BOOK REVIEW

Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780 - 1870, by Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 388 pp. Hardback, £59.99. Paperback (2014), £18.99.

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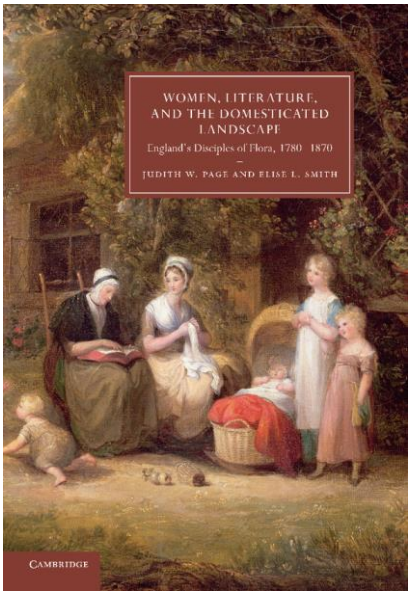

Originally published in 2011, Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith's ambitious, extensively researched, and beautifully illustrated monograph has recently been republished in a more accessible paperback form. The authors argue that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gardens functioned both as actual sites of pleasure and labour, and as complex symbolic spaces that were central to the ways in which women negotiated transitions between private and public life (p. 1). Represented as liminal zones, gardens often occupied contradictory positions as enclosed refuges and discomfiting locations for self-fashioning, and as sites of instruction and experimentation. Gardening, engaging in botanical studies, documenting the natural world in writing and in paint, and using the garden as a locus for social, moral, and cultural lessons, allowed women to successfully connect their seemingly contained domestic lives with larger socio-political prospects.

Building on the classic texts of Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan, and on the work of feminist geographers like Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey, Page and Smith attempt to bring a strong theoretical grounding to their exploration of garden spaces.[1] The book looks not only at gardens, but also at particular

[1] See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1964); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

articulations of the garden in the form of the arbor, the bower, and the greenhouse. It highlights the boundaries that separate gardens from interior spaces and exterior expanses, thus doors, windows, walls, and gates become focal points of analysis. The question at the heart of the book is not simply concerned with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century horticultural practices, but relates to larger interrogations about the nature of domesticity, interiority, and selfhood, and the charged negotiations between inside and outside. Drawing on the Deleuzian idea of the pleat, the authors propose that the garden '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 destabilises the idea of the home as a protected retreat' (p. 6).[2] Though a useful theoretical tool for Page and Smith, this notion remains underdeveloped and problematised by the fact that they reach it secondhand through the work of Rose, who herself arrives at it through Probyn.[3]

The book is divided into four sections, organised by theme and approach – moral order, visual frames, personal practice, and narrative strategies – , with each consisting of two chapters that read almost like self-contained essays. This clearly structured plan and chronological progression guides the reader smoothly through a vast range of sources and long historical span. However, this itself gestures towards the partial success of the work. The extraordinary diversity of texts examined is remarkable; moving from children's stories with obvious moral lessons to botanical studies, gardening manuals, poetry, personal journals, periodicals, and novels, Page and Smith build an impressive argument on the centrality of gardens and the language of cultivation in the cultural imagination of the period. Consequently, canonical works are put in conversation with lesser-known writings; poetic vision is explored along with the scientific eye, the imaginative along with the instructive, and the labour of the mind along with the toil of the hands. These close readings of texts are supported and extended by the book's visual material, which becomes one of its main strengths. However, the ambitious timeframe of the book is less successful. While the authors attempt to tell a longer story that links key

[2] The notion of the pleat reoccurs throughout Deleuze's work but is most clearly articulated in his book on Leibniz. See *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). For Deleuze, the fold (*le pli*) is a creative way of rethinking subjectivity in terms of continuum or process: the inside is simply a fold of the outside, and subjectivity may be understood as a complex arrangement of different kinds of folds.

[3] See Elspeth Probyn, 'This Body Which Is Not One: Speaking an Embodied Self', *Hypatia*, (Autumn 1991), pp. 111–124.

Romantic and Victorian ideas, the argument in the second half of the book falters and the leaps in time from one chapter to the next become less tenable.

