

Locus Amoenus

Gardens and Horticulture in the Renaissance



Edited by
Alexander Samson



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Edited by Alexander Samson

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English School, detail of *Portrait, probably Sir George Delves*, 1577, oil on panel, 218 x 133.8 cm (© Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool)

Notes on contributors

Brian Dix is an archaeologist specializing in historic gardens and their landscapes. He has worked extensively throughout mainland Europe in addition to investigating major British sites. He is a former Course Tutor at the Architectural Association, London and co-author of *Peopling Past Landscapes* among other publications.

Brent Elliott is the Historian of the Royal Horticultural Society, having previously been its Librarian and Archivist for twenty-five years. He is the author of *Victorian Gardens* (1986), *Flora* (2001), and *The Royal Horticultural Society: a History 1804-2004* (2004) among other works. Formerly the editor of *Garden History*, he is currently the editor of *Occasional Papers from the RHS Lindley Library*. Most recently, he has been editing for publication part of The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, due to appear in 2012 as series B Volume VII of that catalogue raisonnée under the title *Flora: the Paris Manuscripts*.

Paula Henderson is an independent architectural and garden historian. Her many publications include articles in *Architectural History*, *Garden History* and *The British Art Journal*, as well as essays in *Albion's Classicism: The Visual Arts in Britain, 1550-1660* and *Patronage, Culture and Power: The Early Cecils, 1558-1612*. Her first book, *The Tudor House and Garden: Architecture and Landscape in the 16th and Early 17th Centuries*, won the Berger Prize for British Art History. She is currently completing a book on gardens in Tudor and Stuart London.

Claudia Lazzaro is Professor of History of Art at Cornell University. She is the author of *The Italian Renaissance Garden* and many articles on villas and gardens, as well as co-editor of *Donatello among the Blackshirts: History and*

Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy. She is currently working on images of cultural identity in sixteenth-century Florence.

Jennifer Munroe is Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she teaches courses on early modern literature and culture, Shakespeare, film, and literary theory. She is author of *Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature* and editor of *Making Gardens of Their Own: Gardening Manuals For Women 1550-1750*. She is also co-editor of *Ecofeminist Approaches to Early Modernity*. Her current book project looks at the relationship between women and the natural world as it bears on the development of early modern science.

Alexander Samson lectures in Golden Age Literature in the Spanish and Latin American Studies department at University College London. He has published widely in the fields of Anglo-Spanish intercultural relations, Mary Tudor and her marriage to Philip II, translation, early modern travel writing and the *comedia*.

Susan C. Staub is Professor of English at Appalachian State University, where she teaches Early Modern literature. She is author of *Nature's Cruel Stepdames: Murderous Women in the Street Literature of Seventeenth Century England* and various essays on Spenser, Shakespeare, and Gascoigne and is editor of *The Literary Mother: Essays on Representations of Maternity and Childcare* and *Mother's Advice Books*, Volume 3 in *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works*, series II. Her book-in-progress is on Shakespeare's gardens.

Introduction Locus amoenus: gardens and horticulture in the Renaissance

Alexander Samson

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden'.¹

Gardens, horticulture and their literary representation intersected with many of the critical, defining social transformations of the early modern period; from shifting patterns of land use to evolving political discourses of magnificence and power, new scientific ideas about the natural world, botany and medicinal writing, religious changes and aesthetics. The natural world was invoked to justify and make sense of unprecedented social, cultural and political change. However, gardens also reflected new forms of self-fashioning, leisure and pleasure. Garden history has not been revolutionized by the emergence of environmental criticism, instead gardens have become intertwined in other disciplinary areas from archaeology to gender studies, art history to literary studies. This volume seeks to demonstrate the ubiquity of the garden in Renaissance culture, whether as metaphor, symbol or real space, as a site for contemplation, agricultural production or cultural inscription, and at the same time reflect the diversity and range of academic writing on the subject. Woodcut illustrations in herbals (medicinal treatises about plants) were pirated and reused to the point of being unrecognizable and of no practical use in the identification and classification of plants. This points to the persistent

