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“This Other Eden”: The Representation of the English Countryside in Costume

Drama since the 1980s

The scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been in England since England was a land ... The wild anemones in the woods of April, the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as the twilight comes on ... These are things that make England.

– Stanley Baldwin (1924)

On a spring morning, Elizabeth Bennet, wearing a ribbon-tied bonnet, looks out over the gently rolling hills of the Derbyshire countryside. Picking wildflowers as she goes, she skips down a country lane, and climbs over a wooden stile sheltered under the shade of an ancient oak; wandering towards the old vicarage, she passes bay horses grazing in a meadow. The opening of the BBC’s adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Simon Langton, 1995), following on from a long-established tradition in art, literature and poetry, presents an idealised vision of the English countryside – the England of “cherished oaks and elms, speedwell and heather, larks and nightingales, mists and green” (Helsing, 17), and of “white farm houses looking out among the trees” (West, 199). This England is George Orwell’s “wild flowers”, “deep meadows”, “slow-moving streams bordered by the willows”, and “larkspurs in the cottage gardens” (221); it is John Betjeman’s vision of a village with a country house, a church and thatched roof cottages (Howse, “John Betjeman’s Britain”). It is William Blake’s “green and pleasant land” (“And did those feet...”). The English countryside has not only been revered for its aesthetic beauty, but recognised as “spiritually

uplifting” (Picot, xi); William Wordsworth found the “spirit of God” in the Lake District (36), and John Clare experienced the Northamptonshire farmland as a “place of religious vision” (Gorji, 114), while William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope and others even found in England an earthly paradise – the Garden of Eden. Appearing in the late 16th century, the metaphor of the English countryside as the “garden eastward in Eden” (*King James Version*, 2:8) has endured into the 20th century and beyond.

As described in the Book of Genesis, the Garden of Eden was a God-given paradise inhabited long-ago by Adam and Eve, before they were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit and were banished from the Garden, resulting in the Fall of Man. Jean Delumeau discusses the history of the representation of the Garden of Eden as appearing from a Greco-Roman tradition. From Ovid’s vision of an earthly paradise in which “spring was everlasting”, St. Ephraem the Syrian later wrote of the “fragrant springs” of the biblical Garden, and St. Augustine of its “fruit-bearing trees” (qtd. in Delumeau, 12). By the 17th century, John Milton furthered the representation of Eden as a land of plenty, in describing “Flowers of all hue, and without Thorn the Rose” which “Led on th’Eternal Spring” (Book IV, 256-268). The representation of the Garden as a paradise is derived not only from the iconography of fruits, of flowers and springtime, but from the Biblical narrative, as, in the Garden, Adam and Eve lived a life of virtue, experiencing contentment but not suffering, and harmony but not resentment. The Garden of Eden represents a time before Man was separated from God, and, ever since, Man has longed to return (Picot, 28).

The English countryside, meanwhile, has been fundamental not only to literature and to art, but to culture, society, and national identity (Matless, 198). Literary

representations of the countryside – described as ‘pastoral’ – developed from the early Greek writing of Hesiod, and Virgil of Ancient Rome, from which Edmund Spenser, writing in the mid-16th century, established a pastoral “firmly grounded in the English countryside” (Gorji, 78). While Spenser wrote of the hardships of rural life, Alexander Pope, by the early 18th century, visualised an England of “green retreats”, of “hills and vales”, of “woodland” and “plain” (1-11), as “the mansion of our earthly Gods” (228). It is in this England that Pope found the “groves of Eden” (10). As early as 1595, William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* had cast England as an earthly paradise, with John of Gaunt describing the “sceptr’d isle” as “this other Eden” (II.i, 40-50). During the Romantic era, William Wordsworth wrote of a “blissful Eden” (“The Recluse”, 105) – of the “majesty and beauty and repose, / A blended holiness of earth and sky” (143-144) – of his beloved Lake District, while Samuel Taylor Coleridge delighted in the beauty of the Somerset hills, described as “fair as Eden’s bowers” (“Ode on the Departing Year”, 131). At the same time, the tradition of English landscape painting emerged, including John Sell Cotman’s watercolours of the Norfolk coastline and John Constable’s visions of Suffolk. Influenced by the landscape painting of Claude Lorrain (Barrell, 12), the English landscape artists also depicted an idealised country life – from the boy fishing on the banks of the River Stour (*Stratford Mill*, 1820), to the sheepdog herding a flock along a lane (*The Cornfield*, 1826), and the farmer tending to his crops (*A Ploughed Field*, c.1808).

