

# CARDIFF CORVEY: READING THE ROMANTIC TEXT

Archived Articles

*Issue 5, No 1*

---

THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE AND THE ROMANTIC-ERA NOVEL  
Changing Concepts of Space

---

*Marie-Luise Egbert*

## I

ATTENTION has repeatedly been drawn to literary anticipations of a change in taste which was to mark English garden design in the eighteenth century. One of the earliest voices to give expression to their dissatisfaction with late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century practice in garden design is Joseph Addison, who in a contribution to the *Spectator* of 1712 wrote:

Writers, who have given us an account of *China*, tell us, the Inhabitants of that Country laugh at the Plantations of our *Europeans*, which are laid by the Rule and Line; because, they say, any one may place Trees in equal Rows and uniform Figures. They chuse rather to shew a Genius in Works of this Nature, and therefore always conceal the art by which they direct themselves. ... Our *British* gardeners, on the contrary, instead of humouring Nature, love to deviate from it as much as possible. Our Trees rise in Cones, Globes, and Pyramids. We see the Marks of the Scissars upon every Plant and Bush. ... For my own part, I would rather look upon a Tree in all its Luxuriancy and Diffusion of Boughs and Branches, than when it is thus cut and trimmed into a Mathematical Figure; and cannot but fancy that an Orchard in Flower looks infinitely more delightful than all the little Labyrinths or the most finished Parterre.<sup>1</sup>

What Addison is taking issue with here is the then dominant type of formal garden arranged in strictly symmetrical patterns of neat parterres, terraces, paths and alleys, which were themselves further subdivided according to exactly the same patterns. An integral part of these gardens were evergreen trees and bushes trimmed into the geometrical shapes which Addison deplors. These formal gardens were chiefly inspired by Italian Renaissance and French Baroque gardens adorning aristocratic palaces. They reflected a conviction that the world as set up according to God's plan was essentially an ordered one which offered itself to description by scientific laws.<sup>2</sup>

