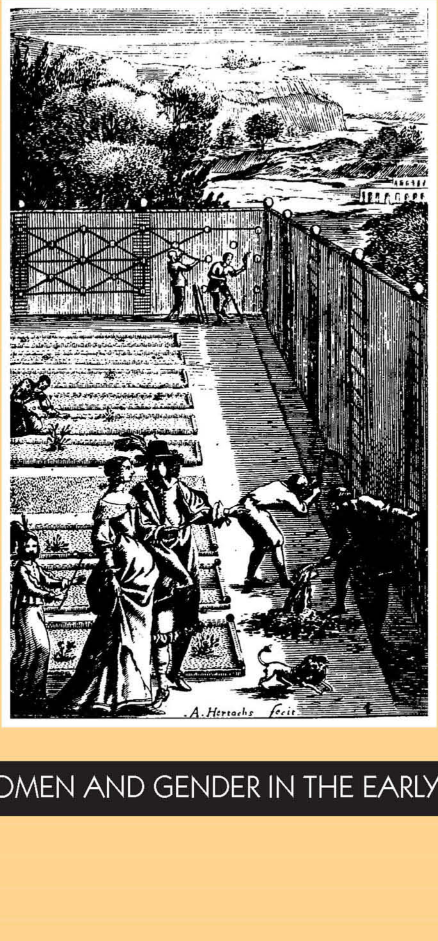
Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature

JENNIFER MUNROE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WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

GENDER AND THE GARDEN IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature

JENNIFER MUNROE
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

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Introduction

Laying the Groundwork

Each spring, countless men and women take shovels in hand and move outside to transform the landscape, whether that involves tackling a small flower plot in their backyards or a planting a community vegetable garden to share with friends and neighbors. No matter the scale of their gardens or their experience as gardeners, these enthusiasts proceed with a vigor unsurpassed by so many other kinds of household "work." Botanical gardens attract visitors from far and wide to spend a few hours, or perhaps the entire day, strolling in the well-kept beds of flowers both common and exotic. What is it about gardening that has captured the interest of the laborer and admirer alike for centuries, though? Just as they are today, early modern English gardens were sites of particular interest for men and women at least in part because they were spaces for growing things. Yet they were also ideologically-charged spaces that conveyed social meaning. *Gender and the Garden* reconstructs how gardens functioned as such spaces, how they typified what geographer Denis Cosgrove terms historically-contextualized and geographically-specific "ways of seeing" the world (xxix).[1] The book argues that early modern gardens, both actual and imagined, provide a window into how early modern social space—and of particular interest here, the gendered power relationships in it—was shaped and reshaped by people as they made and remade the places they inhabited. As such, this book understands the early modern English garden to be a site where men and women transformed the look of the natural world, but the garden was also a space where they could manipulate their position in society, too.

Looking at the relationship between gardens and gendered social identity reveals how gardens were imagined as complex and often contradictory sites of ideological struggle, where one could conceive of renegotiating social position as much as one might imagine fitting in.[2] In *The Description of England* (1577), for example, William Harrison suggests some of the garden's unspoken meanings when gardening was understood to be an artistic endeavor rather than as a subsistence practice alone:

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[1] Cosgrove's work has been influential not only for geographers but also for scholars in a variety of disciplines who study landscapes. Scholars have critiqued Cosgrove's claim that "a landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can only be understood as part of a wider history of economy and society" (xiv), citing the ways that such a thesis might draw attention to already-discussed groups of people who are foregrounded as part of dominant discursive systems, such as men and the aristocracy. The work since accomplished in Geography and other fields has shown, however, that the fundamental problem with Cosgrove's thesis was not his historicizing of landscape study but rather the range of people he studied as part of that history. Even though Cosgrove repeatedly posits the relational qualities of landscapes—as depending on both imagination and actual properties—he tends to emphasize the imagined characteristics more so than the actual ones. As should be clear from my emphasis on DeCerteau's and Lefebvre's work (as I discuss later in this Introduction), I believe that landscapes, and for the purposes of this book, gardens, are both.