By the mid-nineteenth century, representations of the English countryside became “ever more idealised” (Burchardt, 34), as if the image of the recently urbanised countryside – following the development of mechanised farming machinery and commercial agriculture practices – had been repressed. In the post-industrial rural

landscape, the horse and carriage plodding along a country lane became cars driving along tarmac roads, the plough in the field – for centuries heralded as the “sight of England” (Baldwin, qtd. in Miller, 90) – became the fuel-powered combine harvester, and the pastures green made way for urban developments. The transformation of England is seen in John Grierson and Robert Flaherty’s *Industrial Britain* (1931) – from the opening shots of the windmill and the haystack, the thread-spinner and the basket-weaver, the film progresses to the “steam and the smoke” of the steelworks, and to the “belching furnaces” and “humming machinery” of the grimy industrial towns. And yet, even as a film produced by the Empire Marketing Board, intended to celebrate the country’s industry, the voice-over declares that England is found in these “scenes of yesterday”. The rural landscape endured, then, in the imagination, as the nation looked towards the past, and towards the “happy Eden of those golden years” (Clare, qtd. in Williams, 10).

The England-as-Eden metaphor is evident even from the early years of film. Claude Friese-Greene’s travelogues from the mid-1920s, for example, found idealised imagery of “Great Britain’s Glorious Homeland”, from Lands End to John O’Groats; the films feature blooming flowers in Shropshire, gently flowing streams in Cumbria, and heathland in Somerset. In a scene from Friese-Greene’s *The Open Road* (1926), farmers are seen to gather hay onto a horse and cart in Gloucestershire, as the inter-titles claim “New days have not abolished old ways”. Machinery had, however, largely replaced manual labour in haymaking even by the mid-nineteenth century, and, by the 1920s, mechanised hay loaders had even been introduced (Fair, 20). This is, then, a glorified England – unharmed by the Industrial Revolution, and by the hand of man.

The idealised representation of the countryside, then, was already “widely established in British culture” from the early 1900s onwards (Moody, 23, in *Picture Perfect*). And yet, following the outbreak of the First World War, there appeared an ever increasing need to “retreat from the painful experience of modernity” (Gledhill, 37, in *Picture Perfect*), which led the camera again towards the countryside, while in the 1960s, city-dwellers longed for the “fulfilment of a wish to escape” (Higson, “A Green and Pleasant...”, 240) offered by contemporary realist dramas set in rural England. By the 1980s, film looked more than ever towards the countryside, not of the present-day, but of the past, with the decade seeing the rise of the costume drama.

Roman Polanski’s *Tess* (1979), for example – adapted from a Thomas Hardy novel – was released the year that Thatcher’s New Right government came to power. As an escape from the “high unemployment”, “inequalities of standards of living” and “social unrest” (Higson, 92) experienced following the election, critics at the time applauded the film as embodying Thomas Hardy’s “connection with” the land, and as capturing the writer’s “appreciation for nature” (Niemeyer, 26-27). The need to escape Britain’s “socio-economic crisis” under Margaret Thatcher, Andrew Higson argues, led to the genre gaining not only box-office success, but becoming the foremost “production trend in British films of the 1980s” (241), with the decade seeing the release of Merchant-Ivory productions, as well as Granada TV’s *Brideshead Revisited* (Charles Sturridge, 1981) and, into the 1990s, a series of Jane Austen adaptations.

Defined as a “production set in a particular historical period” (“Costume Drama”), costume dramas feature period costume and set-design, and are often adapted from classic novels. Andrew Higson describes the trend towards costume drama during the 1980s and 1990s, then, as related to the New Right practice of promoting the national past – termed the “heritage industry” (*English Heritage...*, 49). The past of the costume drama is found between the 18th century of Jane Austen and the early 20th century of E.M. Forster – and yet, as Frederic Jameson described, this is an aestheticised past (9). That is, the past is represented not by events of the era – the social reform, the Napoleonic Wars, or the expansion of the Empire – but through iconography, including the period costume – the laced corset, the hoop skirt and bonnet – and the set design – wooden panelled interiors with antique furniture and upholstery, as well as all that it signifies – the longed-for traditional values and old-fashioned ways of life, and, in particular, the wealth and grandeur of the upper classes. It is not the past that is a referent, then, but *images* of the past.