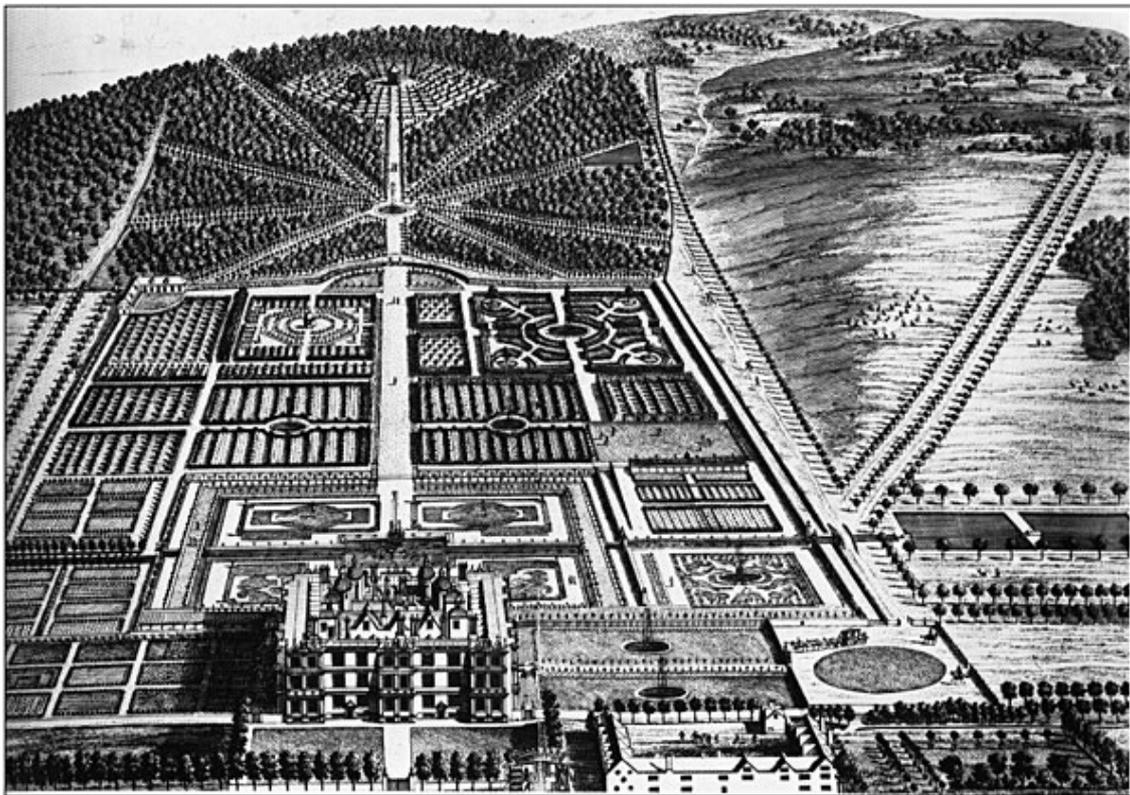


FIG 1. LONGLEAT, WILTSHIRE. ENGRAVING BY KIP AND KNYFF, c.1700

1. *The Spectator* 414 (25 June 1712), 98–102 (pp. 101–2).
2. David C. Streatfield, 'Art and Nature in the English Landscape Garden: Design Theory and Practice, 1700–1818', in *Landscape in the Gardens and the Literature of Eighteenth-Century England. Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar, 18 March 1978*, ed. David C. Streatfield and Alistair M. Duckworth (Los Angeles: University of California, The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1981), pp. 3–87 (pp. 5–8).

Apart from aesthetic reasons, the gradual replacement of the formal model by one which came to be known as that of the 'landscape garden' came about not least for economic reasons. On the one hand, the upkeep of formal gardens involved very high maintenance costs which less stylized gardens avoided in the long run. On the other hand, they allowed for the integration of the surrounding farmland and woodland which could thus be managed to greater financial advantage.<sup>3</sup>

The development of the landscape garden went through two major stages, which are often referred to as 'emblematic' and 'expressive', respectively.<sup>4</sup> Gardens created in the first half of the eighteenth century drew their inspiration partly from the neo-classical landscape paintings of Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, and Salvator Rosa and appealed to the ideal of rural retirement expressed by Horace and Virgil.<sup>5</sup> These gardens were seemingly 'natural' spaces created by a particular arrangement of features of the landscape and interspersed with architectural elements. An example of this is seen in the garden of Stowe (Buckinghamshire) as landscaped by William Kent. The garden contained a meticulously devised pattern of monuments and temples alluding not only to Classical mythology and contemporary literature but also making comments on the social and political reality of the day. Thus, the garden held a grotto with an artificial spring, reminiscent of the natural cave in which, according to Roman mythology, the nymph Egeria conversed with the muses.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere there was the Temple of Ancient Virtue, and placed in stark contrast to it, the Temple of Modern Virtue, which, significantly, lay in ruins.<sup>7</sup> As Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock has pointed out, gardens of this type employed a representation of nature which served as a moral standard.<sup>8</sup> Directed by the layout of monuments and paths to perceive particular vistas and arrangements of features, the educated beholder could not but read this intricate web of elements in a predictable way. Put differently, this was a space laden with emblematic significance which relied on the beholder's ability to compare and read the features of the garden in the way required and to derive from them a moral precept.

In the second half of the century, the emblematic landscape garden gave way to an 'expressive' type which is associated chiefly with the work of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Doing away with the