tension between experience and authority in the way the natural world was understood. The emergence of horticulture and botany as empirical sciences paralleled a broader dignification of gardening as a liberal rather than mechanical art. Attempts to read historic gardens aesthetically point to the inadequacy of art historical categories like 'Renaissance' or 'Baroque' and the differences not simply between national but also regional traditions. Changing fashions in flowers reflected a democratization of the garden and its appropriation for aesthetic, non-utilitarian ends, as a space for new forms of leisure, contemplation and moral improvement. The changing role gardens played in mediating between people and the natural world were reflected and appropriated in literature and art. The complex interplay between poetics and gardening saw art understood through metaphors drawn from the garden and the garden recast as a living form of art.

WRITING GARDENS IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE: BOTANY, HORTICULTURE AND LITERATURE

The explosion of writing on gardens and horticulture in the early modern period, beginning with translations and printings of classical authors, reflected the different ways in which the return to nature was used to ground and make sense of the shifting relationship between people and the natural environment. In the case of England, Xenophon's treatise on household management and agriculture, the *Oeconomicus*, for example, was published in a Latin translation as early as 1508 and then reprinted in five

further editions by 1526, before being Englished in 1532. Virgil's *Eclogues/Bucolics* and *Georgics* appeared in English in 1575 and 1589 in translations by Abraham Fleming. An underlying factor in the growing popularity of writings on agriculture and gardening was economic: low rents and labour costs alongside rising food prices as a result of the growing population persuaded landowners to end demesne and enter into commercial farming, taking closer economic control of how their estates were managed. This return to farming by magnates after generations without direct experience of agriculture was accompanied by a practical interest in classical writing on husbandry.² Barnabe Googe, a kinsman of William Cecil, and major conduit for the dissemination of Spanish literary culture in England, translated in 1577 the German humanist and servant of the Duke of Cleves, Konrad Heresbach's *Four Books of Husbandry*, first published in Latin 1570.³ At precisely this time, Cecil was expanding and developing 'the most influential Elizabethan garden' at Theobalds, which was overseen by the herbalist John Gerard, who dedicated his *Herball* to Burghley in 1597.⁴

Alongside a revived aristocratic interest in agriculture, a democratizing impulse is apparent throughout Europe in much writing on gardens. The first gardening handbook to appear in England, Thomas Hill's *A Most Briefe and Pleasaunt Treatyse howe to dress, sowe and set a Garden of circa 1558* aimed 'to please the common sort, for whose onelye sake, I have taken these paines and have published this Booke'.⁵ A similar popularizing aim had impelled William Turner, father of English botany, whose works were condemned in 1546 under Henry VIII and in 1555 under Mary, to publish *Libellus de Re herbaria* (1538) and then translate it as *The Names of Herbes* (1548). He complained that his plant list was needed because herbalists were not

communicating their knowledge to their fellow Englishmen.⁶ Eleven herbals and eight horticultural treatises appeared in England across the sixteenth century.⁷ The first book in English dedicated exclusively to vegetable growing was Richard Gardiner's *Profitable Instructions for the Manuring, Sowing and Planting of Kichin Gardens* of 1603, while the first book to focus on flowers was John Parkinson's *Paradisi in sole paradisus terrestris or A Garden of all sorts of pleasant Flowers* of 1629.⁸ Perhaps the biggest selling book of poetry from the Elizabethan period with eighteen editions before the end of the century, was Thomas Tusser's agricultural treatise *A hundredth good pointes of husbandrie* of 1557, expanded in a second edition of 1562 to consider more fully 'huswifery'; — eventually becoming the *Fiue hundredth points of good husbandry* in 1573.⁹ Tusser took it for granted that the garden was the special province of the housewife, listing the plants she should grow. Ironically, this horticultural theorist was less than successful as a farmer; unsuccessfully attempting to farm at Cattiwade in Suffolk, then West Dereham, Norfolk and finally Fairsted in Essex. Tusser's text is also of interest for its defence of enclosure.