> How art also helpeth nature in the daily colouring, doubling, and enlarging the proportion of our flowers, it is incredible to report; for so curious and cunning are our gardeners now in these days that they presume to do in manner what they list with Nature, and moderate her course in things as if they were her superiors…For mine own part, good reader, let me boast a little of my garden, which is but small and the whole area thereof little above three hundred foot of ground, and yet, such hath been my good luck in purchase of the variety of simples that, notwithstanding my small ability, there are very near three hundred of one sort and other contained therein, no one of them being common or usually to be had. If therefore my little plot, void of all cost in keeping, be so well furnished, what shall we think of those of Hampton Court, Nonsuch, Theobalds, Cobham Garden, and sundry other appertaining to divers citizens of London, whom I could particularly name if I should not seem to offend them by such my demeanor and dealing? (265, 270)

Harrison's observations reinforce how gardening marked human artistic superiority over a postlapsarian, or "fallen," natural landscape, even as it was simultaneously seen as and used to mark social differentiation too. Harrison, that is, does more than describe the gardens he saw. He also details their social significance: how the gardener's skill earns him admiration; how the aristocratic gardens at Theobalds and Nonsuch, for example, are paragons that other gardeners might aspire to; and how, even his own "small skill" helped him make a "little plot" that was "well furnished" enough to call to mind the gardens on England's great estates. At the same time, his description of gardening and the relationship between (masculinized) art and (feminized) nature together suggest an underlying gendered tension inherent to gardening. His phrase "as if they were her superiors" articulates anxiety about the extent to which those (male) gardeners to whom he refers *are* the superiors of (feminized) nature; and, the way that Harrison describes his "small plot" and the "simples" it contains aligns his garden (and his gardening practice) with women, who were admonished by male writers in printed gardening books to plant smaller scale gardens than men because women inherently had, like Harrison ironically claims of himself here, "small ability." Harrison certainly reiterates the familiar gendering of nature and art that underlies men's claim to superiority over women and their gardening, but at the same time his deferent position relative his own superiors in the art aligns him with women and destabilizes such otherwise easily gendered dichotomies.

As Harrison's and others' similar descriptions remind us, landscape practices are rooted in ideologies that penetrate the surficial or articulable signs registered by users, and ideologies have a direct bearing on the physical environment. Different kinds of gardens (kitchen versus aesthetic) and their specific purposes (subsistence versus show) each resonated ideologically in different ways.[3] While most kitchen gardens contained vegetables and herbs routinely found in household cooking and medicinal recipes, and the status of those who planted them was relatively equal, aesthetic pleasure gardens bore signs of differentiation and specialization—both among their growers and users and in the plants they selected for display. Aesthetic gardens in elite households often featured manicured hedges to create boundaries between the garden space and the rest of the physical landscape and within these gardens one likely found branches crafted into arbors for banqueting, topiaries that transformed small trees and bushes into geometrical designs, and hand-selected plants artfully shaped into knots, parterres, and labyrinths. These displays evinced what William Lawson described in *A New Orchard and Garden* (1617) as the way "Art restoreth the Collectrix of Nature's faults" by taking a disorderly landscape and making it beautiful. Even as these gardens represented the desire to order nature through human art they established a different hierarchical ordering among household members and garden laborers: aesthetic gardens might well be designed by the owner or his wife, overseen by a professional gardener, and planted by day laborers, the same men and women who may well have farmed their own piece of land as tenant farmers before the period of mass reallocation.[4]

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[2] See Chapter 8, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" in *Marxism and Literature*.

[3] See also the recent work of geographer Alan R.H. Baker, who sees landscapes as "expressive of authority" and bearing the signs of ideologies (5).

Still, aesthetic gardens were not strictly the domain of dominant groups alone. In fact, garden landscapes often represented competing interests in realigning authority, for the marginalized as well as the elite. I qualify Roy Strong's claim in *The Renaissance Garden In England*, then, that the formal, aesthetic garden during this period was "a symbol of pride and an expression of royal and aristocratic magnificence; *man* conquered the earth, tilled and planted it, subjecting it to *his* will" (11, my emphasis). Such a claim, albeit supported by the preponderance of examples in Strong's book, suggests that gardens were almost exclusively the domain of the male elite. True, formal gardens were almost exclusively the domain of royalty and aristocracy (and arguably, men) early on, but by the middle of the sixteenth century this changed. We know, for example, that the social status gained by land ownership and gardening extended beyond just the elite to the upwardly mobile middle class men and women as the sixteenth century progressed.[5]

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[4] For more information on the widespread land reallocation and enclosure movement in England during the sixteenth century, see Joyce Youings, *Dissolution of the Monasteries*; Joan Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England*; Richard Schlatter, *Private Property*; Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*; G.E. Mingay, *A Social History of the English Countryside*; and Leonard Cantor, *The Changing English Countryside, 1400–1700*. I also discuss this topic more at length in Chapter 1.

