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Introduction

Gardens are places of pleasure and of punishment; they are places to read, to dance, to work, to laugh, to study, to labour, and to rest; they are places of horticultural competence and of happy amateurism; they are places to imagine, to make, to own and to visit; they are places which speak of elsewhere and places which signify home; they are places of retirement and of ostentation, they are places of transgression, of meditation, of excitement, boredom, seduction, luxury, and suicide. All but the last are the subject of this book.[1]

This, then, is a book about gardens; but more than that it is a book about eighteenth-century women and the gardens they created, inhabited, and imagined. It starts from the assumption that the shaping of physical space is the shaping also of identity, and that gardens are microcosms, speaking of and reacting to a world beyond themselves. It starts also with an anecdote. In the summer of 1761 Sarah Lennox could be found in the hay fields of Holland Park: dressed in her finest clothes, and with one eye on the turnpike road, she was a shepherdess in search of a prince (Figure 1). This was no pastoral daydream, however, for the prince in question was the newly crowned George III and for a time – with the aid of her pastoral trappings – it seemed that she might succeed in becoming the queen of England.[2] Ten years later, disgraced by an extra-marital affair and by the scandal of divorce, she had swapped the landscape of pastoral for a landscape of disgrace.[3] Where before she had been a beautiful shepherdess waiting for her handsome prince, now she was a penitent waiting for absolution; and where once she had inhabited the splendid gardens of Holland Park, now, wearing plain clothes and a doleful expression, she was banished to an old manor house and country obscurity in the recesses of her brother's estate at Goodwood. Forced by her family to exchange the pastoral for the penitential, Sarah Lennox traversed the extremes of how her society imagined a woman in a garden; at each extreme she knew only too well the conventions, the expectations, and the costs.

If this language of pastoral romance and shameful retirement, of shepherdesses, piety, and penitents, of old manor houses and Edenic gardens seems the fanciful stuff of fiction, the staple of poetic effusions, and in short

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Figure 1 Palemon and Lavinia, 1780 (engraved by John Raphael Smith; painting by William Lawrenson). ©The Trustees of the British Museum (2010,7081.2227)
Ostensibly an illustration of Thomson's pastoral lovers in *The Seasons*, the image was popularly thought to represent George III and Sarah Lennox. Holland House is recognisable in the background to the right.

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a 'literary' world we should be careful to distinguish from lived experience, in the course of this book I will be arguing instead that such literary models were never far from the leisured elite, that they were amongst the first, and most powerful, associations to come to mind, and that when we look to the gardens created by women in the eighteenth century, the languages of retirement and disgrace, of pastoral, piety, and penitence are fundamental to the ways in which they imagined themselves and were in turn imagined by others. As Roy Strong notes: 'Actual gardens never quite shed their relationship to a rich literary inheritance. Such concepts would have been part of the furniture of the mind of any educated viewer of both actual and imaginary gardens.'[4]

It is as well to be clear about what kind of garden I have in mind here, and what kind of women. Along with the traditional kitchen gardens, fruit gardens, and flower gardens that take centre stage in the horticulturalist Philip Miller's long-running *Gardeners and Florists Dictionary* (first published 1724), the eighteenth century saw the burgeoning of town gardens and the increasing popularity of public pleasure gardens in London and other large cities.[5] It is not, however, kitchen gardens or fruit gardens, public pleasure gardens or town gardens that form the focus of this book; instead, it is the large-scale landscape gardens which came to be associated with an English style. By the middle of the eighteenth century that style had developed into various forms – in his influential *Observations on Modern Gardening* of 1770, Thomas Whately suggested the categories of ornamented farm, park, riding, and pleasure garden; other writers offered alternative divisions and distinctions – but with the need for large areas of land, and a concomitantly large income, one factor that held them together was that these gardens were beyond the reach of most. A focus on women who created such gardens inevitably means that this book is concerned with an educated, leisured, wealthy, and relatively tight-knit female elite; but this small group of women offer us an extraordinary density of writing about gardens which, while public in some sense, were nevertheless recognized as a private venture, as an image of their owner, as an opportunity to articulate one's identity, and as a place in which, and on which, one would be judged.