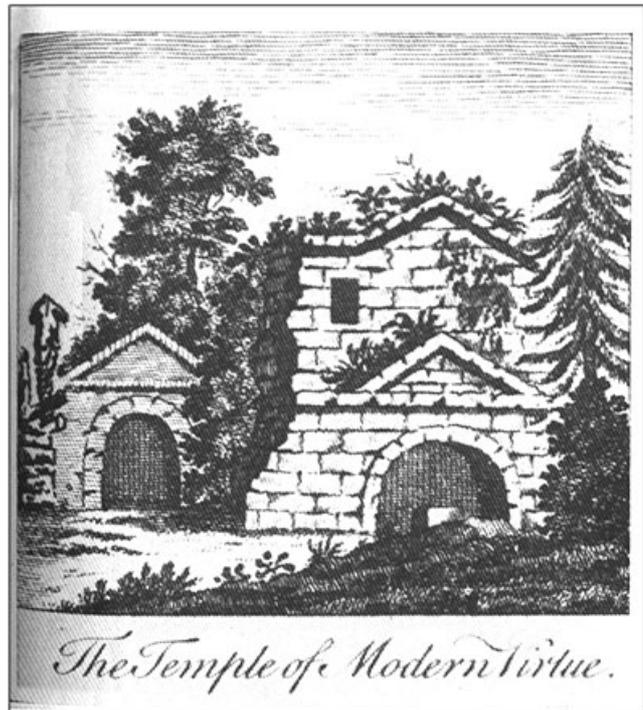


FIG 2. WILLIAM KENT, THE TEMPLE OF MODERN VIRTUE, MID-C18TH

3. Ibid., p. 10. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the passing of the so-called Enclosure Acts gave estate owners the opportunity of enlarging their grounds by integrating into their estates those parts of the surrounding land which had formerly been used for communal grazing. However, the grounds thus acquired historically had often been the property of local peasants who had made them available for communal pasturing once a year. For them, the Enclosure Acts meant losing a source of income.
4. See John Dixon Hunt, 'Emblem and Expressionism in the Eighteenth-Century Landscape Garden', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4 (1971), 294–317.
5. Streatfield, 'Art and Nature', p. 19.
6. Hunt, 'Emblem and Expressionism', 296–7.
7. This and other satirical comments found at Stowe have been interpreted as visual counterparts of some of Pope's poetry and of the allegorical vision Addison had given in the *Tatler* (no. 123, 21 January 1709, 99–104). See Hunt, 'Emblem and Expression', 301, and Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock, 'The English Landscape Garden: Literary Context and Recent Research', *Yearbook of English Studies* 14 (1984), 291–9 (p. 298).
8. Müllenbrock, 'The English Landscape Garden', 296.

earlier coded meanings and using a minimalistic repertory of lawns, trees, shrubbery and lakes, Brown re-designed Stowe and offered to the eye views and perspectives which could trigger associations more freely. The garden no longer had to be deciphered but instead was turned into a space which could express the beholder's own feelings. It was therefore experienced differently according to the prevailing mood. A walk through the garden thus became a very personal affair and provided opportunity for introspection.<sup>9</sup>

With the development of the expressive garden and the new role of landscape as a mode of eliciting and reflecting human emotions, new possibilities were also opened up for literature. The expressive potential was, of course, not exclusive to man-made spaces but was also a feature of natural landscapes, from which the gardens derived. But it was with the rise of the landscape garden and with the contemporary interest in the link between perception and emotion that the interaction of landscape with the emotions moved to the fore, and both natural and artificial spaces began to be put to use in fiction.

Some late eighteenth-century novels quite explicitly joined the contemporary debate about the correct taste in garden design (for example, Ann Radcliffe's and later also Jane Austen's novels), but even where the literary texts are less clear about their authors' aesthetic allegiances, they often use the emotional and psychological potential of landscape. This is particularly evident in some Gothic novels (of the late eighteenth century), which crucially rely on the notion of the sublime to inspire in their heroes and readers feelings of awe and terror. I will present here readings of two examples from the Gothic genre, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) in order to trace different garden concepts and their application to narrative ends.

