INTRODUCTION

The Language of Place

In about 540 C.E. Gildas wrote his *De Excidio Britonum* in order to deplore and explain the state of Britain. He chose a potent metaphor for Britain whose “obstinacy, subjection, and rebellion” brought about her present misery—the island garden, thus linking Britain’s actual geography to the biblical Eden, the garden lost through human rebellion. Eden was also the prototype for the garden of the Song of Songs, which is linked, of course, to its bride, allegorically the soul or the church, and for the gardens at the heart of monastic foundations. In describing Britain as “like a bride arrayed in a variety of jewelry,” Gildas signaled the connections between Britain and these gardens and prepared the way for his account of Britain as a postlapsarian garden whose rebellious people, like Israel, bride of God, have turned beauty and fertility into waste and sterility. Moreover, rather than simply produce the metaphor, Gildas joined his moral and allegorical perspective to a physical reality, describing Britain as a geographic entity, “virtually at the end of the world,” eight hundred miles in...
length, two hundred in width, fortified by the sea. Gildas’s description of Britain, the wasted garden island or the fallen bride, was taken up by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* two centuries later and modified in ways that illustrate the process by which one man’s metaphor can become another man’s differently directed mode of analytic discourse. Whereas for Gildas Britain’s insularity is the source of its vulnerability, since its beauty and singularity inspire willfulness and incite desire, Bede describes *England* as permeable (not necessarily vulnerable) and inherently hospitable; as colonized (rather than victimized), thus as enriched by those who transgress its boundaries; as attached to (rather than detached from) the rest of the world; and, finally, as enriching a world now in need of the Christian culture once translated to its own shores. Bede’s act of translation, and the popularity of his history, provided later writers with a language with which to construct or explore national identity. Even before there was a political community called England, there was an island called Britain, whose history could be told and explained using the language of place, a language that, from Gildas on, was associated with Christian and providential perspectives on history.

This book isolates and explores this language of England’s self-definition; but, more important, it explores the ways in which the trope of the beautiful island garden became attached to, or was a sign for, the anxieties of the English nation and was reformulated at certain key moments by writers who perceived, as did Bede, its usefulness as an elastic, subtle, but nonetheless pointed discourse for historical analysis and thus for social or political critique. In fact, the trope of the island garden, used by Gildas in reference to Britain, was refocused through an Anglocentric lens that, as R. R. Davies has argued, dominated the historical tradition from the twelfth century on. Though we are all aware that Britain is an island and that even now England is referred to as a garden, the image of the island garden during the medieval and early modern periods was neither simple nor stable but used variously to express those concerns and anxieties belonging to national identity and to an understanding of the nature of its community. Put simply, I suggest that the description of Britain as an island garden, which Gildas employs to describe its fall from Edenic bounty to waste and sin and Bede to suggest the processes of historical reparation of the English that he attributes to the church, catalyzed two crucial histori-
Introduction

cal perspectives and thus analytic modes. The key concept attached to England’s language of place is enclosure, the island enclosed by the sea, the garden enclosed by its wall, the bride enclosed by her chastity, the nation protected by its ecclesiastical foundations or by its kings, a concept fraught with anxieties of violation or of isolation that the writers of the histories, treatises, and poems discussed in this book explore.

In chapter 1 I trace England’s language of place as employed by Gildas and Bede and used thereafter by the post-Conquest historians William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, and Geoffrey of Monmouth and the sixteenth-century Tudor historians who employed the terms of Bedan history filtered through twelfth-century historians even as they struggled to reformulate them. These historians, like Gildas and Bede, are concerned with the whole of England’s history rather than with the annals of specific years and therefore ground their works in introductory accounts of origins. The twelfth-century historians provide examples of the different ways in which history could be written following either Gildas or Bede. Both William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon do not simply fit their works into Bede’s Historia, but, like him, manifest historical perspectives that suggest the processes of history, the providential reparations that succeed apparent disasters. Though England’s is a history of five invasions, as both acknowledge, it is also a history of growing social, legal, and ecclesiastical cohesion. Each weaves the uncertainties and the brutalities of history into a whole cloth that serves as a testimony to an order that is inherent in the identity of the nation itself, despite the realities of personal cupidity, passion, or misfortune. Like Bede, William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon give evidence of narrating a piece of a more comprehensive history whose end they cannot see but whose providential shape they can adumbrate. I trace the historiographical perspective of Geoffrey of Monmouth to Gildas and his use of history as jeremiad wherein history is hostage to human sin and nation but a name for a truncated or unrealized concept. What is an important distinction in medieval historiography, including that to be found in the vernacular Brut and Higden’s Polychronicon, becomes an urgent debate about the relationship of England to the world in Tudor histories that mark the contraction of the island garden and its increasingly beleaguered and enclosed identity. However, here, too, there is evidence
of historians—among them William Camden, Ralph Hollinshed, William Lambarde, and Samuel Daniel—who do not explicitly dissent from official views but nonetheless offer intaglios that suggest their understandings of Bede’s broader vision, a vision that is foreclosed by Milton in his *History of Britain*.