Even amongst this group of elite women, female experience can all too often disappear within estate papers and the 'shared' records of married life, or be misleadingly confined to the flower and kitchen garden. However, where sustained personal records do survive, large-scale gardens in the country clearly offered quite distinct opportunities both for female owners and for female visitors. As a private space visited by the public, as a public space shaped by a private individual, as a space in which one might very

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often be alone, and as a landscape designed to look beyond, and to resist domestic containment with its far-reaching views and a vision of large-scale change, the landscape garden was addressed by eighteenth-century women owners and women visitors with a sustained and particular intensity.

Part of the reason to write of gardens when in the country was that – unlike the town, with its more disparate, and more often indoor, pleasures and fascinations – the country offered fewer distractions; and part of the reason to write of the *landscape* garden was that it offered elite women a peculiarly dense, suggestive, at times contradictory, but undoubtedly nuanced means of writing about themselves. The gardening women I offer in this book are chosen because they have left to us a sustained record of their thoughts and actions and aspirations, but chosen, too, because they had an acute sense of what, and how, the garden could mean.

One of the most powerful aspects of the garden in the eighteenth century is that it allowed men and women, those who owned and those who merely visited, to claim its rich cultural resources as their own. In this they were aided by a great wealth of religious, literary, and practical writing that made the garden as much a metaphorical as a physical space. Gardens are not of course unique as spaces of solitude or retirement, of display or of ostentation.[6] They are, however, the locus for a recognisable complex of interconnected activities and concerns which range from solitude to sociability, from planning to planting, from politics to pleasure, and they carry a cultural freight on which individuals draw, or in which they can find themselves implicated and embroiled.

Tom Williamson has rightly argued that a stress on the literary has misled us in the past into a false account of eighteenth-century garden design by emphasising what was written over what actually happened on the ground. My concern is rather different; for, while Williamson's careful work brilliantly traces the physical layout of a garden, its changing appearance, and its broad social significance, that is only one part of its existence: as Williamson is also keenly aware, its significance lies at least as much in what is brought to it by an individual as in what is physically present. To put women back into garden history we should be less concerned with those narratives of innovations in design that have always championed the work of men, and we should turn instead to the sources in which women actually appear and to the cultures on which they drew.[7] We should turn, that is, to the letters, journals, and diaries, to the fiction and to the poetry in which women's gardens continue to have their existence. The world of letters and of cultural imagination was not just some literary exercise for women who gardened; rather it was a crucial part of the way in which they engaged with a world beyond

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their apparent rural seclusion. Indeed, if they have been largely omitted from narratives of garden history, women who gardened nevertheless confronted and were forced to engage with some of the central cultural narratives with which eighteenth-century society sought to understand itself.[8] Moreover, when we turn to the accounts of gardening left to us by eighteenth-century women, passive acceptance of gender roles and the cultural narratives that support them is far from universal. Rather, gardens are recognised as the opportunity for a self-fashioning engagement with cultural norms and narratives, a space in which the disparate agenda of eighteenth-century culture would inevitably have to be confronted.[9]

As an activity, gardening confronts the individual with both their influence over, and their place within, the world. Many of the documents left to us by amateur gardeners may appear to address little more than the vagaries of the weather, but even in this they imply the delight of seeing things grow and the disappointments of decay. Gardeners, that is, invest their hopes in plants that can all too easily wither under the external influences of the elements, diseases and pests, or from the gardener's own inattention or indifference. It is not that such experiences necessarily lead to reflection on one's place in the world, but they certainly provide the occasion for such reflection, and many women who gardened in the eighteenth century took that opportunity.

