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978-0-521-76865-8 - Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780-1870

Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith

Excerpt

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In Charlotte Smith's *Rambles Farther* (1796), Mrs. Woodfield plans an expedition for the four young girls under her tutelage. Her exemplary daughters Henrietta and Elizabeth are passionate botanists who prefer the idea of a visit to Curtis's Botanic Garden followed by some nurseries in Chelsea; the other two girls, however, seem to require more of what Wordsworth called "outrageous stimulation,"¹ in this case Merlin's museum of mechanical swings, horses, and other amusements.² Her brother proposes a compromise: "I will decide for two of these pleasures, since you have time for them; and Ella here will like the miracles of Merlin, as well as your two little disciples of Flora the gardens they are to visit afterwards."³ Mrs. Woodfield and her daughters are fictional representations of the passion for gardens and botany so prevalent at the end of the eighteenth century, and as we shall see in our *Disciples of Flora*, well into the next. Smith's *Rural Walks* (1795) and *Rambles Farther* illustrate the kind of mental and moral cultivation that could be acquired through gardening and botanizing, differing notably from the frivolous entertainments embodied in Ella and her desire for the more immediate pleasures to be found at Merlin's.

From 1780 to 1870, a period marked by major political, technological, and cultural changes, the domesticated landscape was central to women's complex negotiation of private and public life. Women writers and artists used the subject matter of gardens and plants to educate their audience, to enter into political and cultural debates, particularly around issues of gender and class, and to signal moments of intellectual and spiritual insight. As more women became engaged in gardening and botanical pursuits, the meanings of gardens – recognized here both as actual sites of pleasure and labor and as conceptual or symbolic spaces – became more complex. During this period the home landscape functioned more overtly than previously as a transitional or liminal zone. Often viewed as an enclosed refuge during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, valued for its safe removal from the noise, grime, and moral decay of the increasingly industrialized city,

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the garden also offered a protected vantage point for engagement with the wider world and the means of expressing one's skills and aspirations to a larger audience than the intimate family circle.

The textuality of gardens – the recognition that they, in the words of John Dixon Hunt, “represent the larger world outside them”⁴ – is central to our investigation of both canonical and lesser-known women, and we will see that a study of the domesticated landscape crosses many divides as it reveals unexpected relationships among women. Gardens provided women with a new language and authority to negotiate between domestic space and the larger world. Although this more expansive form of domesticity still highlighted the virtues associated with the feminized home, it also promised a wider field of action. In this way framing devices such as doors and windows, boundaries such as walls and gates, and spatial relationships such as those between the drawing room and arbor become important markers of the dynamic between inside and outside, refuge and prospect. Despite the visual and symbolic constraints of the walled enclosure that was considered the ideal for middle- and upper-class properties, the garden offered expanded possibilities that re-centered domesticity outward. During this period many women writers and artists focused on that spatial progression from the interior of the home into and through the garden.

The idea of cultivating a garden became a foundational metaphor in educational theory and practice. Both the radical Mary Wollstonecraft and the evangelical conservative Hannah More, for instance, use versions of this metaphor of the garden in their writings on women and education. Wollstonecraft opens her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by claiming that women's manners are in an unhealthy state; like flowers that have been planted in an over-rich soil, “strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty.”⁵ More also grounds her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) in a poetics of cultivation, arguing that pampered women are like the plants of “the luxuriant southern clime,” a comparison which encourages indolence rather than industrious attempts at improvement.⁶ Both writers prefer the nurturing of unpretentious native plants to hothouse exotics, but most importantly they shift the discourse from seeing women themselves as flowers or gardens – objects to be admired while fresh and blooming – to identifying women as agents, as gardeners involved in the process of growth. They turn the tables on writers like Rousseau, who in his popular *Letters on the Elements of Botany, Addressed to a Lady* (translated into English in 1796) muses to the recipient, “I fancy to myself a charming picture of my beautiful cousin busy with her glass examining heaps of flowers, a hundred times less flourishing, less fresh, and less agreeable

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than herself.”⁷ This language of cultivation, with its contested positioning of women as objects or agents, permeates the discussions of gender and education from the 1780s on into the Victorian period. Gardening is both a metaphor for development and itself a form of mental cultivation, an activity that inspires growth for the people who engage in it.

