction: 'if you crown him let me prophesy: / The blood of English shall manure the ground / And future ages groan for this foul act' (4.1.136).

It is important that these predictive claims are often in rhyming couplets, especially when they are platitudes like York's scene-concluding remarks about bad courses. *Richard II*'s extensive verse form is unique to the Shakespearean canon and is also perhaps something that can be traced to the play's interest in replicating the experience of using almanacs. Critics since Coleridge have offered a range of possible explanations for *Richard II*'s verse form and the play's large portion of perfect rhymes (a quarter of its total line endings); my own suggestion does not seek to discredit assertions that the play's language has particular functions in terms of characterisation, tone or its debt to medieval *contemptus mundi*

⁴⁰ Jeffery Neve, *A new almanacke and prognostication, with the forraine computation seruing for the yeere of our lord and sauour Jesus Christ M.DC.V* (London, 1605).

⁴¹ Cited in Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press*, 147.

traditions.⁴² Nor do I wish to suggest that the play's verse form is not without variation in style. However, a consideration of *Richard II's* interest in the experience of almanac reading does potentially help explain the frequency of those moments when characters (usually in a state of acute fear or sorrow) not only revert to rhyming couplets but do so to express sentiments whose trite emotional register can seem out of place. One crucial characteristic of early modern almanacs was their extensive use of the verse form.⁴³ Rhyming couplets and closed rhymes were used for medical and agricultural advice, and for pastoralised commentary on the changing of the seasons. Gabriel Frende, who compiled almanacs in the 1590s, said of March 1593: 'Such victuals as March acquireth / As are both light and pure, / Bloodletting somewhat profiteth, / And medicines somewhat cure'.⁴⁴ Platitudinous rhyming couplets were also used for vague political commentary and can perhaps be seen echoed in lines such as Bolingbroke's 'the more fair and crystal is the sky / The uglier seem the clouds that in it fly' (1.1.42), and Gaunt's rhyming reaction to Richard's 'lour': 'things sweet to taste prove in digestion sour' (1.3.236). York's horticultural warning to Aumerle is itself one of these couplets ('bear you well in this new spring of time / Lest you be cropped before you come to prime').

Once again, it is the Gardener who proves the most successful at political commentary. This skill, together with his consummate use of the play's horticultural and humoral knowledge, suggests that the Gardener is the play's most astute almanac reader. He knows the king's fate before the queen does; she has to learn it from him and her response seeks to discredit both his husbandry and his skill in 'divin[ation]': 'why dost thou say king Richard is deposed? / Darest thou, thou little better thing than earth / divine his fall? Say where, when and how / camest thou by this ill tidings?' (3.4.77–80). The Gardener responds by chastising Richard for not observing the same cyclical actions (set out in almanacs) that he himself has observed: 'Oh what a pity it is / That he had not so trimmed and dressed his land / as we this garden!' Unlike Richard, the Gardener 'at time of year' 'wound[s] the bark . . . Lest being overproud in sap and blood / With too much riches it confound itself'. Describing those 'superfluous branches' which 'we lop away, that bearing boughs may live', the Gardener concludes with a couplet on Richard's political doom: 'had

⁴² Forker, *King Richard II*, 55–64.

⁴³ By the seventeenth century, the wretchedness of almanac writers' rhyming verse was widely known, but by contrast, Elizabethan compilers were largely university-educated and their verse, though not considered literature, was nonetheless respectable. Capp, *English Almanacs*, 225–37.

⁴⁴ Gabriel Frende, *A new almanacke and prognostication* (London, 1593).

he done so, himself had borne the crown / Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down' (3.4.55–65). The Queen seeks to discredit the Gardener's knowledge and skill, but the scene demonstrates that the Gardener's good husbandry will outlast her sovereignty. In fact, it will subsume her: the Gardener monumentalises the Queen into his garden plan before she has even lost her crown or her life. 'Here did she fall a tear. Here in this place / I'll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace'. Again concluding with a couplet: 'Rue even for ruth here shortly will be seen / In the remembrance of a weeping queen' (4.1.104–7). The Gardener absorbs the Queen's very body, through the tears she sheds, into the material reality of the garden – that 'soil' that will, through his labour, continue to thrive and live (because it is well managed) where hers will be barren.