The eighteenth century provided a range of easily available models for such meditation and their interest lies not least in how the individual might engage with those conventions, embrace or resist them, question or deny them. Thus, for example, seemingly endless poems and essays celebrate the joys of country life, the advantages of retirement, or the pious opportunities offered by garden solitude; but if such writing could be turned to account for the individual's acts of self-fashioning, so too could it be wielded to reinforce eighteenth-century cultural norms of gender and class. In many cases such encomia could in principle at least be claimed by both men and women, and the garden could offer a shared space for labours at once physical and intellectual, moral and emotional. In important ways this is just what the idea of the garden did offer, both to men and to women; but it also allowed for a breaking down of those apparently shared interests along gender as well as class lines, and it was aided in this by a great mass of writing that claimed the garden as its subject while addressing issues spreading well beyond the cultivation of trees and flowers. When Sarah Lennox turned from pastoral romance to take up the role of penitential recluse after her ill-fated elopement with Lord William Gordon, both she and her family recognised, and then went on to reproduce, conventions to be found in

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popular magazines, in novels, and in moral tales. Her shift from pastoral to penitential was certainly physical in its geography, but it was also literary in that it repeated and reinforced the narratives her culture told itself, about itself, and literary too in that those narratives were articulated in terms of the complex language of retirement.

What is important here is that popular tales of seduction in gardens, of retirement to gardens, and of punishment in gardens, could jostle alongside biblical accounts of Eden, encomia on the joys of rural solitude, or classical tales of delightful retreat. At different moments each might be drawn upon to justify a way of life or a momentary experience, but each might also become a means for others to judge the individual against a claimed social norm and its inequalities. Notably, while in popular fiction and poetry men might be figured as melancholic recluses in the wilder parts of the countryside, or praised in poems for inactive leisure after public labours, it was women who were regularly punished with a lonely life in a garden that could give them no pleasure but only remind them of their loss.

For men who wished to do nothing but read there was a ready Roman inheritance; for men who wished to do nothing at all, that inheritance was conveniently refashioned by the likes of John Pomfret in his hugely popular celebration of retired sociability, *The Choice*.[10] Indeed, for the eighteenth-century man of leisure, myths of male retirement offered numerous justifications, and the figure of the man in the garden could be used to claim intellectual rigour, proper ease after political labours, or the innocent (and not so innocent) pleasures of quiet sociability away from the ambitions and corruptions of court and city. The creation or habitation of a garden offered a bulwark against accusations of being vulgar, or lazy, or dull: to garden was to create a work of art, to transform the physical world into the intellectual world of pastoral, to demonstrate one's distance from boorish rusticity, even to assert one's sense of national responsibility.

In the much repeated claim of Francis Bacon, gardening is an innocent pleasure; and its innocence is derived in part from its association with the intellectual, spiritual, and moral claims of retreat. For women, however, something far less comfortable is frequently at work, and that lack of comfort is acutely related to the problematic language of retirement with which eighteenth-century women had inevitably to engage. Certainly, in assuming the role of the penitential recluse in her plain clothes and obscure situation, Sarah Lennox adopted a set of retirement conventions wholly gendered in their assumptions about her misbehaviour, her necessary regret, and her equally necessary punishment. When her contemporary Henrietta Knight was thought to have had an affair with the Rev. John Dalton, the young

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parson still went on to modest success as a dramatist and writer of sermons, but Knight was immured in country obscurity for the rest of her life.[11] Poetry, piety, and literary tales could offer aspirational models for women who took to gardening on a large scale, but conversely they all too often reiterated and reinforced cultural expectations that could leave women alone in their gardens, that could taunt them with unattainable aspirations, and that as a result could damn them to disappointment, to disillusionment, and to a depressing sense of failure.