Given this horticultural underpinning of educational theory and practice, it is not surprising that garden settings and botanical instruction appear in many of the children's books and instructional texts of the period, as in *Rambles Farther*. Gardens, greenhouses, and nearby woods and fields become the site and subject matter of much instruction for children and young adults; scientific, moral, religious, and epistemological issues dominate the discussion. Gardens are places where children learn to sympathize with the minutest details of creation – in fact a major theme of botanical writing is the cultivation of sympathy. The traditional association between women and the ethics of care led to the garden being viewed as a school for virtue, evident throughout the children's literature discussed here.

Because of the garden's associations with Edenic myths, intimacy, and childhood, it was often constructed by women writers and artists as an idyllic realm, imbued with nostalgia and memory. As a result, we often see emotional connections with the garden, as it becomes a statement of personality and character as much as a stage for practical action. Women also engaged in a robust practical literature that developed in the early nineteenth century, including gardening manuals and how-to books. These texts cover not only the practical questions of gardening but also, especially in the Victorian period, issues of social propriety. While Dorothy Wordsworth dug in the dirt without commenting on its social acceptability, writers such as Jane Loudon address the question of whether a woman who does so can still be considered a lady. The class-consciousness of practical gardening literature also permeates the novels of Margaret Oliphant, for whom gardens are both important sites for revelation of character and key signifiers of social class and standing in the community. Oliphant's Carlingford novels admirably display the influence of horticultural theory and practice in mid-Victorian England.

Our study draws on a variety of theoretical sources, including early studies of the cultural role of space by Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan, the more garden-oriented writings of John Dixon Hunt, and recent texts by the feminist geographers Gillian Rose, Doreen Massey, Mona Domosh, and Joni Seager. Bachelard's concept of “topoanalysis,” for instance, and his discussion of the “dialectics of outside and inside” in *The Poetics of Space*

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(1958) inform our understanding of the garden as a bounded but mutable and permeable space. His concern with notions of refuge and enclosure and his interest in thresholds and doors are also important to our analysis. In marking a human tendency to move outward, necessitating an expansion beyond the nest – what he calls an “explosion toward the outside” – his approach undergirds our own.⁸

Tuan's distinctions in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) between freedom and security also inform our readings and conceptual frame. He asserts that the stable centering of “place” (or home, in our use of the term) should be recognized as a “concretion of value” from which “the openness, freedom, and threat of space” (the world around and beyond the home) can be experienced. Our idea of the domesticated landscape as an arena for practical, political, and symbolic action has roots in Tuan's statement that “Space assumes a rough coordinate frame centered on the mobile and purposive self.”⁹ Building on Tuan, we argue that women in their various modes of textualizing – whether in their personal lives, intimate letters and diaries, published writings, or visual images – acquired additional layers of private and public meaning by adding the landscape spaces beyond the home to their root sense of domestic place. Both Bachelard and Tuan also recognize the role of memory and nostalgia in the spatial mapping of our lives, a process involving the continual renegotiation of ideas about center and periphery over time.

Stephanie Ross, in *What Gardens Mean* (1998), proposes “enclosure” and “invitation” as two modes of experiencing the garden: the former suggests “comfort, security, passivity, rest, privacy, intimacy, sensory focus, and concentrated attention,” the latter, presupposing a long view or prospect, incorporates curiosity and risk as well as ownership and control. Although she does not acknowledge here the ways in which such a dichotomy is overlaid with traditional views of sexual difference, the gendering of protected spaces and open prospects, or, more simplistically, inside and outside, is a commonplace by now.¹⁰ The feminized home of the Victorian period is perhaps the starkest example of this idea of interior removal.

Hunt's *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (2000) is a key text in theorizing gardens and garden writing, and his basic definition of a garden both as bounded space and as a cultural object that functions rhetorically is also central for us. His statement that “Garden enclosures both define their spaces and appeal across boundaries – by way of representation, imitation, and allusion – to a world dispersed elsewhere” acknowledges the function of gardens as powerful social signifiers. As “concentrated or perfected forms of place-making,” they highlight the changing realities of

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women who were struggling to make meaningful lives within the limited scope of action available to them.¹¹

