

The Medieval *Hortus conclusus*: Revisiting the Pleasure Garden

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THE FOUR essays presented in this special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* examine some of the multifarious functions and meanings of the prominent literary *figura* of the *hortus conclusus* in the high to late Middle Ages. Tracing its origins from biblical sources, such as Genesis and the Song of Songs, and their intersections with classical and Persian traditions, these essays focus upon the walled garden's deployment in both canonical and lesser-known literary texts, arguing for far more complex meanings attached to the medieval enclosed garden than have generally been considered in a single volume.¹ As simultaneously physical, spiritual, symbolic, curative, and restorative—and, iconographically, frequently housing Christ, the Virgin, or the “Lady” of medieval romance—the walled garden's multilayered association with a heady mix of female spirituality, sexuality, and women's curative medicine has remained largely underexplored.² These four essays therefore

1. All four essays were first presented at the Leeds International Medieval Congress, July 2013, in the sessions “Gendering the ‘Pleasure Garden’: (Re) Reading the *Hortus Conclusus* in the Middle Ages” sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship. The contributors are grateful to the fifty or so people who attended and for the lively discussions the two sessions generated.

2. Some pertinent studies that have been undertaken into one or other of these aspects include Bernard Beck, “Jardin monastique, jardin mystique. Ordonnance et signification des jardins monastiques médiévaux,” *Revue d'histoire de la pharmacie* 88, no. 327 (2000): 377-94; Levi D'Ancona, “L'*Hortus conclusus* nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento,” *Miniatura* 2 (1989): 121-29; Sylvia Landsberg, *The Medieval Garden* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Paolo Luzzi, “Giardini tra Oriente e Occidente: un

aim to unpack from a gender-inflected perspective the complex associations between women, the garden, and its potential hermeneutic multiplicity during the medieval period.

Perhaps the most visible of biblical gardens during the Middle Ages was that of the Garden of Eden, one that, as these essays will all demonstrate in different ways, continued to haunt the medieval imagination throughout the period, offering narratives of loss, fallenness, and exile to countless numbers of texts, images, and their embedded discourses. In the words of Mary-Catherine Bodden, “gardens never quite lost their early association with the ‘fall’ of humankind and more particularly their association with male temptation, female deception and, especially, female untoward desire for knowledge.”³ Typologically, however, such a haunting of the medieval imaginary was countered in part by a near obsession with the biblical Song of Songs, which endured as one of the most popular and influential of texts of any genre during the Middle Ages.⁴ Here, the male speaker—or “bridegroom”—famously professes of his lover: “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up” (4:12). More often interpreted within medieval exegesis as a declaration of Christ’s love for Ecclesia, the human soul, or even the Virgin Mary than as a declaration of the secular sexual passion that clearly forms its origins, from the twelfth century onwards, the *hortus conclusus* of the Song was also closely associated with the courtly

confronto possibile. Il giardino come percorso interiore,” *Bollettino della Accademia degli Euteleti della città di San Miniato* 74 (2007): 495–516; *Health and Healing from the Medieval Garden*, ed. Peter Dendle and Alain Touwaide (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2008); Laura L. Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens and the Language of Convention* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997).

3. M. C. Bodden, *Language as the Site of Revolt in Medieval and Early Modern England: Speaking as a Woman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 80.

4. For a detailed exposition of the exegetical tradition attached to the Song, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of my Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). See also, Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

lady of popular romance tales, as a number of the images included here also attest. Indeed, as Roberta Magnani reminds us in her essay, the *hortus conclusus* was frequently the generic location *de choix* for the romance heroine as well as her spiritual *doppelgänger*, the Virgin Mary. Indeed, both women were frequently conflated in terms of popular representations of the enclosed, contained—and, therefore, “ideal” woman, walled-up in a space that not only reflected the naturalness of patriarchal order, but the dictates of divine order too. Thus, as the multivalent site of, among other things, a walled-up and heavily policed chastity, the *hortus conclusus* established a hermeneutic tension between widely disseminated allegories of the Song as articulating the relationship between the human soul and God/Christ (or, in Jewish exegesis, God and the Jews), and its expression of secular, earthly, sexuality. Moreover, while E. Ann Matter is technically correct in her claim that “there is no ‘non-allegorical’ Latin tradition of Song of Songs commentary,”⁵ nevertheless, a close study of the texts focused on in the essays included in this issue is suggestive of a different type of “non-allegorical” commentary from that imagined by Matter, one that has “gone underground,” as it were, or that was devised to be uncovered via a selective “reading with the eyes closed” (to use concepts that have become prevalent and important within contemporary feminist analyses).⁶ This concept chimes directly with that presented by Bodden, who claims of the garden’s disruptive potential in the context of the late medieval *Assembly of Ladies* that “The author’s deliberate disruption of the (masculinist) forms of courtly love narratives, their garden images and their dream visions, is her way of reminding us that this is a fake love system, an illusory world.”⁷ As such, as these essays will all demonstrate, literary treatments of the medieval enclosed garden can frequently be seen *a priori* as offering a subtle

5. Matter, *Voice of my Beloved*, 4.

6. For a discussion of “reading with the eyes closed” as a subversive literary practice for medieval women, see Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Medieval Anchoritisms: Gender, Space and the Solitary Life* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 111, 113-46. I have borrowed this term from Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 35.