It is women's response to the clash of cultural narratives, traditions, and agenda surrounding the gardens in which they found themselves which offers us such a rich resource when we try to understand the place of the woman in the garden and the place of the garden in eighteenth-century culture. My aim is not to argue that when women created landscapes their actions and experiences were wholly different from those of men; it is, however, to argue that those experiences could be crucially different because of the gendered accounts of retirement received by both men and women. Often widowed, divorced, separated, or unmarried, women gardeners tended to be social and economic anomalies of a kind. As female landowners, such women confronted not only the dominant structures of landowning but the ideological freight which had built up around it. More than this, gardening signalled a peculiar kind of cultural agenda that distinguished it even from landowning: when it came to farming and estate management, landed women, like men, would inevitably use the services of local farmers, stewards, and overseers; when they gardened on a large scale their involvement was likely to be much more personal, and crucially, so too was their public identification with the landscape that they had created. Indeed, women who created landscape gardens inevitably engaged with the eighteenth century's understandings of women's place in the world, their relationship with the public sphere, with domestic space, with piety, luxury, retirement, and fame: if we turn to women's gardens, that is, those gardens turn us back to the larger culture of which they and their creators were a part.

When women gardened, then, they entered a conversation with both men and women, a conversation at once public and private, and a conversation which turned perhaps most frequently on the subject of retirement. However, while retirement for men was routinely inflected by a ready stock of classical examples, and justified with the easiest of nods to Horace, or Pliny, or Cincinnatus, for women such classical models were deemed of little relevance.[12] Thus, while men and women might share the same physical location, their sense of retirement might be quite different. What follows

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this introduction is an attempt first to identify the ideas and assumptions upon which such different experiences might draw, and second, to identify how the languages of retirement and gardening are played out in individual cases. Before we reach these case studies and the language of retirement with which they are so intimately entwined, however, I want to use the following pages to set out some contexts in which women and their gardens might most usefully be placed. Those contexts can be broken down into the following interrelated areas: a modern garden historiography still influenced by the eighteenth century's own insistence on design and innovation; conventionally gendered accounts of men and women's place in the garden; and women's robust responses to that gendered rhetoric of gardening which equates men with design, with education, and with intellect, but women with piety, domesticity, and sexuality.

My argument then is twofold: first, that far more women gardened on a large scale than most garden histories assume; and second that in gardening these women not only confronted their culture's assumptions about class and gender, but that these confrontations broaden our understanding of eighteenth-century gender politics as a whole.

With that in mind, this book recognises women's gardens – like men's – as an imagined quite as much as a physical space; and to make sense of that imagined space we must turn to the cultural languages in which that imagining was articulated, complete with their conflicting narratives and often quite divergent agendas.

The genius of the place / The place of genius

One of the founding myths of the eighteenth-century landscape garden is that it was the creation and the domain of men. Following the lead of eighteenth-century writers, modern historiography of the landscape garden has remained predominantly male in outlook and interests; it has placed at its centre the idea of male genius and the conceit of the male designer transforming a female Nature; and thus – with its fascination for design and for narratives of formal change – to read eighteenth-century garden history is predominantly to read a story of men. Characteristically, the names of professional designers from Charles Bridgeman (1690–1738) and William Kent (1685–1748) to Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716–83) and Humphry Repton (1752–1818) are used to articulate a series of 'breakthroughs' in design, all leading towards the 'natural' style of the late eighteenth century; to these professionals are usually added a handful of 'gentleman amateurs',

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including the likes of Charles Hamilton (1704–86) at Painshill, the banker Henry Hoare (1705–85) at Stourhead and the poet William Shenstone (1714–63) at the Leasowes. Equally, and despite the large number of gardens being created or remade throughout the century, the same few sites tend to recur in garden histories, whether those histories were written in the late eighteenth or the early twenty-first century.

A conventional account of changes in eighteenth-century garden design would run something like this: early in the century influential writers, including Sir Richard Steele and Alexander Pope started to reject the French and Dutch styles of gardening which had been popular since the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution (Charles II introducing the one, William and Mary introducing the other). They championed the removal of clipped hedges, parterres, and geometrical layouts, and in their place advocated a style of gardening that mirrored and drew into its bounds the natural beauties of the landscape. Thus, while the great Dutch topographical artists Jan Kip and Leonard Knyff's illustrations for *Britannia Illustrata* in the early decades of the century recorded the huge French-style geometrical layout of Badminton in Gloucestershire (Figure 2) or the careful topiary and parterres of Southwick in Hampshire, by the 1740s and 1750s it was the great show gardens of Stowe and Stourhead (Figure 3) which were in fashion, by the 1770s and 1780s it was the innumerable works of Capability Brown and his followers which were spreading across the land, and by the time that Jane Austen was writing her early novels, Brown's designs were in turn being adapted to a more domestic form by his self-styled successor, Humphry Repton.[13]