Furthermore, the images of the past in the costume drama – the country-house, the “rolling hills, green fields ... the village green ... the church” (Gardner, qtd. in Higson, 49) – disregard the era as it was experienced by much of the population, in the deprived rural areas and in the overpopulated, disease-ridden, poverty-stricken cities. Despite the advancement of industry, technology, and engineering during the Industrial Revolution, there remained child labour, appalling working conditions, social inequality, high infant mortality, rising crime rates, and capital punishment (Olsen, xii). The costume drama, then, presents images not of a reconstructed past, but of an *imagined* past – a “Golden Age”, which Raymond Williams argues has become a “myth functioning as a memory” (Williams, 43). Writing in *The Country*

and the City (1973), Williams discusses the “Golden Age” as a motif present throughout literature, from Ancient Greek verse through to Victorian novellas. *Tess*, for example, looks away from the present-day, not only in being set in the yesteryear of Victorian England, but in the fictitious county of Hardy’s Wessex.

According to Williams, the myth of the Golden Age functions to resist the forces of capitalism – its “economic drives, its fundamental priorities in social relations, its criteria of growth and of profit and loss” (302). That is, by envisaging the past, we are able to escape from the present. Edward Picot further describes the myth of the Golden Age as a form of nostalgia, and as a longing for the “blessed” past (17). From the Greek *nostos*, nostalgia is a longing to “return home” (“Nostalgia”), and, if home is the “origin”, then the home of Man, according to Judaeo-Christian belief, is the Garden of Eden. Mircea Eliade, then, asserts that this longing for the “beloved past” represents a fundamental human longing to restore life as it was before the Fall, and before Man’s separation from God (qtd. in Schulz, 1). In this way, then, every Golden Age comes to represent the Garden of Eden.

As a story of a daughter of an impoverished family in rural England, *Tess* may not seem to envisage the Golden Age of countryside living. And yet, an earthy paradise is found in *Tess*, not in the arable land of the working-class Durbeyfields, but in the gardens of the estate of the well-off Alex D’Urberville. On arriving at the estate, Tess (Natassja Kinski) walks through an avenue of elm trees, and is greeted with the sight of the house set amongst the trees. As birds are heard to sing, Alec (Leigh Lawson) lavishes upon Tess strawberries, which are “already in season” – as in Milton’s eternal spring of the Garden of Eden – and adorns her with pink roses. Sudhir Dixit

further argues that, in Hardy's novel, Tess is cast as Eve (Dixit, 71) – innocent, virtuous, and fair – before Alec takes advantage of her. Later, there is hope of a return to Eden for Tess, as she arrives in the Talbothays, where she is to meet Angel Clare. In Ian Sharp's 1998 adaptation, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a voiceover remarks that Tess (Justine Waddell) feels she is "returning home" – again in the spring, on a "bird-hatching morning in May". The image of Tess' arrival at the Talbothays, shot from behind as she looks upon the valley, is an almost mystical country scene in which a



farmer leads his cattle across a river reflecting a golden light from the morning sun (see Figure 1).

An idealised vision of the English countryside is again found in James Ivory's adaptation of E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1987). This is an England in which students punt along the river Cam discussing philosophy and spend long afternoons at country estates playing cricket. Set during the Edwardian era, Maurice (James Wilby) and Clive (Hugh Grant), fall for one another during their time as students in Cambridge, and escape the confines of their university to embrace their love affair. By a riverbank, they frolic in the grass, as Maurice declares his feelings of "harmony". In

Figure 1: Tess (Justine Waddell) encounters the idealised country scene of the Talbothays (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 1998).