Underlying changes in land usage in this period played out against this background of an increasingly informed and textually mediated understanding of cultivation. Rising food prices, then as now, did not just add impetus to commercial farming, but also made it more attractive for private individuals to grow their own. Tusser was dismissed by Gabriel Harvey as a poet 'for common life, and vulgar discourse'.¹⁰ While in Spain, Andrés Laguna, the translator of Dioscorides, the foremost classical source for botanical knowledge and herbals, suggested that his treatise would help grandees and noblemen planning great agricultural estates and gardens to avoid the pitfall of supposed 'experience'.¹¹ Gregorio de los Rios argued similarly that

his 1592 treatise *Agricultura de jardines* 'será luz y provecho para los jardineros, pero también para los dueños de los jardines en todo estados de gentes' [will illuminate and profit gardeners, but also the owners of gardens from all estates of society]. On the other hand, he underlined that 'no metiéndome en las medicinales, sino en aquellas que tienen buena flor y vista ... podré decir con razón ser yo el primero que escribe esta materia' [I do not deal with medicinal plants but rather pretty ones with flowers ... I can rightly say that I am the first person to do so] and 'Debiéndoseme dar crédito en lo que *por experiencia* he descubier- to ... no se puede probar con autoridades de otros' [I should be trusted for what I have discovered through *experience* ... it can not be proved according to the authority of others].¹² Not only were the precise status of gardening and horticulture as branches of knowledge being negotiated in this period, but also who the space of the garden belonged to, whether professional or amateur, male or female, landlord or commoner. The very function of gardens themselves was also the subject of debate, whether utility or pleasure, contemplation or commerce, science or art.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

Until the fifteenth century, gardens had depended on empirical experience and were not seen as works of art, lacking an underlying conceptual process. By the mid-sixteenth century, however, gardens had begun to reflect the ideas of architects like Francesco di Giorgio and Sebastiano Serlio, involving conceptual thinking, models and drawing. With the concept of the garden as a work of art came iconography, gardens that told a story through their intertwining of motifs, themes, and complex mythological schema. Giovanni Battista Ferrari's 1633 *De*

florum cultura provided the first complete theory of garden design akin to those formulated for architecture. Botany, aquatic engineering and the medicinal uses of plants, as well as their association with cookery, tipped the balance of gardening and gardens towards being considered liberal rather than merely mechanical arts.¹³ Leon Battista Alberti was perhaps one of the first thinkers to define them as liberal arts.¹⁴ Luis Cabrera de Córdoba, biographer of Philip II, was the son of the superintendent of the grounds and gardens at El Escorial. He wrote a twenty-nine canto, 23,000 line-plus poem, *Laurentina* (c. 1580–90) for Philip II. Only a fragment (seven cantos) survives in a manuscript presentation copy at the Biblioteca de El Escorial with the dedication, first canto and those parts of the poem relating to San Lorenzo (cantos 24–28).¹⁵ The poem's protagonist is the river Tagus, who describes the woods of Aranjuez (canto 1, octaves 32–97) and the estate around the monastery at El Escorial (canto 24, octaves 36 – 97), and the gardens annexed to it (canto 26, octaves, 17 – 9).¹⁶ An even more striking example of this process of dignification was the French gardener and landscape architect André Le Nôtre, who when offered a coat of arms by Louis XIV suggested that they should figure three snails, a cabbage and a spade.¹⁷