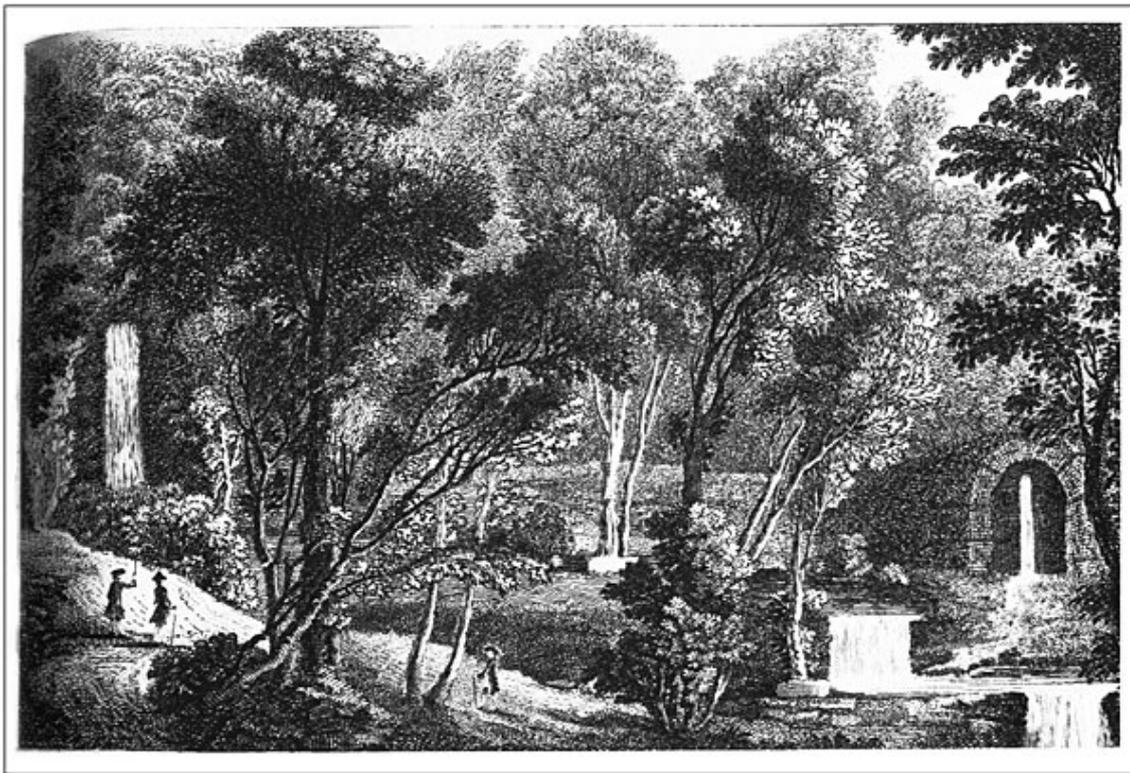


FIG 3. THE LEASOWES, SHROPSHIRE. ENGRAVING BY JAMES MASON (AFTER A PAINTING BY THOMAS SMITH), 1748

9. Hunt, 'Emblem and Expressionism', 306; Streatfield 'Art and Nature', p. 49.

## II

Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*<sup>10</sup> is the story of Emily, who after the untimely death of her parents comes under the tutelage of her selfish and narrow-minded aunt. Being forced to accompany her aunt, who leaves France to live with her husband Montoni in Italy, Emily is separated from her prospective husband, Valancourt. In Italy, both aunt and niece become the object of Montoni's ploys to avail himself of their fortune. To this end, he imprisons them in Udolpho, his castle in the Apennines. After many an adventure, Emily is eventually able to return to France, where she is at length reunited with Valancourt.

The novel is set entirely in France and Italy of the late sixteenth century, but its landscape descriptions throughout appeal to the categories of the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque, which are the key terms in the aesthetic debates going on in England from around the middle of the eighteenth century. Writers and philosophers claimed to see these categories implemented in contemporary landscape gardens.<sup>11</sup> In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque serve to characterize the landscapes of Southern France and Northern Italy which make a profound impression on Emily.<sup>12</sup> The forbidding grandeur and cragginess of the mountains in the Pyrenées, for instance, are contrasted with the gentler plains situated below, and the narrator states that: 'This landscape with the surrounding alps did, indeed, present a perfect picture of the lovely and the sublime, of "beauty sleeping in the lap of horror".' (p. 55) This and many more occurrences of the key terms show Radcliffe's engagement with contemporary aesthetic theory,<sup>13</sup> but beyond this, they are made to perform specific functions in the novel. The fact that the sublime is likely to cause sensations of pleasurable terror, for example, is fully exploited to create the ghastly atmosphere setting the scene for and accompanying the appearance of what are supposed to be supernatural powers at Udolpho and the Chateau-le-Blanc. More often still, attributes of the natural surroundings point to the characters' feelings and moods.

A young woman of high sensibility, Emily is susceptible to the scenes of nature, and her response to the environment is often expressive of her present state of mind. This connection is at times made explicit by the narrator, as, for example, at this juncture when Emily cannot bring herself to forget Valancourt, whose honourable character she has come to doubt:

Having reached the watch-tower, she seated herself on the broken steps, and, in melancholy dejection, watched the waves, half hid in vapour, as they came rolling towards the shore, and threw up their light spray round the rocks below. Their hollow murmur and the obscuring mists, that came in wreaths up the cliffs, gave a solemnity to the scene, which was in harmony with the temper of her mind, and she sat, given up to the remembrance of past times. (p. 558)

Such functional uses of landscape description in narrative are familiar to today's readers, but they were a relatively new development in the novel in Radcliffe's day. It was only possible for Radcliffe and others to use them because of the contemporary interest in the relationship between the qualities of an object and the feelings to which its perception gave rise. It is this relationship which was at the centre of the controversy about the above-mentioned aesthetic categories.

- 
10. Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (1794; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). Subsequent references to the text are taken from this edition, and will be included in parenthesis in the essay.
  11. Brown's gardens in particular seem to be realizations of the ideas concerning the beautiful and the sublime expressed by Burke in his *Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1756). The picturesque was formulated by William Gilpin in 1792 as a mediating category between the beautiful and the sublime. It could be seen implemented in gardens designed by William Mason in the 1770s (Streatfield, 'Art and Nature', pp. 56, 60–63). For more detail see Hans-Ulrich Mohr, "Picturesque and Sublime": Zur Inter- und Metatextualität der englischsprachigen Bestände der Bibliothek Corvey', *Literatur und Erfahrungswandel 1789–1830*, ed. Rainer Schöwerling, Hartmut Steinecke, and Günter Tiggesbäumker (Munich: Fink, 1996), pp. 283–316.
  12. The narrator occasionally likens the vistas which Emily perceives to landscape paintings by Salvator Rosa and Domenichino (pp. 30, 377). The protagonists' impressions as well as readers' responses to such passages in the book are moulded by their knowledge of those paintings, and this points to the importance which landscape painting had for landscape gardening as well as for literature.
  13. See Pierre Arnaud, 'Les Jardins dans les romans de Mrs. Radcliffe'. *Autour de l'idée de la nature: histoire des idées et civilisation, pédagogie et divers. Actes du congrès de Saint-Etienne, 1975* (Paris: Didier, 1977), pp. 83–9.

