

Strawberries to
withered flowers:
shakespeare's use of
garden imagery to
define a...



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Throughout English history, kings have been judged by both their political strength and by their personal conduct. Each of these criteria is equally important in assessing the success or failure of a King's reign. In William Shakespeare's history plays, Shakespeare often uses imagery as a tool for comparing how successfully a king is running his government, describing the kingdom as either a managed or unkempt garden. The personality and political skill of a king determine whether the garden is in unruly or pristine condition, and this imagery plays a distinct role in defining a king's true character. In *The Life of Henry V* and *The Tragedy of King Richard II*, Shakespeare uses garden imagery to reveal whether each king is keeping the State in order or not. Throughout each play, the imagery reveals how Henry's and Richard's different political and personal approaches to ruling affect their leadership abilities, defining how the State should be run to achieve maximum success and marking the progression or decline of each king's rule.

Henry V's boisterous adolescence casts a shadow of doubt on his ability to rule his kingdom effectively and causes his character and personality to undergo scrutiny. When Ely discusses the days of Henry's youth to Canterbury, however, he states, "The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,/ And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best/ Neighbored by fruit of baser quality"(1. 1 ll. 62-64). Although Henry surrounded himself with frivolous parties, women, and whatever else brought him pleasure during his adolescent years, his true character was simply dormant and waiting for the passing of time to make him mature enough to rule his country. The image of Henry as a strawberry surrounded by nettle not only excuses his behavior

as a young man but also foreshadows the difficult war with France he will endure. Henry is surrounded by the intimidating force of the French but he must push through these harsh realities for him to grow into the King his country can rely on.

Henry's true character as a fully blossomed adult is evident after he fulfills his destiny and takes the French crown. In the epilogue the chorus says, " Fortune made his sword, / By which the world's best garden be achieved/ And of it left his son's imperial lord"(Epilogue II. 6-8). Henry used his good fortune and combined it with his own strength to give him the advantage he needed to achieve his goal. The " world's best garden" is a symbol of the great kingdom that Henry has now created: the blossoming and orderly garden imagery that reveals Henry's true character shows that Shakespeare believed that Henry's personality was fundamental to his success as a ruler.

For Richard II, the garden imagery that depicts his character and personality is in stark contrast to the imagery used toward Henry V. When the gardener is in the royal garden describing Richard's downfall, he compares the King to the bark of the fruit trees, " being over-proud in sap and blood, / With too much riches it confound itself"(3. 4 II. 60-61). Richard is over-confident, and this trait has spoiled his ability to defend himself and his kingdom. His inability to see his weaknesses brings about his own failure as a leader; his lacking personality is portrayed as a tree that is too ripe to maintain itself. In comparison to Henry V's well-groomed and pristine garden, Richard's garden is becoming both overgrown and wilted due to his own lack of strong and reliable character. Richard even foreshadows his own demise when he visits

John of Gaunt on his deathbed and ignores his dying words. After John's
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death, Richard states, "The ripest fruit first falls, and so doth he"(2. 1 l. 154). Richard's lack of respect toward the dying man's last words, which warn him that he does not have the personality needed to rule with an iron fist, reveals that he cares more about himself than about the success of his kingdom. He does not realize that it is himself that is the "ripest fruit" and will soon fall. Nonetheless, his overconfident and weak personality is reflected in the over-ripe and wilting garden imagery that describes him.

Politically, Henry V does not always abide by the moral standards that he expects his own subjects to strive to meet. It becomes apparent that Shakespeare applies different moral standards to kings than to mere mortal men when Burgundy addresses the King after the final battle, saying, "And as our vineyards, fallows, meads and hedges, / Defective in their natures, grow to wildness, / Even so our houses and ourselves and our children/ Have lost, or do not learn for want of time/ The sciences that should become our country"(5. 2 ll. 54-58). Henry has fought a brutal war and defeated the French on their own soil. The "wildness" of France's garden reveals that they are truly defeated, for their "garden" no longer maintains the order it once had. For Shakespeare, kings such as Henry must separate their emotions from their actions during war-time. A great warrior king must destroy the orderly government (garden) of his enemy to create the perfect kingdom for his own nation. France was undoubtedly surprised by Henry's ability to fight a great battle and win because when the constable realizes Henry's incredible power he asks, "Is not their climate not foggy, raw, dull, / On whom the sun looks pale, / Killing their fruit with their frowns?"(3. 5 ll. 16-18) Henry's political savvy has surprised the French because they were

under the impression that that Henry was simply a spoiled adolescent child. The constable describes Henry's rule as "foggy, raw, (and) dull" because that was all he believed the English throne was capable of reacting to: inhospitable and life-choking conditions. Shakespeare excuses Henry's wild behavior as a young man, however, by using it to make his current political skills look that much more impressive. The focus on the withering and pale garden imagery of his youth compared to the strong imagery of his triumph reveals Henry to be the heroic king that Shakespeare assuredly believed him to be.

The garden imagery that reflects Richard's political skills pales in comparison to the imagery surrounding Henry V. When Henry Bolingbroke returns to England to take Richard's crown, the gardener makes reference to how Richard should have tended his "garden," saying, "Go thou, and, like an executioner, / Cut off the heads of too fast-growing sprays/That look too lofty in our commonwealth. / All must be even in our government"(3. 4 ll. 34-37). Ironically, according to this statement, Henry Bolingbroke is acting more like a king than Richard himself. Richard has left the country without leaving any defense behind to save his crown. He did not "cut off" Henry's head like he should have when he decided instead to banish him from the country. This made the "government" uneven, providing Henry with the perfect opportunity to seize the throne. Richard has made one mistake after another, proving that his skills as a politician are less than adequate. Alluding to Richard's downfall, the gardener then says, "the whole land is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up, / Her fruit trees all unpruned"(3. 4 ll. 44-46). Richard's kingdom is in wild disarray and it is entirely his own

fault because it is he who ignored the warnings of others and believed himself to be infallible as King. The imagery that describes his plight reveals that it is Richard's lack of cunning political skills that make him unworthy of his crown.

The personality and political skills of Richard II are greatly deficient, especially when he is compared to Henry V. Shakespeare uses garden imagery to reveal how the State should be maintained, and while it is evident that Henry lives up to these standards, Richard simply does not meet the criteria. At the end of each play, the " garden" of England is vastly different. Henry's is large, orderly, and well maintained, while Richard's is overgrown in parts and wilted in others. Shakespeare describes Henry as the true heroic King, which in turn makes Richard's failure that much more disappointing. In the simplest terms, the grass truly was greener on the side of Henry V.