[5] Most marked changes in land use stemmed from the privatization of land, which took many forms throughout the period. First, monastic land was seized by the State and redistributed among a relatively small number of wealthy well-connected aristocratic families. Palliser calls this redistribution in the mid-sixteenth century the "greatest transfer of land since the Norman Conquest" with parcels of land sold, granted as gifts, or otherwise exchanged by Henry VIII, Edward XI, and Mary Tudor (Palliser 90). In fact, by the time Elizabeth took the throne mid-century, three-quarters of the monastic land was considered "alienated" and either lay in the hands of private landowners or was otherwise held by the crown (Youings 118). Consequences of the new land acquisition and the emphasis placed on private ownership as a mark of social status included landowners "indulging in conspicuous

Different uses of the garden intersected and catalyzed one another throughout the period in an ongoing refashioning of the landscape and the self through a combination of gardening practice, the different gendered social relationships gardens represented, and the gardens men and women might imagine in their writing. The story that surfaces is one of mobility and limitation, disenfranchisement and belonging. The characters featured in this story include men from the middling sort who drew from their (sometimes failed) experiences as husbandmen to enable claims to literary status and authority on gardening; a geographically displaced middle-class courtier who used his metaphorical gardens to gain favor with the queen, substitute her female authority for male, and amass wealth and land; a middle-class woman who sought a sympathetic connection with other women who were marginalized and disinherited as she was, whose garden served as an ideal site to imagine recouping their losses, finding community and redemption; and an aristocratic woman who evoked socially-appropriate avenues for women's creativity (needlework and gardening) and showed how published writing might be an acceptable creative outlet for women too. The men and women whose texts I study all saw themselves as disenfranchised figures, seeking inclusion in domains from which they either participated marginally or were openly excluded, and they extended this inclusion to others like them as well.

Gender and the Garden challenges the alignment of the garden with just men or just the elite by pointing to "fissures" related to shifting gardening practices and meanings in actual gardens, and isolating how they are made manifest in the gardens imagined in texts.[6] Such moments appear historically, as, on the one hand, the presence of rare flowers in one's garden attested to the privilege and status of the upper class, while common and easily-accessible flowers and plants were aligned with the "common sort" in whose gardens they grew. John Gerard, contemporary herbal writer, suggested as much when he identified the perceived link between flower rarity and social status when he declared, "Far fetched and dear bought is best for ladies" (Qtd. in Thomas 232). On the other hand, as more members of the middling sort could afford to plant aesthetic gardens, gardens signaled moments of rupture and functioned as highly manipulable indicators of social status for a range of men and women, not just those of the aristocracy. For instance, when William Lawson insists on the connections between the garden and social status in *A New Orchard and Garden* (1618), saying that one might make a knot-garden because "the eye must be pleased with the forme," he addresses not just those of the elite or those in their employ who might read his book, but also a developing readership of persons from the middling sort. Therefore, his admonishment that "the better sort may use

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consumption, and borrowing heavily at high rates of interest…[as well as] an exceptional fluidity among landed families and estates" (Palliser 90). From 1550 to 1850, private property rights were established on almost all of the arable land in England, but most of the change in land ownership took place among the upwardly-mobile gentry, not the aristocracy. In fact, some historians have estimated that the percentage of land owned by the "middling and lesser gentry" nearly doubled from the middle of the fifteenth through the late seventeenth centuries—from 25 per cent to 45–50 per cent—and yeomen family farmers and other small owners grew from 20 per cent to 25–33 per cent. These increases make this demographic the largest growing group of landholders during the early modern period in England (McRae 14).

[6] For further discussion and theorizing of fissures, see Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines*.

better formes, and more costly worke" shows how such status from gardening was no longer limited just to the most wealthy and privileged in England (11).

Flowers were a particularly *changing* fashion, and the garden became a way to mark "distinction" among its practitioners and authorities.[7] "As each flower went out of fashion," writes Keith Thomas, for instance, "it lost its commercial value and descended the social scale" (231–32). More complicated types of blooms, such as "double-blooms" and "out-of-season" flowers, were often cultivated by lower class men and women, who were more likely to give their blooms the constant attention and care that the hired gardeners of the aristocracy were not motivated to provide. Once men and women from diverse backgrounds incorporated formal gardens and claimed this "art" for themselves, the specific contents of their gardens, it signified upward social mobility (and social status) for a more varied group of people. For example, while members of the aristocracy and gentry earlier in the seventeenth century identified gillyflowers and carnations as "most prized," once these flowers became prolific enough that those from the lower classes could buy and plant them, tulips and auriculas (flowers virtually unknown to people in England until then) became the newly desirable fashion instead.

