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ENGLAND, SHAKESPEARE, AND GARDENS

A REFLECTION

Patricia Ann Quattrin

Gazing out the window of the Brit-Rail train as it sped from Kings Court station toward Leeds, I was immediately taken by the size and colors of the flowers springing up from the postagestamp yards in front of British homes. From city to country, yard after yard, magnificent roses in hues of red and pink and yellow stretched toward the sun, while smaller flowers of various colors shared the little patches of earth allotted to them all. Later, as I walked the streets of Leeds, a large manufacturing town of about two million people, a city of coal mines and soot-filled factories, I was again amazed at the profusion of king-size, carefully cultivated flowers bulging out of very tiny lawns. "Away before me to sweet beds of flowers," I recalled from *Twelfth Night*. Is it any wonder that Shakespeare, with the poet's powers of observation and sympathy, would choose to convey in phrase and epithet this enchanting natural beauty that he saw around him?

I had come to England for professional purposes, to present a paper and to chair a session at the International Medieval Congress being held at the University of Leeds. Although a teacher of Early British Literature, I was making my first visit to this history-laden country. Familiar as I was with Shakespeare's feelings for gardens and pastoral scenes, having read all of his plays as well as taught a few, I was unprepared for the splendor and beauty that bespoke the English landscape. The British people produce gardens of great charm and beauty.

When my conference ended, I traveled southwest into the Midlands to take in the countryside, particularly the Malvern Hills area, the setting for the Middle English poem, *Piers Plowman*, which was the subject of my conference paper. The rolling meadows, dotted with well-marked farmlands and grazing sheep and cows, were as picturesque as any travel guide could portray, and I was continually impressed by how neatly well-groomed and meticulously clean these people kept the lands. What pastoral peoples these English be, I thought. The occasional forest brimmed with color, as the wildflowers stood their ground among the woodbine and greenwood trees. Even the rivers and streams, which most often led either into or out of monastic ruins, were crystal clear, begging to refresh the weary traveler. Before returning to London, where I would spend my remaining few days poring over Medieval manuscripts in the British Library, I stopped at Stratford-Upon-Avon to see Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, a play that I had never seen performed. "You must visit Anne Hathaway's cottage and Shakespeare's birthplace," I was told. And so I did.

The farmhouse where Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, lived before their marriage dates from at least the fifteenth century, if not earlier. Its thatched roof and walls of timber-framing depict with much charm the Elizabethan farmhouse. In

addition, the cottage contains well preserved original Hathaway furniture and an Elizabethan bedstead. But it was the gardens that most attracted me. An infinite variety of colors and fragrances infused my senses, as I walked the roughly laid paths of broken stone that weaved around the house and the grounds. Hedges and flowering shrubs line the entrance path; red and white roses, perennial posy peas, and jasmine cling to the cottage walls. Close upon this greenery, a medley of oxlips, daisies, violets, primroses, columbines, pinks and milk thistles, hollyhocks, foxgloves, carnations, cowslips, daffodils, and crown imperial crowd together to form a sea of color, shape, and smell. Beyond this indescribably beautiful array lies Anne's orchard filled with aged fruit trees and more wild flowers.

Making my way around the house and through the coach park, I came upon Shakespeare's Tree Garden which, according to the entrance plaque, displays a specimen of each kind of tree mentioned in the works of Shakespeare. I was reminded of our own Shakespeare Garden taking shape so beautifully outside Lake Superior Hall. Our Grand Valley Garden attempts to duplicate a variety of the plants mentioned by Shakespeare. This Tree Garden offers informal groupings of the trees, each specimen sporting a plaque with an appropriate quotation, such as "The worthy fellow is our general; he's the rock, / the oak, not to be wind-shaken" (*Coriolanus*). Wide rows of bright pink azalea bushes border the walkway, as if to dramatize the stately green and brown of the oak, cedar, lime, hawthorn, silver birch, and thirty-some other plantings scattered about in groups, as if guests at a backyard picnic.

After roaming the Hathaway Gardens, I arrived at Shakespeare's Birthplace to find it already closed for the day. Walking around to the rear of the building and stepping onto the fence ledge, I stretched my neck and peered through the wooden slats, like a prisoner hoping for a glimpse of daylight. This garden, too, is designed to display the many trees, plants, herbs and flowers mentioned in Shakespeare's works. In contrast to Anne's Garden, where flower crowds upon flower, giving a sense of wild, colorful overgrowth, Shakespeare's garden appeared trim and contained. Do these different gardens reflect their namesake's individual personalities, I wondered. The expanse of lawn that lay in front of me, occasionally broken up by a tree, gave the impression of spaciousness and dignity. Flowers in hues of red, yellow, pink, white, and violet border the sides of the house as well as the long central path that approaches it through the garden area. A wide bed of flowers, herbs, and plants in different sizes and colors stretches on either side of the walk from the back fence to the house. Over 138 different varieties of flowers, plants, herbs, and trees are represented in the Birthplace Garden. Among the more easily recognizable herbs and flowers are bachelors buttons, daisies, honeysuckle, ivy, mint, mistletoe, poppy, rye, and strawberry, as well as trees of apple, cherry, and nut. Mingled among these are less easily recognizable varieties, such as aconitum, lark's heels, mallow, pig nut, and medlar.

Shakespeare found meaning in even the most ordinary flowers, trees, plants, and herbs. Whether he observed them in meadow, hedgerow, wood, or garden, he tried to convey the inner meaning and mystery of their natural beauty. Clearly, Anne Hathaway's cottage and Shakespeare's Birthplace, as well as the quaint market-town

of Stratford-Upon-Avon, attempt to recreate and perpetuate the charm and beauty of the typical English countryside that Shakespeare describes so delightfully. London, I thought, will be different.

I was wrong! Although in London, building presses against building, and house shoulders up against house, wherever a plot of ground pushes out from the concrete, regardless of its dimensions, flowers of every size, texture, color, and smell wink and nod at the passerby. The flat in which I roomed while in London boasted of old-fashioned rose bushes at the front entrance and a beautifully flowering garden-patio off the kitchen. A block from the bustling, people-filled British Museum in the heart of London, Bloomsbury Park sits in the midst of concrete and glass, excessive traffic, and frantically rushing people. However, within its tall borders of trees and flowering bushes, people sit on benches or grass, reading and meditating, in peaceful oblivion to the noise and crowds without.

I went to England to learn about its past culture by attending a conference, visiting historical sites, studying Medieval manuscripts. What I learned, however, was more about the spirit and character of a people who derive so much pleasure from flowers and gardens and who express that love with peculiar charm and beauty in natural and homely simplicity wherever they can.

When daisies pied and violets blue
And lady-smocks all silver-white
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight . . .
Love's Labors Lost

These lovers of gardens are truly Shakespeare's people.

As my plane rose off the runway of Gatwick Airport and dipped its wings toward the west, I looked down once more at the receding English countryside and mused longingly, "This garden has a world of pleasure in't" (*The Two Noble Kinsman*).