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## The Uses of a Shakespeare Garden

Jim Persoon

*Grand Valley State University*

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# THE USES OF A SHAKESPEARE GARDEN

*Jim Persoon*

This is a note of thanks to Roz, for conceiving of our Shakespeare garden, and then going through the labor of actually bringing it forth on the southeast corner of Lake Superior Hall, going against the stereotype of academics as more promiscuous in their conceiving of ideas than dutiful in giving them form in the world.

But before the conception and incarnation and all the parenting that followed (especially in its infancy when the straggly thing looked best left out in the elements to whatever fate gods or beasts willed for it), before all this, she did the proper thing and had a marriage. The marriage followed a long courtship between literature and gardening, interests of the mind and interests of the body, who exchanged vows of honoring each other's particular kind of knowledge. I celebrate that wedding as much as the child it produced.

But on to the child. Now that it has begun to grow a personality, it invites much interaction with us. I find myself smiling at it as I pass, or wanting to play, and have on occasion brought a class there to perform a bit of a play, or at least a dumb show or a *tableau vivant*. The garden has a genius, genius in its original sense of an individual deity that everyone and everything has. This spirit of the garden helps to awaken our genius and to invite it to come out to play, and to play in the most childlike physical way so that the spirit does not have to remain divorced from the body, disembodied.

The genius of the garden, as small and young as it is, is in touch with some old truths, and teaches them. Sitting one day on the stone wall that borders it, I (the I who has spent a lifetime hating camping, nature walks, and any Hallmark poster that suggests that a sunset or a waterfall is all you need to set things right), I felt something, something sappy. I remembered how Emerson used to handle his children. When one was cranky, he'd send it on an errand, outside, maybe just to go down to the garden gate to see if any clouds were coming. He said Nature always helped the child more than he could. The sappy thing I was feeling was rising through my body and sweetening me up. That's all I have to say about that. The garden will help you more than I can.

The garden taught me in another way that surprised me just as much. I know that as a good teacher I'm supposed to learn as much from my students as they learn from me, but I usually learn more from books or colleagues or myself. And if our little garden really is, as my metaphor suggests, a young and fairly mute child, I will have to admit that it teaches the intellect, not just the senses. It teaches the adult, rational, progressively developed faculties as easily as it teaches the imaginative ones that Wordsworth tells us are strongest in childhood and then weaken over time.

This is how. I brought my Shakespeare class out to the garden. Roz gave us a tour. We asked her to show us the herbs that Ophelia in her madness hands out to

her not-yet-dead brother, and to the King and the Queen—rosemary, rue, fennel. Those herbs have symbolic meanings, but editors and scholars argue about what those meanings are and who, therefore, should receive them most appropriately from Ophelia's hand. I smelled the fennel, its strong licorice-like smell, the heavy smell in Italian sausage, a smell strong enough to cover up any other smell, including the smell of meat that has gone bad.

I remembered what Hamlet had to say about meat. It's what he thought about whenever he thought about his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle. He thought the marriage was "greasy." He thought it was like a "stew." He said sarcastically that it was done so soon because of a concern for thrift, so the baked meats served at the funeral dinner for his father could be served again the next day as cold cuts at the wedding. Cold meat. Left-over meat. Rotten meat. Rotten Denmark. So Ophelia in a madness that has some method in it gives the King fennel, the herb used to flatter, cover up, and disguise rottenness.

This little child of a garden, through my nose, taught me more about that scene than the powerful minds of Pope, Rowe, Johnson, Coleridge, Granville-Barker, Bradley, Harbage, Hinman, and a dozen modern editors could.

I'd like to close with these lines from the Spanish school-teacher poet Antonio Machado, as translated by Robert Bly:

The wind, one brilliant day, called  
to my soul with an odor of jasmine.

"In return for the odor of my jasmine,  
I'd like all the odor of your roses.

"I have no roses; all the flowers  
in my garden are dead."

"Well then, I'll take the withered petals  
and the yellow leaves and the waters of the fountain."

The wind left. And I wept. And I said to myself:  
"What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?"

Machado's garden is something spiritual and indefinable and more than just a garden, but without the physical garden that we can sit in, smell, listen to, experience in our bodies, a certain genius will be lost to us. Then we will ask ourselves what have we done with this garden entrusted to us.