Chapter One takes us to the gardens of children's moral tales, where these cultivated natural spaces function as safe and protected training grounds. In story after story, the garden reveals itself to be 'a moral, psychological, and physical threshold' that connects the sanctuary of the home with the risky adventure of the outer world (p. 17). It is in this in-between space that certain sensibilities may be inculcated most organically, with children acting out undesirable behaviour that can then be changed and restrained. Yet the stereotypical gender norms that were largely advocated in children's narratives, Page and Smith suggest, must not be read simply as rigid didacticism, but rather as models for empowerment in which women are given the tools to regulate their own behaviour. This potential for self-fashioning is at the centre of Chapter Two, which looks at botanical texts, often meant for children and young readers, that emphasised careful study of the natural world not simply for scientific learning, but for appreciating an aesthetic of the minuscule which would in turn lead to enlarged sympathies. Examining the fascinating journal of Emily Shore and the botanical studies of Maria Jacson, Agnes Ibbetson, and Mary Roberts, Page and Smith show the scientific curiosity of these female botanists, and the ways in which this peculiarly feminine science allowed these women the space for scientific expertise (p. 55), while their methodological rigour gave them access to the secret lives of everyday objects that could only be uncovered by intense observation (p. 67). This microscopic view of the world then morphed the rational scientist into the dreamer.

This creative mobility is further explored within the genres of botanical illustration and landscape painting, in Chapter Three. While the comparison of Anna Maria Hussey's detailed studies of fungi and Maria Spilsbury's paintings of cottages and family portraits underlines the overdetermined relationship between women and the domesticated natural world in the period, it interestingly shows the ways in which the two women cannily used this stereotype to consolidate their professional identities. The following chapter also focuses on two women, the sisters Ann and Jane Taylor, to uncover the personal topography manifested in Jane's drawings, as well as in their published and private writing. In doing so, it deciphers the centrality of the garden in the mapping of memories, homeliness, and intimacy, and in negotiating the tussle between domestic duties and professional desires evident in their work.

Dorothy Wordsworth's garden in Grasmere is the subject of Chapter Five. In Grasmere, Dorothy Wordsworth set about creating 'a natural garden',

transplanting into the domestic refuge local specimens from the wild. At the same time, she continued working on her journal and travel diaries, in which she recorded both her observations and gardening experiments. The garden and the book then become part of the same creative continuum, products of her imagination and her hands, through which she fashions a sense of self and a place for accommodating this self. Chapter Six subsequently takes up the question of practice, exploring the physical labour that gardening required and the suitability of this work for women. While tending the garden might be a healthy pursuit and akin to housekeeping, the idea of women digging in the dirt, soiling their hands, begriming their clothes, and sweating over manual work, was clearly a problematic one and produced a range of strategic responses in women's gardening manuals. One of the most interesting ways in which this anxiety was managed was through tools (rakes, hoes, shears, baskets, spades, forks, as well as specially designed long-handled wheelbarrows), that at once showed the serious commitment of the gardener to her work and made that work itself seem less arduous – more like an easy chore than an activity requiring serious physical exertion.

The final chapters of the book engage in analyses of gardens in novels: Lucilla Stanley's philanthropic gardening in Hannah More's *Cælebs* (Chapter Seven), Fanny Price's private potted garden in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (Chapter Seven), and Margaret Oliphant's fictional gardens in the Carlingford stories. The examination of Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (Chapter Eight) in particular brings together many of the issues that Page and Smith have already explored in the book. In all of these readings, the garden emerges as a 'working, productive, and sustaining plot of ground', containing possibilities for the formation of independent, articulate selfhoods (p. 214). However, this is where Page and Smith's argument most clearly shows its limits. While the authors repeatedly remind us of these potentialities, we are never really presented with these radical selves. In the epilogue, Page and Smith state that Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* leads us to 'a rich inner garden of transformation, interiority replacing exteriority as the site of greatest risk and potential' (p. 251). Yet, why is that risk left unexamined, gestured towards but finally marginal to the book's argument? The close readings, while thoughtful, do not probe and interrogate the text in ways that would unearth the fugitive, fragile crosscurrents that lie beneath the plot lines. For instance, Page and Smith fail to draw out the implications of the space and language of gardens in terms of sexuality and erotic desire. Women have long been associated with delicate flowers, ornamental hothouse exotics, vines that need to be trained, ivy that clings for support and sustenance, and to Eve in her pre-lapsarian

garden in a period of innocence and beauty. Women's bodies and sexual maturity are often described through floral metaphors – blooming, blossoming, flowering, unfurling – and the garden frequently acts as a metaphor for the body of the woman who tends or inhabits it. So Fanny Price's red geraniums are as much about her emergent sexual and romantic consciousness as they are about the cultivation of a quiet but confident selfhood.

Despite this blind spot, readers will find in this book much to think about. While the book may not describe the raptures, passions, and disordered emotions that gardens inspire, it does show the more placid contentment and delight they bring, and is a rich interdisciplinary resource for scholars interested in questions of women's self-fashioning and the politics of space.

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