Gillian Rose and other feminist geographers provide us with a different way of interpreting the role of gardens in women's lives. Rose's recognition of "the everyday [as] the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested" supports our study of the garden as a space in which women both were trained within traditional structures and asserted themselves against those constraints. In her groundbreaking book *Feminism and Geography* (1993) Rose reveals the limitations of humanistic geography as practiced by Tuan, among others, and in its place she calls for a feminist approach that accommodates women "as complex and diverse social subjects." She reminds us that only an essentially masculinist geography could characterize the home-ground so unproblematically as a safe and stable place, and in fact she proposes that female identity in all of its diversity can only flourish through the loss of the constraining "safety" of home. She further critiques the humanistic geographers' concept of "topophilia" as centered on an idealized view of "place" that involves "thoughtless passivity and unthinking immersion in the natural." Rose observes that landscape is more than a cultural construct based on visual perception, but that it also entails a complex system of power relations.¹² As Susan Ford notes in "Landscape Revisited: A Feminist Reappraisal" (1991), the controlling and "unavoidably phallogocentric" gaze that surveys the sweeping vistas of a landscape is fundamentally different from the participatory "matriarchal aesthetic." She suggests that the socialized female gaze is "transvestite," in that it has been socialized to take part in the masculine survey but also is rooted in quotidian details. The domestic garden of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is thus, according to Ford, "a landscape which is heavily feminized," blending "the rational and emotional dimensions of those who participated in it."¹³

Rose presents the notion of "paradoxical space," or "complex and contradictory spatialities," as a way to reorient our understanding of geography away from an exclusive view to one that "speaks of power, resistance and the acknowledgement of difference." She deconstructs the opposition of inside and outside as a Deleuzian "snag or ... pleat," rather than as two separate, neatly bounded domains, and we too find that women's movement in and through the garden is a complex mapping that calls for an acceptance of this kind of paradoxical spatial pleating.¹⁴ As Rose argues, "These feminist maps are multiple and intersecting, provisional and shifting,"¹⁵ and the fluctuating nature of this kind of geography lies at the heart of our analysis of garden spaces.

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Like Rose, Doreen Massey in *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994) complicates the idea of home as a bounded, secure place and instead proposes that because of the dynamic nature of social relations the identity of home must be “for ever open to contestation”: “A large component of the identity of that place called home derived precisely from the fact that it had always in one way or another been open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it.”¹⁶ The garden, we propose, is one of the spaces of greatest flux in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century view of the home-ground, as it operates as a kind of valve (or pleat) that paradoxically both reinforces and destabilizes the idea of the home as a protected retreat.

Observing that “space is gendered,” Mona Domosh and Joni Seager in *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (2001) assert that “spatial organization and relations are not simply a neutral backdrop for human dramas, but instead help to shape them.” Like many geographers, they use the terms space and place as contrasting signifiers, space simply referring to “the three-dimensionality of life” whereas place is “invested with meaning,” especially of a personal nature.¹⁷ They recognize that “the geography of daily life” is traversed by – and thus “invested with meaning” by – physical bodies, and “When the ‘wrong’ bodies are in the ‘wrong’ places – when women walk into male spaces or vice versa – this is often translated into a challenge to norms of feminine or masculine behavior.”¹⁸ Following their lead, throughout this book the question of who belongs in the garden – whose place is it, and how is it invested with meaning? – underlies our exploration of women’s texts and images.

Our book also takes into account the groundbreaking work of Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science* (1996), although our embracing of gardens in the more inclusive sense is wider; Shteir focuses more specifically on botany, especially on the divide that appears in the early Victorian period between amateur botanists and science, the realm largely claimed by men. More recently, in *Botany, Sexuality and Women’s Writing 1760–1830* (2007), Sam George recognizes that the feminization of botany actually begins with such writers as Rousseau, whose *Letters* were influential at the end of the eighteenth century. As we argue here, many women writers in various genres question Rousseau’s association of women with flowers, choosing instead to resist such a passive relationship with nature. Furthermore, unlike Shteir and George, we are interested in the broader category of women and domesticated landscape, which includes botanical writing but also texts related to gardening, garden design, and horticulture as well as the more didactic or moralizing approaches found in children’s

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literature and etiquette manuals of the period. Other recent books, such as Jill H. Casid's *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (2004) and Beth Fowkes Tobin's *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760–1820* (2005), also intersect in interesting ways, but both of these studies are centered on colonial gardening or the influence of empire.¹⁹