Men and women from the lower ranks of society could appropriate status markers simply by purchasing and planting in their own gardens the plants once deemed exotic and rare but that had since become less expensive, more abundant through cultivation over time. Those from lower classes could use their employment as garden laborers or their own gardens to destabilize the very status boundaries the elite tried so hard to demarcate; and members of the elite in turn sought new ways of differentiating status in response to the always-present potential for destabilization. In fact, some who labored in the gardens of the elite could even catalyze the transition from rare to common by pocketing imported bulbs and seeds to plant in their own gardens.[8] As the first commodity market, the tulip trade made wealth and status a possibility for individuals who would otherwise have earned only modest incomes (Goody 195–99).[9] For instance, success in the tulip trade allowed a poor farmer to purchase the largest house in the township and become a highly respected city official, only to lose it all when the bottom dropped out of the market.[10]

As the work of landscape architects has demonstrated, gardens, both then and now, also bear the signs of particularly gendered power relations negotiated by those who make them, use them, and imagine them.[11] The publication of William Lawson's *A New Orchard and Garden* in 1618 suggests one way that the garden was understood in gendered terms, as it includes separate books for male and female gardeners with quite different instructions for and purposes in planting the garden for each. As Lawson (and others like him) suggest, men were to plant comparatively larger-scale gardens for profit and pleasure, while women were to engage their skills in planting modest flower and herb gardens that reflected their relatively less-developed skill set. Still, numerous women, particularly those of the elite, were known for their extensive garden displays, as was the case of Elizabeth Shrewsbury and Lucy Harrington, who were instrumental in the design and planting of elaborate gardens on their personal estates at roughly the same time Lawson's manual appears. Moreover, by the mid-seventeenth century, women had established themselves in the realm of aesthetic gardening, and were cited as such by male writers on the topic, as was true in Hugh Plat's *Garden of Eden* (1652) and Nicholas Bonnefons's *The French Gardiner* (1658).[12] Despite such noteworthy successes in women's gardening during this period, the value of such activity and its products stood in tension with the gardening associated with their male counterparts. Therefore, while the gendering of the garden may have circumscribed women's involvement and the extent of their gardening in some ways, it also offered new possibilities for women to catalyze their own social mobility or assert agency over their social status.[13]

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[7] In *Distinction* Bourdieu discusses how, as the bourgeousie established itself, a new kind of competition arose between members of the middle class and the elite. The developing (or developed, as is the case in Bourdieu's study) middle class could acquire goods and obtain elite status, or marks of "distinction," formerly obtained only by members of the elite by using wealth and prestige they gained through professions.

[8] See Goody, 182–205 for a discussion of the iconic significance of flowers and gardens in the period, which includes "tulipomania" and the importation of other exotic plants. See also Thomas, 226–41.

[9] Goody describes not only the impulse to import and plant exotic flowers, but also the Puritan counter-impulse to reject such indulgences.

[10] See Dash for a more lengthy account of how the tulip trade developed as well as what led to its downfall.

In the same way gardens signified a gardener's ability to "fashion" her/himself, they suggest how we might theorize the dynamic process of *gendered* self-fashioning in the early modern period. Just as the gardener's art that shapes and marks the boundaries of a given piece of land is limited to some degree by the inherent qualities of the land he or she cultivates, so too is the artful shaping of the (gendered) self at once challenged by as it challenges the limits of that shaping. In both cases, these different examples of fashioning—of land and of the self—necessitate a repeated stylization that calls to mind Judith Butler's now familiar formulation of gendered identity, which involves the "repeated stylization of the body" and is "neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating a set of fixed effects" (*Gender Trouble* 33, *Bodies that Matter* 10). Both the stylized garden, constituted by artful practice, and the stylized body that "performs" gender produce the appearance

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[11] See, for example, Riley, whose article comes from a special issue on women and landscape. Riley further questions whether there might even exist what he calls a "gender-neutral" landscape and argues instead that "Women have no choice but to use male-biased landscapes" (162). For similar questions, although related to modern landscape design, see Masden and Furlong.

[12] See also Hannah Woolley's *The Accomplisht Ladys Delight* (1675 ed.) as an early domestic manual for women by a woman with an interest in gardening for women. The 1675 and 1720 editions include a short section titled, "The Ladys Diversion in Her Garden," most likely written by Thomas Harris. It is unclear whether Woolley played a role in the inclusion of this short section on gardening, but the fact that it was included in her longer text nevertheless associated a woman writer with expertise on this topic. Harris was an unknown writer, while Woolley's books sold well; therefore, the inclusion of Harris's section would more likely have been to help Harris capitalize on Woolley's successes rather than the other way around.

[13] See Harris, Lazzaro, Merchant, and Keller.