However, what appears a subtle but straightforward dialectic among historians who employ the language of place to debate the relationship between islands and the merits or realities of cultural isolation is complicated by literary texts, which I explore in the second chapter. A wide variety of authors make use of the trope in very different ways, creating a discourse whose themes and images are reformulated and reapplied to contemporary situations. Earlier histories tended to associate England’s singular, and potentially sacral, identity either with the strength of its ecclesiastical foundations or with its anointed rulers. However, when in the mid-fourteenth century William Langland employed another enclosed space—the peasant holding, the half acre—as an image for England, he prompted a dialectic worked out in images for national identity that implied a relationship between sovereign power and the common good. From the A-text of *Piers Plowman* on, those subjects and anxieties linked to the image of the island garden became attached to alternate images for England as less a moated isle than a semienclosed garden in need of proper cultivation. Langland’s translation of the metaphor for nation from a discrete and royal space into an agricultural holding had, as chapter 2 demonstrates, a long life in English literature. This dialectic, as it was expressed through the construction and exploration of enclosed spaces, is the more arresting because it predates the later country/city debate and stages a subtle probing of social status, regality, and the relationship of both to law.3 Chaucer detaches the image of the peasant holding as a metaphor for nation from Langland’s poem of spiritual pilgrimage and uses it to explore the nature of political authority and order, looking forward to the more politically explicit use of images of enclosed spaces throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, particularly in texts addressing the land-enclosure disputes. However, an image and set of concerns that can be found in agricultural manuals and parliamentary sermons is altered once more by Ben Jonson, who attaches it to the estate, and by Andrew Marvell, whose “Upon Appleton House” muses on a once ecclesiastical and now secular house, Nun Appleton, the home of Cis-
tercian nuns until it was suppressed in the reign of Henry VIII. In the poem Marvell considers subjects like the relation of the individual to society, national origins and identity, and the nature of the sacred, issues that are likewise central to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century treatments of England as garden. With its concern for boundaries, lineage, and the processes by which sanctity is asserted, “Upon Appleton House” links what has been described as the last of the country house poems with a tradition beginning with Gildas and Bede and continuing through monastic myths of origin, the medieval chronicle tradition and their refractions in vernacular literature. Marvell’s own circumstances—a Yorkshireman by birth; contemporary with the burgeoning antiquarian interests of men like Dugdale, Tanner, and Cotton; and an assiduous scholar in his own right—wrote with more than a casual knowledge of the transformation of sacred space, all too evident in a Yorkshire once the very heart of medieval ecclesiastical geography.

Chapter 3 takes as its problem Langland’s employment of the image of the enclosed croft and focuses on the fourteenth century, in particular, on texts that can be associated with Edward III. Though “change” does not simply happen, there are periods that seem to hasten change or to offer new ways of imagining the present. I look to the reign of Edward III (1327–77) as such a moment.4 In 1341, when as a youngish king he still had much to learn about the arts of governing, Edward came to verbal blows with his chancellor and archbishop of Canterbury, John Stratford, in letters that were widely distributed. The occasion was money; the subject, authority. Edward had been left high and dry on the continent, waiting for funds he had requested that would allow him to continue the conflict he had begun in 1340 when he claimed the throne of France, thus beginning a war, punctuated by periods of truce, that came to define diplomatic relations in Europe for a hundred years. Returning to England, embarrassed and furious, he began a public quarrel with Stratford, which he ostensibly lost but which he parlayed into a personal victory. Within a few years he held a court of the Round Table and initiated the Order of the Garter, by which he sought to bind the nobility to himself and to identify England with the Virgin Mary and Saint George, patron of chivalry.

