

**Landscapes as Womanscapes**

*Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780-1870.*  
Judith W. Page and Elise L. Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 314 pp.

Reviewed by **Barbara T. Gates**, University of Delaware

<1>*Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape* is tantalizingly introduced. It sets out to explore women and domestic landscapes in order to improve our understanding of private and public life in a nearly hundred-year period of transition—a very tall order for any subject. Partly through the lenses of recent feminist geographers, partly through their own readings, the authors promise to expand upon such remarkable geographical thinkers as Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan. This is a heavy burden for such relatively light scaffolding—or should I say trellising—to bear. The authors undertake to do this through four major sections of their book: instructional texts from a number of genres; various visual frameworks such as the arbor or the window; how-to books on gardening; and several fictional texts. Each of the sections is more or less discreet, so that the book reads less like an historical progression and more like a series of monographs.

<2>In the book's first sections, the authors are on their firmest ground, that of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Building upon the work of such predecessors as Ann B. Shteir and Mitzi Myers,<sup>(1)</sup> in part one the two authors discuss the home garden as a locus of teaching by mothers or mother-like figures who are inculcating various virtues. The section culminates in interesting sub-sections on arbors and garden gates as sites for looking into and beyond hearth and home. One of the strengths of this book lies in its visuals, which are in evidence here as in other parts of the book and offer convincing buttressing of the written arguments.

<3>A second chapter in this first section is called "The Botanic Eye," a subject much discussed in Victorian studies but apparently newer to students of the earlier timeframe featured by Judith W. Page and Elsie L. Smith. Here botany is connected both to the Garden of Eden and to the microscope, which, according to the authors, came into more common use during their favored timeframe. And here again, the book draws upon texts previously discussed by Shteir—those of Agnes Ibbetson, Maria Jacson, and Mary Roberts. This leads to a new section on "Constructing a View," which explores women's sketching, perspective, and sense of place as a feature of memory. Next is an entire chapter on Dorothy Wordsworth, who is seen as the prime expositor of self-fashioning through the text of the garden. Her gardening work at Dove Cottage becomes a

haunting recollection of nests and bowers that Wordsworth took with her whenever she may have re-situated.

<4>The book then moves to other tillers of the soil, wisely focuses on the prolific Jane Loudon, and discusses the appropriateness of digging in dirt for women of the nineteenth century. The concluding section explores three fictional texts, Hannah More's *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1801), Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814)—discussed, oddly enough, in terms of Fanny Price's potted plants—and Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865-66).

<5>In a number of ways, this final section points up a general weakness in the book. Its subtitle, which includes the dates 1780-1870, does not represent the volume as a whole. The bulk of this book dwells in the earlier periods, the long eighteenth century and Romanticism, with its landscapes of memory and focus on the imagination, so that the shift to the later 1860s and Oliphant comes as a significant leap. There seems insufficient preparation for a reading of Victorian Oliphant's *Chronicles of Carlingford* (1861-76) series as landscape literature. In their discussion of Oliphant, the authors do speak briefly of Shirley Hibberd, a male landscapist with an ambiguously gendered first name. But Hibberd cannot provide them with a rich enough botanical context to fully ground their discussion. One wonders whether other fitting exemplars drawn from earlier Victorians might not have led to a better continuum and more fruitful comparisons and contrasts. This sort of leap-frogging over decades makes one speculate as to whether our emphases on long centuries, once a productive way of breaking down constraining periodizations, may not be leading us somewhat astray, forcing the kinds of historical disjunctions found here.

<6>This reader also wondered why the final three fictional works were separated from dialogues, journals, and other genres discussed in earlier portions of the study, when a stimulating discourse might have been promoted among them. For example, Page and Smith's discussion of cultivated and uncultivated nature and women might have included the earlier Victorian Brontë sisters with the contrasting final garden and open spaces of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or the landscape of isolation contrasting with the domesticity of Moor House in *Jane Eyre* (1847). The Brontës offer an interesting pairing with the Taylor sisters of the early nineteenth century who are featured in the second part of the book. Pairings like this might have led toward better continuity and deeper insights. One is never quite sure precisely why the chosen texts support the idea of the domesticated landscape better than others might have.

<7>Since there was an earlier generation of scholars who did such sound recuperation of women who worked in and on the fringes of botany, perhaps it is time to review women's contributions within the context of the work of contemporary male writers. After all, Jane Loudon worked alongside John Claudius for much of his life, to cite just one example. The couple's association was far more prolific and meaningful than sexist, although that is the one area our authors choose to stress. Looking at women botanical writers and artists along with the men who worked in parallel areas might have provided a fuller view of the contexts in which the featured women lived and worked and could still give pre-eminence to their own important contributions.

<8>I also sometimes wondered why the authors spoke of some of their women writers familiarly and others more formally. One can understand why Dorothy Wordsworth might be called “Dorothy,” since she could be confused with her brother, William, but Emily Shore is constantly called “Emily,” though I could never understand why. To me, a book featuring the contributions of women writers and illustrators should be careful to give its authors the same respect that would be accorded to male writers or illustrators. Additionally, I occasionally found that the authors took liberties in making assumptions about what their subjects might have believed: for instance, their speculations on what Emily Shore might have felt about certain botanical writers or what early students of optics would have thought about Bachelard’s comments on microscopes or telescopes.

<9>This said, *Women, Literature and the Domesticated Landscape* has much to offer. It is widely and well researched and honest in its attributions; it adds to the continuing discussion of Romanticism as a province not exclusive to a few male figures and a handful of rediscovered women poets; it is richly and aptly illustrated and produced, so that it is a delight to read and to see; and it sports some fine readings of little-read texts, like Hannah More’s novel, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*.

#### Endnotes

(1) Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora’s Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; Mitzi Myers, “Impeccable Governesses, Rational Dames, and Moral Mothers,” *Children’s Literature* 14 (1986): 31-58.(^)