Large formal gardens were expressions of power and courtly magnificence. When Richmond Palace was rebuilt by Henry VII following a fire that destroyed the old palace in 1497, it became the first in England to possess extensive formal gardens.¹⁸ His son's first essay into gardens at Hampton Court Palace in the 1530s with alterations first to the Privy Orchard and then the Privy Garden were captured in Anthonis van Wyngaerde's famous panorama of Hampton Court from the Thames, *circa* 1558.¹⁹ Gardens reflected the

magnificence of their creator's mind 'magnificenza dell'animo suo': 'exotic planting and expensive ornamentation of ephemeral materials conveyed the magnificence of a garden's owner, so too did the ordered squares and rows of trees, manifested above all in a view of that garden.'²⁰ Visual depictions of gardens, painted or engraved views, followed conventions and sought to replicate the modes of viewing gardens that their layout and design encoded, with raised walkways (as at Hampton court or Valladolid in 1605) or parterres creating specific ways of seeing and reading the spaces. Knot gardens, formal terraces and walkways symbolized through geometry, the ability to shape and control nature. Branching out from the medicinal monastic gardens dissolved during the Reformation and royal palace gardens reflecting magnificence and providing a backdrop for chivalric, heraldic and dynastic propaganda, numerous distinctions between different kinds of garden developed during the course of the sixteenth century: kitchen gardens with vegetables and herbs; leisure gardens, dominated by flowers, statuary, fountains and architectural structures; and the philosophical garden, private, leisurely retreats for conversation and contemplation.²¹

The dignification of horticulture as a liberal art was connected to the increasing politicization of gardening and gardens. Gardens were frequently invoked in political discourse as a metaphor for the ideal republic; their harmonious unity of sense and smell, animal and plant life, contemplative and spiritual qualities, evoked nostalgia for a prelapsarian Eden, a golden age when every need was supplied by nature's spontaneous, natural abundance free from conflicts brought about by private property. By the second half of the seventeenth century in England, cultivation, in this case of trees, was seen as political in this way. The first major publication of John Evelyn, now

generally known as a diarist, the first 'Publique Fruit of your Royal Society' as he wrote in the dedication to Charles II, was about 'Woods, [which] contribute to your Power, as to our greatest Wealth and Safety ... For, as no Jewel in your Majesties resplendent Crown can render you so much Lustre and Glory as your regards to Navigation.'²² Forest, chase and warren had been traditionally exempt from common law and forbidden to any but the king 'privileged for wild beasts and foules', 'for his princely delight and pleasure, which Territorie of ground, so privileged, is meered and bounded with unremovable, markes, meeres, and boundaries'.²³ The laws governing forests had fallen into disuse by the Restoration and the resultant change of land use had led to the cutting down and decimation of plantations that Evelyn objected to.

He underlined the fact that Pliny and Cicero had 'disdain'd not to exercise themselves in these Rusticities'.²⁴ The virtuous republican ideal and citizen in contrast to the decadence and corruption of imperial Rome was often symbolized by the figure of Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, the Roman called away from his plough to save the republic. In the accompanying almanac, Evelyn's patriotism extended to a concern for his fellow countrymen's spiritual wellbeing:

As Paradise (though of Gods own Planting) had not been Paradise longer then the Man was put into it, to Dress it and to keep it ... there is not a more laborious life then is that of a good Gard'ners; but a labour full of tranquility, and satisfaction; Natural and Instructive, and such as (if any) contributes to Piety and Contemplation, Experience, Health and Longevity. In sum, a condition it is, furnish'd with the most innocent, laudable and purest of earthly felicities, and such as does certainly make the neerest approaches to that Blessed state, where only they enjoy all things without pains²⁵

The cottage garden came to be seen as a site for self-improvement, a symbol of fruitful labour and the morally salutary effects of gardens. The word paradise derived from Old Persian meaning an enclosure, park or orchard.²⁶ While the etymology of 'hortus' the Latin word for garden also meant 'enclosure' and conjured up the notion of retirement, self-reliance and content away from the public world of politics. With boundaries, however, also came the possibilities of transformation, exclusion and transgression.²⁷ In the classical world priapus was the guardian deity of gardens and tension between the sensual and spiritual is a constant theme of gardens and their description. Justus Lipsius in his *De constantia* exclaims to his friend 'You have heaven here, Langius, and no garden', to which Langius replies with a diatribe against the collectors of 'strange herbs and flowers'.²⁸ The commonplace of gardens as another Eden, alerts us to the way in which the study of gardens crosses over into more general considerations of evolving conceptions of nature.²⁹ Antonio de Torquemada's philosophical and theological treatise *Jardín de flores curiosas* [*Garden of curious flowers*] (1570) invoked Aquinas' definition of nature as the representation of the 'voluntad y mente de Dios' [mind and will of God].³⁰ Evelyn's particular formulation here of the relationship between God and nature, sets improving labour at the centre of man's purpose within the divine plan.