Whether we are told that the landscape garden is the apotheosis of 'natural' design, the culmination of an 'English' tradition, a site for personal engagement with nature, a killing ground for elite gift exchange, or a space asserting class solidarity, an emphasis on design and innovation has tended to cement the association between large-scale gardens and men.[14] In part, this is the doing of Horace Walpole (1717–97) who claimed in the middle of the eighteenth century that the landscape garden was a new and peculiarly English invention made possible only by the power of the landowning gentleman.[15] For Walpole, such gardens were the product of liberty and the aesthetic result of a political constitution that upheld the rights of the property-owning individual: his history of gardens is a history of inevitable progression towards 'Nature', but that account of the 'natural' is quite as much about politics, economics, and empire as it is about trees and fields and things that grow.

Not least thanks to Walpole, it became an eighteenth-century commonplace to associate the landscape garden with a kind of freedom Englishmen

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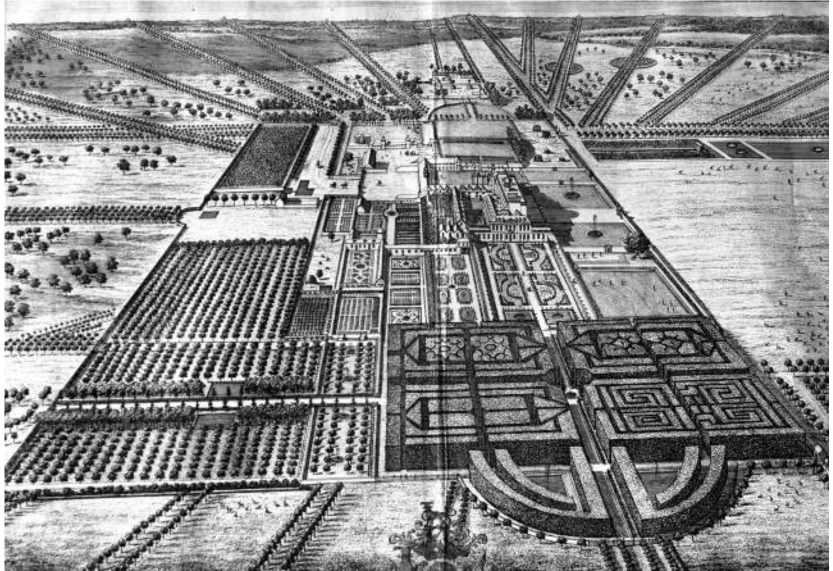

Figure 2 Badminton, Gloucestershire, from *Britannia Illustrata* (1708/9)
With its high clipped hedges and radiating avenues, Badminton's French-style gardens became increasingly unfashionable by the mid-eighteenth century. Kip and Knyff's image is conventional in entitling Badminton the seat of Henry Duke of Beaufort, but it was the Duchess (1630–1715) who was largely responsible for the gardens, amassing one of the largest collections of exotics in the country.

thought only they could know; but we should also be aware that this style of gardening made its appearance in a century which saw an increasing emphasis on property rights and a legal system which, while adopting a rhetoric of individual liberty, was in fact removing many of the traditional rights of the poor. In this sense, we should recognise landscape gardens not only as aesthetic objects but as a metaphor for the power of the ruling class and its legal system. The appearance of landscape gardens was made possible in part by the removal of public rights of way, the enclosure of common land, the rise of a wage economy, and an increasing rejection of a manorial system which had asserted not only the rights but the duties of the landowner.[16] Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the distance between those with property and those without grew ever greater: we should be wary, therefore, of over-adulatory claims for the glory that is the English garden and wary also of garden histories that repeat the self-serving rhetoric of an eighteenth-century male elite.

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