the televised adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (Charles Sturridge, 1981), similarly, a couple lounge in a meadow, beneath the shade of a tree. The motif of paradise is introduced early on in the series, with the chapter title 'Et in Arcadia ego' (translating as "Even in Arcadia, there am I"), referring not only to the pastoral paintings of Nicolas Poussin, but to the mythical Arcadia. Charles Ryder (Jeremy Irons) finds the afternoon an almost spiritual experience, and describes feeling "the joy of innocence" as he punts beneath the willows, reminiscent of the "innocence ... faith ... and bliss" (Milton, *Book XI*, 411) experienced by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Away from the dreaming spires of Oxford, he recalls a visit to the country estate of Brideshead on a "cloudless day in June", and, the following year, returning to Brideshead, he spends a summer exploring the gardens, drinking wine in the summerhouse, paddling in the fountain, and playing croquet on the lawn. Presented in flashback, the images of nostalgia reveal Ryder's longing to return to the past, and, ultimately, reveal Man's fundamental longing to return the earthly paradise Garden of Eden.

The BBC's televised adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) again presents an idealised vision of the countryside, as the Bennets are seen to wander along footpaths, across farmland, down country lanes, and around the gardens of stately homes. More recently, critics celebrated the beauty of the English countryside as represented in the film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Joe Wright, 2005). Dominic Dromgoole of *The Guardian*, for example, admired the majesty of the "meads", the "meadows" and the "fields", and suggested the film was a "love letter to the English landscape" ("Simply Majestic..."). Even before the opening credits of the film have ended, birds are heard singing – the nightingale, which for John Keats "singest of summer" (10),

and Hardy heard erupting into “full-hearted evensong / Of Joy illimited” (19-20). The film then opens as the sun rises over the English countryside. Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightley) wanders through the long grass, and towards a cottage with ivy climbing the walls. She climbs over a wooden bridge as cattle cross behind her, and encounters a yard draped with sheets hanging out to dry, and maids tending to the fowl. Although Andrew Higson describes the film as presenting a “realist” (171) vision of muddy fields, roaming farm animals, and lowly domesticity – and director Joe Wright even condemned period films for depicting an “idealised” English heritage as “Heaven on Earth” – it is a landscape not unlike the pastoral scenes of John Constable.

And yet, *Pride and Prejudice* does differ from productions of the 1980s and 1990s in its representation of the countryside, in that it not only presents a vision of fields, and of meadows, but a rugged England, as Elizabeth, travelling with the Gardiners, encounters the landscape of the Peak District. The score rises to a crescendo as she steps towards Stanage Edge, her overcoat billowing in the wind, and she looks out over the rugged rock face to the valley below (*see Figure 2*). Unlike other visions of the English countryside, this landscape encapsulates William Gilpin’s description of the picturesque. Referring back to Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757)



Figure 2: Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightley) surveys the picturesque landscape of the Peak District in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005).

into the feelings of terror associated with the sublime, Gilpin's picturesque is defined as that which is "capable of being illustrated in painting" (2); it is a subjective beauty, found not in the daydream of the meadow, nor in the bourgeois architecture of the country house, but in a castle ruin atop a rugged cliff face, and in the gnarled bark of ancient oaks.

Costume dramas, instead, tend to exclude not only the vistas of the Peak District, but the ridges of the Black Mountains, and the crags of the Pennines; neither the North York Downs nor of the Lake District have any place in this England. The England of the costume drama is, particularly, a vision of the south of England, with Hardy's coastline to the south, Constable's farmland to the east, and Shakespeare country to the north. The genre, it could be said, is afflicted with what Marjorie Hope Nicolson has referred to as a 'Mountain Gloom' – a disregard of mountain scenery (qtd. in Nye, 2). This England, then, is not a wilderness – it is not the vast expanse of the American frontier, and not even the dramatic landscape of the Scottish Highlands. It is, instead, a "very English Garden of Eden" (Dixon, 7).

This "very English" Eden is found beneath the shelter of woodland, in the secluded meadow, and in the enclosed pasture. This is not the landscape of Monument Valley, which represents the prospects of the West – as described by Edward Buscombe (104) – but a landscape encapsulating the restrained, the safe, and the predictable. It is not the landscape of the perils of the gunfighter, the quest to rescue the damsel in distress, the duel at high noon, it is, instead, the quiet country life, away from the city – the cottage nestled in amongst the cliffs in *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995), and the rows of stone houses in *Persuasion* (Roger Michell, 1995). This enclosed landscape is

epitomised in the opening scene of *Northanger Abbey* (Jon Jones, 2007) – the shot is framed with the *repoussoirs* of overhanging branches of a tree in the foreground, and leads the eye towards figures walking the path of the field behind, as in the idealised Claudean landscape painting described by Tom Gunning (34). Unlike the panoramic landscapes of nineteenth-century American painting, however, the mid-ground is devoid of horizontal depth, while the viewpoint is not from above looking onto the valley below, but from within the Garden itself. This landscape is not the vistas of the Adirondacks depicted by the Hudson River School; instead it is reminiscent of Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds* (1823) – a particularly English landscape (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: The opening of *Northanger Abbey* (2007), in which the church spire is framed by foliage of the foreground.



