

Early Modern Literary Studies

**Lynn Staley, *The Island Garden: England's Language of Nation from Gildas to Marvell*
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In *The Island Garden: England's Language of Nation from Gildas to Marvell*, Lynn Staley examines the paradox of public-private negotiations of national identity in medieval and early modern literature in England. Staley's wide-ranging survey of an island nation's language of identity and authority blossomed from her earlier study of Susanna's garden and adaptations of the apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders in English literature. Susanna's garden, Staley realized, was not only a trope of the private, female Eden but also a microcosm of English legal rhetoric regarding the power of the church and state and problems of corrupt or false authority over the nation.

Staley balances the monumental scope of her work with meticulous scholarship. Her own rhetoric sidesteps jargon and ideological debate, although she straightforwardly addresses, for example, representations of Susanna's gender. *The Island Garden* is a classic literary study focused on close, precise readings and historical data. Staley's study of Susanna's garden constitutes the final chapter, following three chapters arranged topically: porous boundaries in historians following Gildas and Bede, literary anxieties of enclosure, and the fourteenth-century redefinition of secular and sacred place under Edward III. The conclusion, 'Island Discourse,' discusses the importance of understanding an island in its relation to the whole, a nation in relation to its colonies, allies, and enemies, and this study in relation to the broader scope of history.

Staley's first chapter traces the divergent influences of Gildas and Bede on the rhetoric that developed England's language of nation. Gildas depicts sixth-century England in terms of a desolate wasteland, a lost Eden, or a fallen Eve. For Gildas, England's beauty as an island and garden ironically became the source of its downfall through temptation or the

incitement of lust. The more popular history of the Venerable Bede, two centuries later, adapted Gildas's language to present England as enriched by its five waves of invaders and colonizers rather than ravaged by them. For Bede, too, England was naturally connected to the world rather than drifting far out at the ends of the earth. Staley traces the influence of Gildas's jeremiad, to use her term, upon Geoffrey of Monmouth and the vaster influence of Bede's vision of progress upon William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, and sixteenth-century Tudor historians.

The second chapter moves from historical accounts to a variety of literary texts that deal with a tension between isolation and enclosure by using the trope of the island garden. Texts including *Piers Plowman*'s peasant's half-acre, Chaucer's Chanticleer, Ben Jonson's hierarchical world of Penshurst, and Marvell's transformation of sacred space in Nun Appleton House offer varying negotiations of privately and publicly held space. The tradition of the island garden explicitly questions historical approaches structured around church and monarch, presenting a space whose 'georgic order' is found in the laws of the household and the realm (p. 8). Multiple microcosms of the island garden exist in Staley's study: England, of course, in relation to the wider world, but also the individual English household or croft, town or city, woman, family, monastery, and so on. Anxieties of enclosure surrounded the public-private legal discourse of the day, particularly regarding issues such as the dissolution of the monasteries, the construction of hedgerows and other landscaping that extensively changed England's agrarian topography, and the agricultural laborer.

Staley's third chapter presents the fourteenth-century reign of Edward III as a watershed moment in delineation of national place. The first half of Edward's reign saw literary attempts to concentrate national identity in the state and monarch. However, that moment was followed by later writers - Langland, Chaucer, Hoccleve - who, Staley argues, broadened the possibilities of national identity by including other figures besides the king: such writers offered 'a recognition of agency somewhat detached from the concept of social degree and thus a way of conceiving of space as including more than the noble soul' (p. 137). Letters from William of Pagula to the king condemn the predation of the royal household on the English countryside with reference to David's ravishment of Bathsheba, in an echo of Susanna's garden; legends of Robin Hood from this era also raise issues of corruption in the legal and political hierarchy. The plague years further complicated the literary identity of England as island garden, now unmoored and adrift in a primordial state recalling Gildas's lost Eden. Among Edward's responses, the architecture and visual art of

his college chapels at Windsor and Westminster enshrine the divine right of kings as central to national identity.

Susanna's garden is the culmination and focal point of Staley's study, as becomes apparent in the fourth chapter. A wide variety of medieval and early modern literary representations of Susanna's garden from the apocryphal Book of Daniel show church and state authority questioned, individual legal ownership sanctified, the enclosed virgin troubled, and the public-private divide negotiated. This final chapter's microscopic attention to a relatively small aspect of the vaster trope of the island garden valuably illuminates the broader surveys of the previous chapters. Staley's examination of the range of meanings of Susanna's female, private place in English texts shows a high frequency of exposure of unjust legal, religious, and secular authority. Susanna's garden suggests a microcosm of English national identity that is not fundamentally identified with church or monarchy but with the legal rights of an individual household and the legal protection of an individual woman.

The island and the garden are hoary tropes in English studies, from John Donne's Meditation XVII to John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*; Staley's valuable study offers a microscopic survey of less familiar but central texts and figures. She demonstrates the fundamental connection of island and garden tropes in English discourse. Marvell's sixth stanza of 'The Garden' explicitly highlights the inherent tension in the union of island and garden, of a vast disputed space with a microcosmic private one. While acknowledging this tension, Staley uses precise studies and consistent focus to connect many literary and historical moments in one unified vision supported by English literary and national history: a woman, a garden, an island, a world.