Many early nineteenth-century women – living and writing from the inside, quite literally, of this spatial divide – attempted to validate their domestic lives by presenting the small, daily details, unremarkable when considered individually, as a model in microcosm for the larger ideal of a well-ordered society based on duty and devotion. The fictional mother in *Correspondence between a Mother and Her Daughter at School* (1817), co-authored by Jane Taylor and her mother Ann, explains in a letter extolling the virtues of home that “*Men* have much to do with the world without; *our* field of action is circumscribed.” But she added in a significant aside, “yet, to confine ourselves within its humble bounds, and to discharge our duties there, may produce effects equally beneficial and extensive with their wider range.”²⁰ These writers and artists often drew on garden imagery to illustrate the ideal of an inner sanctum, characterized by growth, beauty, and meaningful work, within and from which women could influence larger spheres of action. For the popular Mrs. Ellis in her book on *The Mothers of England* (1843), the mother is “enclosed, as it were, in the home-garden with her daughters.”²¹ Reminding us of Edmund Burke’s gendered reading of the sublime and the beautiful, she compares the simple, small events of a woman’s life to “the green knolls in a lovely landscape, left out by the painter as insignificant in comparison with the rocky heights, the falling torrents, and the precipitous ravines; yet chosen by the husbandman, and cultivated with particular care, because they alone are capable of yielding the harvest upon which his happiness depends.” Her conservative view, in which women should be content with “the freshness, the verdure, and fertility” of home rather than always seeking for the “cold and barren” heights,²² is balanced, as we will see, by those women who used the garden and near landscape as a zone for experimentation, a place to flex their physical and mental muscles, thus prompting greater freedom and experimentation in their lives.

We have divided the book into four interrelated parts, and in the first of these, “Moral order: the school of nature,” we discuss instructional texts in several genres and some of the educational roles that gardens play in the stages of human development. Often these books are set in what we would now call learning communities. In “The visual frame: constructing a view,”

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we present public as well as private modes of apprehending nature through various framing devices – both physical, such as the window, and experiential. The third part, “Personal practice: making gardens grow,” includes analyses of those texts that are technically how-to books as well as journals and diaries that function as ways of seeing and interpreting the meaning of gardens. Finally, in “Narrative strategies: plotting the garden,” we focus on the ways that gardens are represented and employed to further developments of plot or character in several works of narrative fiction.

Chapter 1, “‘In the home-garden’: moral tales for children,” explores the way in which many of the books written for children during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries use flowers, gardening, botany, and the larger natural landscape as a means of inculcating a range of virtues, both for the young girls and boys who were the primary recipients of these lessons and for the parents who were the educational mentors. Mrs. Ellis’s “home-garden,” a place of beauty nurtured by women and their apprentice daughters as a haven or retreat, was a common ideal of the period. The cultivated garden was a training ground for children, set apart from the wildness of nature but more flexible, both spatially and socially, than the confined rooms of the home. Operating as a moral as well as physical threshold, the garden separated the refuge of home from the risky freedom of more public spaces while also serving as a transition between the two. Through the lessons learned in that safe, protected realm, children’s unruly temperaments could be transformed into the moral order of a virtuous life. The arbor was a key site for the apprenticeship of children into their adult responsibilities, as it enabled experimentation and role-playing, while the garden wall and gate were recognized as clear boundaries, particularly for girls, to demarcate the extent of their domestic domain. Spatial markers connecting the house with the garden (the window, the porch, the arbor) and the garden with the outside world (the gate, the fence) served as physical and moral tropes around which children’s lives were structured.

Chapter 2, “The ‘botanic eye’: botany, miniature, and magnification,” looks at botanical texts, many of them designed for children and young adults, through theories of the miniature: Bachelard’s idea that “the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens an entire world,” as well as Susan Stewart’s claim in *On Longing* (1993) that the miniature “presents domesticated space as a model of order, proportion, and balance.”²³ In many women’s botanical texts from the late eighteenth century through the early Victorian period, the goal of teaching botany is not just – or even mainly – scientific knowledge; instead, botany is a discipline that leads the student to observe

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nature closely and to imagine the interior world that microscopy and magnification reveal as infinitely expansive. Although the overt goal of such sympathetic apprehension of minute particulars is greater understanding of plant structure and “physiology,” an appreciation of the divine underpinning of these insights gives the study of smallness a sense of grandeur and discovery.