Figure 4: John Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Ground* (1823), which similarly frames the spire with trees.

This enclosure of space appeared as the motif of the *Hortus conclusus* during the Middle Ages, and, into the Renaissance, became further associated with the earthly paradise of the Garden; referring to an “enclosed garden”, the phrase is etymologically related to the Greek Garden of Eden (Jeffrey, 363). England has, for centuries, been represented as an enclosed space – around 1709, Isaac Watts wrote of the “walled” garden of England, “enclosed by grace” and out of the “world’s wilderness” (“We Are A Garden...”). Some years later the land was lawfully enclosed following the passing of the Enclosure Act of 1773, enabling individuals to claim ownership of and restrict access to plots of land (Fairlie), resulting in the subdivision of land, allocation of plots, and the demarcation of boundaries. Although the loss of the common land was mourned by John Clare – as he looked back to a time when “Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene / Nor fence of ownership crept in between” (*The Mores*, 7-8) – it has formed the English landscape still seen today.

As an enclosed landscape, then, the English countryside not only resembles the Garden of Eden – Milton repeatedly describes the paradise as “enclosed” (*Book III*, 20) – but symbolises Raymond Williams’ concept of the “knowable community” (165). Described as a community of direct relationships, the knowable community is found among the characters of Jane Austen’s novels – the Elliots, the Musgroves and the Naval officers of *Persuasion*, and the companions of the Bennets at Netherfield and Rosings in *Pride and Prejudice*. Again, then, this is not the unchartered territory of the lone-cowboy, but the domestic landscape of the family – it is, essentially, *home*.

The knowable community has, however, become increasingly “harder to sustain” in the postmodern age (Williams, 165). Not only have knowable communities been eradicated – as has the provincial life on which they depended. The Garden of Eden, then, is already a paradise lost. As Andrew Higson suggests, the memories of the afternoons spent punting along the river, the day by the riverbank and the summers exploring the gardens of the country estate in *Brideshead Revisited* are “set up, only to be destroyed” (103), as the realities of repressed homosexuality, family feuds, and lost faith return. The film emerges from the flashback to the present day – to the beginning of the second World War – by which time Sebastian has descended into alcoholism, and Charles declares himself to be “homeless, childless, middle-aged and loveless”. The estate of Brideshead itself, since acquired as an army barracks, is “desolate”. Tess, meanwhile – in Ian Sharp’s adaptation – seems to re-discover the Garden of Eden, as she talks with Angel, and becomes cast as the Garden’s Eve. She is in harmony with the natural world, declaring not to have “outdoor fears”, and Angel even likens her to the Greek goddess of purity. Tess is, however, neither virtuous nor chaste, and, as she wilfully – fatefully – takes a bite of the apple in her hand, they begin to talk of suffering, and of mortality. By the end of the film, Tess is tried for murder, and executed. The Garden of Eden for Tess, then, is already lost.

Even as a paradise lost, there remains a fundamental longing for Man to return to the Garden of Eden. Following on from a tradition in literature, poetry, art, the English countryside in film – and in particular in the costume drama – has been reclaimed as the Garden, and as all that it represents – “innocence ... faith ... and bliss”. The “very English Garden of Eden”, however, is found not in the vast landscapes of the

mountains, crags and fells, but in the enclosed landscapes of the garden at Brideshead, the pasture near Longbourn, and the meadow at the Talbothays. “This other Eden”, however, is an *imagined* England – it is the England of Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, and of E.M. Forster. And yet, as long as Man longs to return to the Garden of Eden, this England will endure – as Bob Hope remarked, “There’ll always be an England ... even if it’s in Hollywood” (qtd. in Dalton, 2).

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