In the political world beyond the garden walls, it is perhaps Bolingbroke who most shares the Gardener's ability to read nature's cycles. The meeting at Flint Castle, placed immediately before the garden scene, dramatises the shift in power from Richard to Bolingbroke through precisely the language I have been detailing here. Bolingbroke determines to observe reverence to Richard's 'most royal person' 'provided' that his lands are restored (3.3.38–41). The conditional nature of Bolingbroke's deference recognises that the political tide is turning his way: if Richard will not acquiesce, Bolingbroke will 'use the advantage' of his 'power' and 'lay the summer's dust with showers of blood rained from the wounds of slaughtered Englishmen' (3.3.40–44). Bolingbroke continues to imagine their meeting as though it were a storm: 'methinks king Richard and myself should meet / With no less terror than the elements / Of fire and water when their thundering shock / At meeting tears the cloudy cheek of heaven' (3.3.54–56). In this meeting, Richard will be the fire (the proverbially weaker element that moves upward to the sky), and Bolingbroke will be the 'yielding water' (3.3.58). While he is 'yielding' or deferential to the kingship he covets for himself, Bolingbroke will use his 'strongest . . . hands' (3.3.200) to overcome the man who still clings to the crown: 'the rage [fire] be his', he vows, 'whilst on the earth I rain / My waters; on the earth and not on him' (3.3.57–60). Where Richard and the Queen failed to replicate the powers of the natural world through their own biological mechanisms, Bolingbroke may succeed. His waters, he claims, will feed England's ground, but they will not feed his rival. As his power starts to slip away from him, Richard begins to prophesy: should Bolingbroke reach for the crown 'ten thousand bloody crowns of mother's sons / Shall ill become the flower of England's face / Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace / To scarlet indignation and bedew / Her pasture's grass with

faithful English blood' (3.3.96–100). Where Bolingbroke speaks as though he, like the Gardener, were successfully reading the changing signs in the natural world and participating in them with his very body and 'waters', Richard divines instead the diabolical murder and rape of England that he has feared since the play's opening.

While *Richard II* seems to affirm Bolingbroke's almanac reading, and lament that of Richard and his supporters, Bolingbroke's final observation that he has been watered with Richard's blood could be read as a recognition of the immoral ends to which Bolingbroke directed his almanac reading and his own failure to recognise that he belongs to a world (both natural and political) that is cyclical. In the same way, if Bolingbroke's final rhyming couplet ('my soul is full of woe / That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow') is read as the trite platitudes of a man overcome by the brutal reality of his murderous participation in nature's (and history's) cycles, then Richard's almanac reading has proved correct: he prophesied the earth's 'rebellion' and man's rape of 'fair' England. However, if Bolingbroke's lines are read as cursory and unrepentant lip service to the death of his rival, then we could say that his confident use of almanac reading has, like the Gardener's, triumphed. Crucially, both conclusions register the tragedy in man's desire to interpret and control the created world; even if Bolingbroke only superficially acknowledges that his kingship is merely part of a great cycle, he remains, in our eyes, a victim of nature's turbulence. He too will soon fall.

In *Richard II*, to work the garden/body is to 'monarchise': to invest in the unbroken line of sovereignty as a stabilising structure of government when that line is in reality little more than a series of men violently 'cropped' before they have reached their 'prime' or 'purged' of too much 'blood'. All of the play's main characters use horticultural and therapeutic language to make sense of the political events unfolding around them; their almanac reading can as much explain how the 'caterpillars' and 'weeds' have come to be rampant in Richard's court as it can justify Richard's robbing of Gaunt (the 'ripest fruit' that 'falls first') or stir 'hot' revenge out of 'cold cowardice'. In this way, *Richard II*'s awareness of almanac reading as a way of justifying a range of (often conflicting) politically motivated actions exposes the human desire to control and order nature as ultimately futile since no one person or cause can claim absolute support from the maternal earth or absolute knowledge of its operations. The play's almanac vision neither sanctions Bolingbroke's manoeuvring nor condemns Richard's behaviour. And yet by dramatising Richard's deposition in the language of nature's cycles, the play suggests

that those who can best ‘read’ the forces of nature (those who can see that the new ‘branch’ is stronger than the old, and that it is indeed ‘the month to bleed’) will suffer the least harm.