As seen in Chapter 3, “Picturing the ‘home landscape’: the nature of accomplishment,” women represented the natural world in a variety of ways during this period, from the amateur hobbies of needlework, flower painting, and sketching the landscape to the more professional skill of botanical illustration. Although authors such as Hannah More scornfully rejected the emphasis on female “accomplishments” – setting the young woman intent on superficial pleasure and admiration in opposition to the sensible, reasonable wife and mother – others recognized the value of seeing and ordering (and thus taming or domesticating) the world of nature through a woman’s eyes. The practical, the sensible, the intellectual, and the aesthetic were all components of this new mix of female attributes under scrutiny during this period. The paintings of the successful Royal Academy exhibitor Maria Spilsbury and the botanical illustrations of Anna Maria Hussey will reveal the shifting divide between interior and exterior, near and distant, and amateur and professional. As creative, mobile women operating in multiple spheres, these two artists, like others discussed in this chapter, used their images of nature to acknowledge their actual and metaphorical location in the world. Centered in the home, they were able to apply what we might call domestic confidence to their observation of the landscape, whether in its minute particularities, as with Hussey’s study of fungi, or its framing of personal narratives, as in Spilsbury’s portraits and cottage scenes.

Ann and Jane Taylor are well known for their children’s poetry, such as *Original Poems for Infant Minds* (1804–05), but they also wrote a wealth of letters and other personal texts, as explored in Chapter 4, “Commanding a view: the Taylor sisters and the construction of domestic space.” Jane Taylor’s *Memoirs and Poetical Remains* (compiled by her brother and published in 1826) and Ann’s *Autobiography* (edited by her son and published in 1874) are valuable sources that set up a personal topography, laden with nostalgic and poetic overtones, that allowed them to explore the emotional spaces of home. Boundaries or transitional motifs of various kinds – including doors, windows, porches, arbors, and, in a larger sense, the garden itself – served for them as both linking and separating devices, helping to orient them within the larger domestic refuge. Through their public and private writing the sisters reconfigured the idea of home as an emotional

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and spatial construction, affected by memory, loss, and nostalgia as well as the ordinary events of lived experience.

Chapter 5, “Dorothy Wordsworth: gardening, self-fashioning, and the creation of home,” proposes that the reconfiguration and construction of the garden as a central element of home was the work of both Dorothy Wordsworth’s imagination and her hands. Her experiment in gardening and the written record that she kept set the pattern for the way she approached the natural world, as documented in several travel journals in later years. The garden is both a very real place where Wordsworth collects and names native plants and also the textual space where she fashions herself and reflects on what it means to be at home in the world. Dorothy Wordsworth’s imaginative labor, including her journals and travel diaries which she shared in manuscript with her intimate circle, stands on its own as a contribution to the history of gardening, garden writing, and the aesthetic and ethical response to the natural world.

According to the early gardening manuals by Maria Elizabeth Jacson, Elizabeth Kent, Louisa Johnson, and Jane Loudon discussed in Chapter 6, “‘Work in a small compass’: gardening manuals for women,” the high standards set for work in the home – including neatness, order, and industry – should not be lowered in the domesticated landscape outside. In Loudon’s books, in particular, we find a certain tension among various overlapping and sometimes competing ideas about gardening, in particular about what could be considered appropriate action for middle-class women in the garden. Should they serve only as designers or managers, in their role as arbiters of taste, or was it suitable for them to do some, or all, of the manual labor? As supervisors, they could refine and aestheticize nature from a decorous distance, but when they picked up shovels to dig, did the dirt and sweat of their labor orient them too shockingly toward the masculine? Loudon, Johnson, and other early writers of garden manuals vacillated at times between the rhetoric of social expectations and the practical reality of active women. Though occasionally retreating into the standard language of Victorian discourse about femininity, they enabled their readers to see new possibilities of enterprise and occupation in the garden.

Chapter 7, “‘Unbought pleasure’: gardening in *Cælebs in Search of a Wife* and *Mansfield Park*,” considers two novels, Hannah More’s *Cælebs* (1808) and Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), as representing two different perspectives on the “usefulness” of gardens. For More, the garden is intimately connected to the ideal Christian woman’s philanthropic work in the community. Her character Lucilla Stanley uses the garden to launch her philanthropy and to teach others the virtue of charity. She grows plants (or directs