7. Bodden, *Language as the Site of Revolt*, 90.

critique and disruption of established hegemonies whether gendered, theological, spiritual, spatial, or temporal.

But, of course, we must also remember that the *hortus conclusus* was simultaneously a physical, visual, tactile, and ludic arena within which all types of cultural performances were played out, both in textual contexts and experientially. As Carole Rawcliffe has demonstrated, both monasteries and hospitals relied on the materiality of their cultivated walled gardens to offer both contemplative and restorative physical space for the religious and the sick, for example. However, as Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa posits in her essay, many of these functional gardens, ostensibly devised in practical terms to generate medicinal herbs for curative purposes, were nevertheless also designed with a clear eye on the topography of the prelapsarian Garden of Eden, a physical reconstruction that could facilitate the cure of both body *and* soul within the same locale.⁸ To this end, many curative plants grown in the medieval garden were named after the Virgin Mary and other saints, encouraging the garden's occupier to draw upon and remember the plants' saintly namesakes and to meditate on them while wandering through the walled space. The walled garden thus played a similar part within spiritual *and* physical processes of care and cure, with Mary the Mother of God sometimes transgressing her established gender role and morphing into what Diane Watt has identified as "Mary the divine Physician."⁹ Therefore, while clearly a contested space within the medieval religious imaginary, and subject to what Matter terms the "virtuosity of allegorical interpretation," questions remain about the extent to which the *hortus conclusus* was also a materially contested space.¹⁰ To what extent, for example, were the walled gardens of the secular nobility, along with those of monasteries and hospitals, understood as gendered spaces? Were the fertility and productivity of these material gardens understood in the same complex and labile allegorical terms as the textual or spiritual garden? All four

8. Carole Rawcliffe, "Delectable Sightes and Fragrant Smelles': Gardens and Health in Late Medieval and Early Modern England," *Garden History* 37 (2008): 3-21, 6.

9. Diane Watt, "Mary as Physician," in *Literature, Medicine and Gender*, ed. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, forthcoming 2015).

10. Matter, *Voice of my Beloved*, 3.

essays presented here address these questions and more; and, in so doing, they seek to unpack the wider significance of the walled garden within medieval culture and the multiple uses to which it could be deployed theologically, physically, medically, figuratively, allegorically, and in literary terms.¹¹

There are, however, other considerations that need to be added to this already complex matrix of metaphor, allegory, and materiality. Very little work, for example, has been undertaken to date on the deeply gendered links forged between these types of religious, exegetic, and secular representations of the medieval *hortus conclusus*. Nor has been taken into account in any conclusive way the inherent instability of that garden's status as simultaneously concrete and conceptual—indeed, in terms of what Daisy Black conceptualizes in her essay as a “thin” space that consistently destabilizes expected and traditionally configured gender norms and offers up infinite possibilities for the queer. All four essays in this issue will, in different ways, unravel these issues for further debate, with both Black and Magnani directly addressing the garden's queer potentialities.

The essays by Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa and Liz Herbert McAvoy both argue concertedly that the *hortus conclusus* provides a deeply feminized intervention upon its own male constructedness—and one, moreover, that further subsumes Christ into its ontologically feminine hermeneutics. While Yoshikawa takes as her main focus the garden's medicinal and curative properties, particularly those drawn upon in the Middle English translation of Mechtild of Hackeborn's (d. 1298) *Liber specialis graciae*, the *Booke of Gostlye Grace*, McAvoy's focus is on the (proto)feminist theology of “flourishing” as it concertedly manifests itself in the visionary writings of range of medieval women, Mechtild included. Both Black and Magnani pick up these threads, arguing ultimately for the enclosed garden's *inherent* queerness, not only because of its disruption of linear time-processes in its ubiquitous—and contested—appearances within the medieval imaginary, but also for its resistance to the type of

11. I am grateful to Trish Skinner and Theresa Tyers for recent discussions on these and other questions concerning the walled garden during our interaction at Swansea University.

patriarchal policing of that imaginary that constitutes its most urgent cultural work. Black's and Magnani's main foci are on later medieval literary texts: a Cornish play *Gureans an bys* (The Creation of the World), in which Seth journeys back to the Garden of Eden to recover the Oil of Mercy with which to anoint his dying father, and Chaucer's canonical *The Knight's Tale*. In both cases, new and innovative readings of the *hortus conclusus* unpick the intricate relationship between the material and the spiritual garden and demonstrate the ultimate performativity of those spaces and their gendered contexts.

Finally, all four essays concur that the medieval *hortus conclusus*, both as place and as concept, reveals itself as an unstable, multigendered space within all of the texts and images under scrutiny. While physically it remained the "man-made" locus of both cultivation and culture, within many texts and other more practical contexts it tended to be overwritten palimpsestically by the "unruly" feminine and those hermeneutics of flourishing it sought to control. Ultimately, therefore, such a palimpsest of gender generated a queerness that inscribed itself in highly productive ways upon the sexual, generative, creative, spiritual, medical, and social, a queerness that was clearly read *de bono* as well as *de malo* and a queerness that becomes visible by means of a strategic and energetic reading—and writing—"with the eyes closed."

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