John Parkinson's *Paradisi in Sole* (1629), alluded to above, exemplified the notion of the garden as a lost paradise. In his dedication to the queen, he prayed 'that your Highnesse may enjoy the heauenly Paradise, after the many yeares fruition of this earthly'.³¹ Gregorio de los Rios argued that his treatise, despite the fact that, like Parkinson's, it dealt with flowers, was suitable even for monks and nuns:

para religiosos es honesto y loable, cuando, después de cumplir con sus obligaciones, ocupan la vista en aquella hermosura y variedad de flores y verduras; con lo cual y con la suavidad de sus olores levantan el espíritu en gloria y alabanza de su Criador, [este] regalo ... aparta de murmuraciones, juegos y otros vicios.³²

[it is honest and praiseworthy for those of a religious calling, when after they have fulfilled their obligations, they occupy their sight with that beauty and variety of flowers and greenery; with which and with the gentle smells their spirits are raised up in glory and praise of their Creator, [this] pleasure ... keeps them away from slander and gossip, gambling and other vices.]

Nostalgia for an 'idealized collective-agrarian' feudal communitarian past was frequently expressed in 'fantasies of liberating regression to garden and wilderness'.³³ Notions of the good Christian steward achieving equilibrium between the human and natural orders, civility governed by natural law, a reason or rationality founded in the revelation of God's will in the inner workings of the natural world, were central to the popularizing writings on horticulture. An ordered and fruitful nature shaped by human ingenuity and art reflected early modern discourses of mastery and stewardship.

LITERARY ARCADIAS

Trends towards seeing landscapes instrumentally, for maximizing profit by better exploitation of the land through enclosure, drainage and disafforestation, were countered by literary trends that sought to re-enchant the natural world through romance or mythify the economic structure at the centre of the countryside, the country house.³⁴ As nature was being transformed by the New Science into a

'governable utilitarian object', writers like Mary Wroth strove at 're-enchanting, or better, reinventing nature according to vitalist principles'.³⁵ At the same time that new ways of exploiting the land were being employed, changes to the countryside, concerns about rural depopulation, the absence of sturdy yeoman to people armies for defence, or trees for ships, as Evelyn argued, underlined that sustainability was already an issue even in the seventeenth century. However, claims of scarcity as objective facts about the natural environment, whether of grain or timber, need to be treated cautiously as strategies to create value and manufacture control.³⁶ For Watson, nostalgia for unmediated contact with the world of nature, efforts to identify with flora and fauna, an objective of seeing things in themselves, without recourse to prosopopeia, anthropomorphism or personification, was a response to 'epistemological anxieties brought on by mediation', a crisis of representation and the 'internal referentiality and historical instability of any verbal system'.³⁷ Chorographies and the country house poem invested place with the mythic solidity of the age-old, ancient and unchanging, obscuring the true conditions behind nature's bountiful production of plenty.