England, however, was not univocal. This is also a period when parliament increasingly finds its voice, when the first outbreak of the
Black Death occurs, when a local concern with justice is manifest, and when the wages of war must be paid. I examine chronicle accounts of the period, such as those of Adam Murimuth and Robert of Avesbury, treatises such as *The Treatise of Walter de Milemete* and *De Speculo Regis*, poems like *Winner and Waster* (possibly associated with the Order of the Garter), the A-text of *Piers Plowman*, and shorter poems, arguing that it is possible to explore the competing impulses of a world not so singly or simply seen in elite images. That so many of these texts continued to be copied into later manuscripts says much about the continuing relevance of what are Edwardian texts. As I suggested in *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, the picture that emerges is not that to be found in France where sacrality rested with the king. The present study pushes that statement even further, arguing that in England what is set apart, examined, and sacralized is the secular household, frequently figured as a garden, whose rights are, or ought to be, inviolate. The secular has not replaced the sacred; the sacred has been redefined. These primarily midcentury texts, written when Edward was centering power on himself as a figure of cultic chivalry, suggest other sets of rhetorical possibilities in the images of farmyards, forest spaces, and crofts that were sometimes used as alternate images of nation. In inserting the half-acre into his evolving poem, William Langland located himself within these contemporary concerns and offered a powerful counterimage— one rooted in the actualities of English agricultural life—to the royal isle protected by Saint George that was promulgated by Edward III. Langland’s croft quickly entered vernacular culture and maintained its political vitality through the early seventeenth century.

Chapter 4 concerns the biblical Susanna, whose enclosed garden provided English writers from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth with a means of exploring place, not as a royal or peasant holding, but as a household where safety and identity are guaranteed by law. The story of Susanna, which was commonly applied to lessons of marital chastity and of faith and trust in God, received a profoundly legal emphasis in English texts, and the garden in which she is surprised by the unjust elders was used as synecdoche for the household (both ecclesiastical and lay) and its vulnerability to illegal practices. I argue that her story, as it can be read through English texts during this period, serves to underline a perspective on law, on individual rights.
and consciousness, and on the understanding of what constitutes sacred space that is ultimately crucial to England’
self-conception, in which both the monastic foundation and the great house were described as resting on a law that even kings must serve. Significantly, Susanna and her garden are not located in regal space but in gentry space, suggesting the need to imagine a character for enclosed sanctity that, with the exception of the thirteenth-century “Tractatus metricus de Susanna,” is neither ecclesiastical nor regal. English treatments of Susanna employ those terms that are key to explorations of national self-definition, particularly those that inquire into competing systems of authority. Susanna’s sanctity as chaste wife is imaged in her garden, which is a mirror of her and her marriage and a figure for private space and its sanctity under the law and relationship to the outside world. The texts concerning Susanna provide a sometimes startling echo of concerns for privacy and communal prerogative voiced through a biblical fiction, concerns that are certainly expressed in contemporary terms but that also suggest a continual understanding of the island garden as reinforced and defined not by moats but by law.

The discourse here described is not intended as a comprehensive literary history of the medieval and early modern periods, or as a catalog of gardens in English literature, but as a specifically focused exploration of the ways in which a number of authors develop the semantics of the language of place to construct or explore England’s cultural, social, and political identity. James Simpson has presented a powerful argument for the narrowing of English culture with the reign of Henry VIII and his concentration of power in the crown. Although authors like Bale and Foxe certainly stand as examples of Henry’s cultural revolution, this book suggests a concurrent and subtly opposing impulse, a broadening understanding of sources for national identity worked out using language associated with those issues of insularity and isolation that are integral to accounts of England, the island garden. If Bede suggests that England’s history is the history of its church and later historians choose regnal years as defining categories for their accounts of England, this book presents other ways of reckoning history, ways to be found in the works of writers who offer pictures of spaces whose sanctities depend neither on monasteries nor on kings. The particular garden enclosed by the sea that is the subject of this book—whose historic identity cannot be understood without