The post-war critical reception of Shakespeare’s history plays transformed the way we read the political world they depict. Cynical about the nationalism that previous generations enjoyed in Shakespeare’s histories, twentieth-century readers instead began to recognise in the cyclical nature of these plays a bleakly futile view of monarchical power struggles. Bolingbroke’s final rhyming couplets, spoken as he observes the dead body of his predecessor, exemplify the awareness – evident in *Richard II* and in the cycle of history plays as a whole – that

every chapter [of Royal succession] opens and closes at the same point . . . when the new prince . . . assumes the crown he will be just as hated as his predecessor. He has killed his enemies, now he will kill his former allies. And a new pretender appears in the name of violated justice. The wheel has turned full circle. A new chapter opens. A new historical tragedy.⁴⁵

Bolingbroke’s recognition that Richard’s blood, sprinkled on his own body/earth, has made him ‘grow’ in his predecessor’s place situates the history plays’ cyclical vision of political violence within the almanac tradition. In divine right theory, royal successions ought to be moments of grace in which a divinely appointed monarch is clearly identifiable as the successor and peacefully takes the throne. If in reality royal succession is instead violent and uncertain, this is only in keeping with the truth of human frailty and the rhythms of the natural world. It is those rhythms that almanacs sought to navigate and understand by placing the daily, weekly, monthly and annual activities of body and garden management within the vast expanses of Christendom’s historical perspective, its past and future. *Richard II*’s investment in almanac practices is equally evident in its deployment of this historical model to nationalistic ends. England’s history, like its garden and the bodies of those who work the soil, is at the centre of Christian time. The birth of Christ and the reign of Kings are the moments of change that form the background for those more immediate changes – the seasons, the feasts and festivals, the wanings of the moon – that structured the daily lives of Englishmen and women as they read their almanacs and worked the soil around them. By so locating the wider patterns of England’s political heritage in the material vicissitudes of the body and the garden, the almanac potentially offered Shakespeare a model

⁴⁵ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. by Taborski Boleslaw (Methuen, 1967), 6.

on which to build his new dramatic genre. Part tragedy, part consolation, part education, the history plays gave their audiences an experience at once new and very familiar. In the decade of *Richard II*'s composition, bad harvests and plague were devastating early modern England, and almanac printing escalated. With an uncertain royal succession also imminent, Shakespeare's play of deposition replicated the nature-reading, body-regulating, chaos-controlling language of the almanac in order to at once confirm and console the widespread fear that 'the blood of English shall manure the ground'.

***Richard II*'s Popular Practices and Nostalgia**

Almanacs, Ballads, Jesse Trees: these visual and textual forms all belonged to a popular and often illiterate and/or Catholic culture, but *Richard II* places their distinct iconographic and linguistic registers in the mouths of elite characters – the very monarchs who shaped England's political culture throughout the volatile decades preceding the emergence of the House of Tudor. The history plays invited audiences to walk in the corridors of power, but the dramaturgical spaces chosen by Shakespeare's company were in fact often more familiar to audience members: Hal's inns, Richard's garden, battlefields, public streets. Shakespeare's rulers, drawn from the political past, in fact search for meaning – theological, personal, familial – in the shared, common cultural language of the theatre's socially mixed audiences. *Richard II* in particular demonstrates the ways in which the popular theatre could engage closely with the 'elite', literate discourses – court politics, reformed theology – in ways that embed their significance in the shared materials of common culture: trees, songs, garden work, domestic therapeutics.

This particularly Shakespearean habit of thought could be said to extend dramatic material to the widest audience, to make the high available to the low, and the low to the high – thereby offering gentle audience members a view on elite life that had been, through the dynamics of the theatre, translated into a 'folk' register. The prophesying of kings is achieved through the simple rhyming couplets of a common almanac. The mystery of the Incarnation is signified by the image of a tree. The intellectual complexities governing the reformation of signs are translated into bawdy satire in the ballad tradition. These various gestures suggest that in Shakespeare's theatre the materials of the common, illiterate world were emerging as an aesthetic category of interest to middling and gentle citizens. The resulting vision of pre-Tudor court politics is one in which nationalist instincts are demoted beneath personal anxieties and the very

human – very common – desire to control the vicissitudes of a created world from which divine potency – or, at least, any glimpse of the divine right of kings – seems to have vanished. The vision of illiterate botanical knowledge offered by *Richard II* (by the Gardener in particular and the play's almanac language more generally) stands in opposition to claims made by the iconoclast Thomas Jackson that illiterates were vulnerable to idolatry because they could not understand a metaphor. Together, *Richard II* and the ballad tradition suggest not only that illiterates were more than sophisticated enough to wield a metaphor but that literate, even elite, culture was itself enamoured of, nostalgic for and at the very least lyrically disposed towards the illiterate cultures of botanical piety that were circulating in cheap print.