As Raymond Williams wrote more than three decades ago with characteristic lucidity of Ben Jonson's country house poem for the Sidneys, 'To Penshurst', their plenty was raised 'unlike others, "with no man's ruine, no mans grone"; with none, "that dwell about them" wishing them "downe" ... [rather through] the gentle exercise of a power that was elsewhere, on their own evidence, mean and brutal'.³⁸ The Edenic vision of natural plenty and order, linking Christian and classical myth, deliberately set out to exorcise the curse of the fall, guilt at consumption without labour. There is 'more than a hint ... of that easy, insatiable exploitation of

the land and its creatures - a prolonged delight in an organized and corporative production and consumption - which is the basis of many early phases of intensive agriculture ... this natural order is simply and decisively on its way to table'.³⁹ This vision of providence is decisively linked by Jonson to human sharing and charity. The Arcadian ideal in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was inexorably linked, whether as palimpsest or not, to changes in the early modern rural economy and impact of copyhold land tenure.⁴⁰ There is an important difference between this leisured Arcadianism mediated through Virgil's *Eclogues* and the poetry of husbandry and agriculture inspired by Virgil's *Georgics*, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* and Thomas Tusser. Agriculture was also, of course, at the centre of colonial enterprise, the plantation being at the centre of the civilizing processes of colonization.

Gardens were always part of a 'wider cultural experience', more than simple reflections, they were 'cultural landscapes', 'sites where human beings discover and realize whole patterns of belief, authority, and social structure'.⁴¹ This is particularly true of the refraction of Italianate models in English gardens, tracing an ambivalent cultural relationship of emulation and rejection. The generally accepted picture is one of a change away from the architectural settings of the Carolingian masque with avenues of trees, water features, topiary, arbours and grottoes, a rejection of formal parterres, staged effects, fountains and mythological Baroque statuary, towards variety and wilderness, blurring the boundaries between the formal garden and the woodland and agricultural land that surrounded it. This more 'natural' style of landscaping, however, became political in highly sophisticated and subtle ways.⁴² Despite this, the English landscape garden 'owed much to a continuing emulation of Italian Renaissance

models'.⁴³ The simultaneous presence and absence of the Italianate garden is crucial to the aesthetic, moral and political understanding of English gardens from this period onwards. English visitors tended to elide historical differences and regional variations in Italian gardens, even the gardens of the Medici villas in Tuscany differed markedly from each other.

Italianate gardens possessed important religious and political associations in the early modern English literary imagination. At the same time that the Earl of Leicester was creating the first Italianate, Renaissance garden in 1575 at Kenilworth, Spenser's Guyon was destroying the 'Bower of Bliss': an extensive garden populated by sweet-smelling flowers, scented herbs, the burbling of running water and fountain, erotic pictures 'of naked boyes', the melodious trilling of songbirds and a series of perspectives that required the spectator to read and interpret the scene and apply the moral.⁴⁴ The rejection as opposed to sophisticated, knowing enjoyment of the 'Bower of Bliss' and by extension Italianate gardens by Spenser's Guyon, stems from their mythological, heathen schema and religious distaste with what they connoted. The classical, Ovidian gardens and landscapes alluded to in eulogizing the beauties of the 'bower' all signify death.⁴⁵ The rejection of lascivious statuary, mythological themes and structures, topiary, lettering and heraldic symbolism, the falsity of image, sexual temptation and seduction through the senses and sensuality is part of a broader Protestant rejection of Roman Catholic aesthetics. It is not just that gardens of this type were Italianate but more specifically Roman and Florentine, with all the associations of immorality that came with it of sodomy, murder and corruption.

The antitype of the 'Bower of Bliss', the 'Garden of Adonis', opposed Roman luxuriousness, decadence and immorality,

nature as feigning simulacrum, to the Venetian Republican's utilitarian virtue, exemplified by Trissino, according to which nature is productive, pleasure and utility combined, garden, villa and farm interrelated, nature cultivated and improved rather than traduced with automata or suggestive erotic imagery.⁴⁶ Venice was generally anti-papal, something that endeared it to Protestant observers, who were most likely to visit the Veneto, England's most significant trading area in Italy.⁴⁷ Roman tyranny and oppression, its Baroque aesthetic of visual trickery and allusive, complex allegorical/mythological symbolism were anathema to both Eastern European and English Protestants - in Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* this style is embodied by Basilius' star-shaped lodge, modelled on the country house known as the Jagdsschlosses outside Prague designed by the Archduke Ferdinand of Tyrol, a zealous Catholic who reestablished papal authority in Prague and introduced the Jesuits. Sidney had visited Prague in 1575 and then 1577 shortly after the accession of the ecumenical Rudolf II. Another house, Kalander's, as in Spenser provides a foil in Sidney's poem, with its 'well-arrayed ground', 'neither field, garden, nor orchard - or rather it was both field, garden and orchard ... set with trees of the most taste-pleasing fruits ... new beds of flowers, which being under the trees, the trees were to them a pavilion, and they to the trees, a mosaical floor'.⁴⁸ It is curious that biblical imagery is almost totally absent from Renaissance gardens, despite the potentially rich theme of Christ as Gardener and providential understandings of nature.⁴⁹