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reference to the language of place that was associated with its geographic identity—prompted a conversation as dense and rich as any to be found in late Henry James, a concatenation of images that serve as signs of a discourse tracing out an urgent inquiry into identity. Rather than demonstrate a Darwinian trajectory by which the sacred devolves to the secular, the language of place allows for the reinscription of the sacred on the ordinary, a resacralization of national identity through the rituals of daily life, which are the laws of the household and its order. That the georgic order of the household of the realm is not necessarily to be identified with the sovereign or with the quality of sovereign power is integral to an England conceived of as a nation whose porous boundaries, including those of its households, are regulated or protected by its laws. Moreover, the discourse I identify and describe provides a non to the sic of those who insist on a break with the past occasioned by the Reformation in England. By discussing and linking those authors who offered images of nation in the farm or the great house, enclosures whose rights are guaranteed by the Great Charter and by the legal system that served to check monarchical privilege, I also offer evidence that modifies claims that the Tudors effectively refocused the imagery of nation on the crown. The Tudors may have tried to do so, but, despite Tudor propaganda, this book suggests ways in which others sketched in an England whose identity was more diverse, or robust, and hardly unifocal.8 In my conclusion I consider ways in which those tropes that I have traced back through the Middle Ages remained in play but were necessarily altered during England’s evolution from island garden to the island garden/mercantile empire and were jettisoned by those English settlers in America.

The subjects related to my argument—the medieval/early modern “divide,” the ideation of England as a place, and the history of England’s histories—make it possible for this book to intersect with the work of many other scholars and to reflect the current interest among medievalists in understanding, or in trying to measure, the shadows cast by our thousand years on the next one hundred fifty. In The “Shepherd’s Calender,” I probed Spenser’s relationship to his medieval cultural past and the degree to which he sought to ground his poem in the traditions of those authors in whose footsteps he followed and to

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assert the newness of his poem and the urgencies of his own cultural and political moment. Since then, there has been an increasingly sophisticated inquiry into England’s and Britain’s textual culture, especially into the contemporary understanding of the historic past, not in an attempt to identify medieval sources for early modern formulations, but rather to understand how authors might employ a past to explain a present, sometimes rewriting that past.

Medievalists like Lee Patterson and Paul Strohm have analyzed the medieval construction of its own past, particularly as it concerns Chaucer or the Lancastrian accession to the throne, and, of course, the Reformist (re-)construction of England’s Romish past is well known and well studied. More recently James Simpson has bridged the two periods, following out the implications of Lollard studies initiated by Anne Hudson and Margaret Aston. He, like Eamon Duffy, argues for a cultural break and a consequent break between the medieval and early modern periods, though, unlike Duffy, Simpson does not romanticize medieval England as a time of intellectual plenitude. Rather, Simpson underlines the degree to which Henry VIII imposed his sovereignty on English culture through the dominance of the court as a center for culture. As I have suggested elsewhere, particularly in contrast to the France of Charles V, we can find no such cultural hegemony in England in the fourteenth century; instead we can find competing courts and a variety of cultures. The work presently orchestrated by David Wallace, along with the various dense microstudies by Ralph Hanna, Robert Barrett, Christopher Cannon, Sarah Beckwith, Theresa Coletti, and Gail McMurray Gibson, points up the multivocality of late medieval English culture by studying not simply texts but also the regional culture and systems of patronage and social affiliation from which they emerged.

Given the mobility of medieval life, especially of magnatial households, what may have had regional roots came to contribute to a national culture that Thorlac Turville-Petre has argued can be identified very early. Jocelyn Wogan-Brown and Ardis Butterfield have presented powerful arguments for the diversity of that “national culture,” a culture whose three languages and literary forms cross-fertilized one another well into the Tudor period. Their insistence that any idea of nation in this period must be detached from more modern notions of nationalism or imperialism is an important distinction. Instead, as this book demonstrates, it is the island itself
as a geographic reality become an ideological construct that prompts an inquiry into an identity whose boundaries are not linguistic, and hardly geographic since they uneasily enclose Celtic cultures that frequently go unmentioned or were deliberately occluded by a dominant English political system and culture. More often than not, to say Britain is to mean England. If I echo such acts of occlusion here, it is because I am interested in the language of place as it was used to describe Britain/England, the self-proclaimed island garden.

Moreover, these studies of Yorkshire, Worcester, Cheshire, or East Anglia manifest more than regional consciousness; they manifest an early attempt to understand place as it relates to the greater place that is England. Kathy Lavezzo and Catherine A. M. Clarke have suggested ways in which ideas of place functioned as defining tropes for England and for those men or institutions that sought to ally themselves with the idea of nation as the beautiful isle or the distant island, and Virginia Blanton has placed the cult of Saint Æthelthryth, particularly as it is treated in the Book of Ely, within a web of concerns about national inviolability that were occasioned by the Norman Conquest. Such studies of the tropes of nation, like studies of regional culture, underscore the complicated processes by which England’s writers created a language of identity that served as an indicator of a particular historical perspective and thus could be used to explain or castigate or meditate on a present situation. The invaluable work of Antonia Gransden on medieval and early modern historians certainly testifies to the historical awareness of the monks and chroniclers who wrote the volumes to which I refer in this book and provides a picture of the connections between and among chroniclers throughout a thousand-year span. Those connections are frequently obvious, in the sense that William of Newburgh cites Gildas and Bede or John Foxe disparages medieval historians when they offer laudatory accounts of Rome. The connections, however, are also fundamental in that the most notable writers of England’s history seek to do more than recount events; they seek to locate events within a broader understanding of England’s island status.

It is that understanding, or the rhetoric associated with a particular understanding of England as a place, that prompted my own work, which began, not with England, but with Susanna’s garden. In tracing this garden from Alan of Melsa’s use of it in his early-thirteenth-
century poem to the fourteenth-century *Pistel of Susan* and on into early modern representations of it, I was struck by two interrelated points. First, English accounts of Susanna and the Elders link the garden to the household, and second, they suggest that the sanctity of both depends on the law. Where Alan of Melsa describes a garden that can be assimilated to the Cistercian language of enclosure, later accounts of it suggest its affiliation with secular holdings; however, both the thirteenth-century poem and the late medieval and early modern treatments of Susanna and her garden link the narrative to a broader concern for the rights of individuals under the law. Susanna’s garden led me backward to the island garden and to a sacral identity Bede describes in his account of the growth of the English church, which links the English to the redeemed Israel. England’s ecclesial identity increasingly yields to, or is joined with, a concept of sacral regality and thus to the king’s potentially sacral role in respect to nation, a complex cultural process described by Paul Binski in his studies of Westminster Abbey and Palace.21 Gardens, whether metaphoric or actual, are entrusted to gardeners, to guardians who protect them and allow them to increase. For Bede, the guardian is the church that, through conversion, education, and diplomacy, created a Christian culture that established an identity for England and maintained a fruitful relationship with Christendom. With the Norman Conquest and Angevin rule, nation may be more firmly identified with regality, but, at the same time, as medieval historians notice and record, the ancient traditions of England’s laws can also be seen as defining a construction of nation. In the mid-fourteenth century the tension between those two—and potentially opposed—guardians, and consequently a dialectic about the very identity of the island garden, becomes apparent in numerous texts that employ a carefully worked out language of place. The reign of Edward III is a sort of watershed for efforts to rewrite England’s myth of self-identity. Thereafter, the image of the royal island enclosed by its sea and that of the smallholding enclosed by law become signs of a serious inquiry into the very nature of national identity. It is the language in which this inquiry is cast that is my subject, the ambiguities, the struggles, and the uncertainties of “island discourse.” The plan for the book moves from the broad historical narrative of England to increasingly focused studies—of the language of place as it was employed by late medieval writers to explore England as a national identity, a
language then taken up and re-formed by early modern writers; of the importance of fourteenth-century constructions of England to this discourse; and finally to a single narrative, Susanna, which exemplifies a history of these uses of place and the concerns attached to them. In identifying and analyzing England’s language of place, I make an implicitly bolder claim—that in rhetoric lies history or alternate histories, new perspectives on events that should be understood not as simply reflecting events but as events in their own right.

At a crucial point in writing this book, I was blessed with a year’s membership at the Institute for Advanced Studies as a Dilworth Fellow. There, with Carolyn Walker Bynum as professor of the School of Historical Studies, I could write and test my ideas in the bracing atmosphere of lunch table and seminar room. I was lucky to share that year with many wonderful scholars, but I think particularly of conversations with Caroline Bynum, Julia M. H. Smith, Regina Graffe, and Elisheva Baumgarten, whose offices neighbored my own. I have also been invited to speak, and thus to try out parts of this book, with audiences at the University of Rochester, at the Canada Chaucer Conference, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Fordham University, Columbia University, Catholic University, and Princeton University, as well as at meetings of the New Chaucer Society, the Gower Society, and the Medieval Academy of America. The two readers for the University of Notre Dame Press, David Aers and an anonymous reader, made some very astute suggestions, prompting me to sharpen and expand my argument.

I thank James Simpson and Brian Cummings for inviting me to write the essay “Enclosed Spaces” for their collection, Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History, thus giving me the opportunity to conceptualize this much longer project. In earlier forms parts of chapter 4 were published as “Susanna and English Communities,” in Traditio 62 (2007), and as “Susanna’s Voice,” in Sacred and Profane in Chaucer and Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honour of John V. Fleming, edited by Robert Epstein and William Robins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

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