The Italian painter Federico Zuccaro had been invited to England by Leicester in the same year as the Kenilworth entertainment, having worked on frescoes in the Villa Farnese at Caprarola and Sala Regia in the Vatican, underlining that his garden was a self-conscious emulation

of Italian models.⁵⁰ The mercer and his servant Robert Langham described how the garden was 'beautified with many delectable, fresh and umbragioous Boowerz, aberz, seatz, and walks, that with great art, cost, and diligens wear very pleazauntly appointed'.⁵¹ At the centre of the garden was a fountain where there

wear things ye see, moought enflame ony mynde too long after looking: but whoo so was foound so hot in desyre, with the wreast of a Cok waz sure of a coolar: water spurting upward with such vehemency, az they shouold by and by be moystned from top too to.⁵²

This amusing jape alerts us to the theatricality of gardens, the ways they employed humour and jokes as part of how they were to be experienced, controlling perspectives and their own interpretation, like the terraces constructed to give particular prospects over the garden and surrounding parkland and also link house and garden. Water jokes were common in Italian gardens such as the Villa Medici in Castello and Villa Lante at Bagnaia, and known as 'burladores' or tricksters in Spanish.⁵³ Elizabeth I commissioned a fountain for Hampton Court, finished in 1590, that included a *giochi d'acqua* sometimes catching bystanders unawares with water spurting out of marble columns.⁵⁴ The ability of the garden to erotically excite and at the same time sooth and tranquilize against passion deliberately exploited the tension between the sensual and spiritual we have already noted.

FASHION FOR FLOWERS

Concerns with profit and pleasure, art and nature, authority and authorship link gardens, garden writing and poesie with changing concepts of land and landscape. Evolving notions

of private property and ownership read estates as not solely available for economic exploitation and personal pleasure. Their improvement, as for Evelyn, was a patriotic imperative, improving and strengthening the kingdom and its natural resources while being simultaneously morally beneficial to those involved in such a project. Labour and its moral benefits accrued not just to the great retired soldiers and statesmen of the age as they celebrated their achievements, but for everyone down to the humble huswife. Gardens were not just other Edens, their cultivation was a way back to the prelapsarian world for those who cultivated them. Pruning to control nature's wanton excess and reign in the sprouting of wild vegetation symbolized the constant need to police sexual desire.⁵⁵ As horticultural treatises proliferated, cuttings, splicing, transplanting and grafting became loaded with metaphorical resonances of the relationship between art and nature, art's ability to improve on nature, metaphors further extended to explore the nature of poetic ornament and rhetorical artifice. Sexual reproduction and the life of plants became intertwined in a shared language by which new hybrids, bastard scions or offshoots, new growths grafted onto old rootstock and dynasty or familial hierarchies were envisaged through hortulan language. One metaphor eliding the boundaries between body, landscape and natural world figured mining as an abortion. Family trees and genealogies proliferated at the same time as chorographies invented a new language with which to celebrate landscape and the sites of historical memory. The distinctions between gardens and landscapes specifically shaped for leisure, landscape architects as opposed to mere gardeners, emerged or were blurred while the purpose and understanding of gardens, for utility or pleasure, art or science evolved. There is no doubt that gardens were 'ideologically charged spaces' that conveyed 'social meaning', particularly as sites where gender power