Alongside landscapes, the novel also features gardens. Both landscape gardens and formal gardens are described, and it is quite apparent that the narrator uses them in order to characterize their owners. Thus, Emily's parental estate, La Vallée, is situated in a landscaped garden to which her father, St Aubert, makes only very minor alterations in his time, carefully preserving the ancient trees planted by his forebears. St Aubert's brother-in-law, Quesnel, on the other hand, effects massive changes in the house and garden at Epourville. Paying no respect to its long history, he takes down an entire wing of the old *chateau* to make it more comfortable and cuts down an old chestnut tree for the reason that it obstructs the view (p. 13). In this, Pierre Arnaud recognizes an allusion to Capability Brown's habit of cutting down existing trees and shrubbery to create the vistas he was seeking to achieve.<sup>14</sup> What is more, Quesnel intends to plant the park with Lombardy poplars. In his reaction to the project, St Aubert shows this to be a sign of very poor taste, remonstrating that poplars may create an effect in an Italian landscape where they agree with other such sprightly plants and with the style of architecture but that they are entirely out of place among the chestnuts of Gascony (pp. 13–14). Quesnel's taste in gardening and his lack of a sense of tradition combine with his desire for ostentation and help to mark him out as an altogether superficial person contrasting with those who are capable of real sentiment, like Emily and her father.



FIG 4. SALVATOR ROSA, 'SOLDIERS AND PEASANTS IN A ROCKY LANDSCAPE', c.1650

In a similar way, Emily's aunt (Mme Cheron) is characterized by the very garden she owns. It is Emily who becomes aware of the flagrant contrast between this and her father's garden: 'The straight walks, square parterres, and artificial fountains of the garden, could not fail ... to appear the worse, opposed to the negligent graces, and natural beauties of the grounds of La Vallée' (p. 120). The aunt's garden is the very mirror image of her artificial manners and lack of natural graces, and the strict organization of the grounds points to the pettiness of her thinking and to her lack of compassion for Emily. The moral superiority of the natural over the artificial which is implied here is supported by various other passages, as when Emily praises 'the scenes of nature—those sublime spectacles, so infinitely superior to all artificial luxuries!' (p. 60). It appears then that Radcliffe pits the outmoded formal model against the new taste for landscape gardening in order to characterize her protagonists and in the process shows landscaping to be preferable. As was shown, however, she also criticizes such excesses in landscape gardening as were concomitant with Brown's improvements.

14. Ibid., p. 86.

## III

Lewis's *The Monk*<sup>15</sup> shares with Radcliffe's and with many other novels of the genre the description of landscapes to create a 'Gothic' atmosphere consonant with the apparitions of the supernatural. Besides this characteristic employment of landscape, *The Monk* also displays specific uses of gardens.

*The Monk* is the story of its hero's decline from virtue to vice. Considered by all Madrid the epitome of honour and religious authority, the Capuchin monk, Ambrosio, falls prey to the darker sides of his personality. He breaks his vows of celibacy and has an affair with Matilda, a young woman of noble birth who has entered the abbey disguised as a novice. When she fails to satisfy his lust, Ambrosio endeavours to gain possession of the sixteen-year-old Antonia. His sexual depravity eventually makes him add murder to his breach of chastity. Combined with this is another plot which centres around two young Spanish noblemen, Raymond de las Cisternas and Lorenzo de Medina, the former being a suitor to Lorenzo's sister Agnes, the latter falling in love with Antonia.

The novel is set in Madrid at the time of the Holy Inquisition, and a considerable part of the action takes place in the Capuchins' abbey and in the adjoining grounds. These comprise the abbey garden as well as the cemetery, which is used jointly by the monks and the nuns from the neighbouring convent of St Clare. The abbey garden provides the setting for the encounter between Ambrosio and Rosario in which the latter reveals himself to be a woman, Matilda de Villanegas (pp. 47–55). The garden is introduced in a brief description which shows it to bear astonishingly little resemblance to a monastic garden and the sobriety one would associate with it:

It was laid out with the most exquisite taste; the choicest flowers adorned it in the height of luxuriance, and, *though artfully arranged, seemed only planted by the hand of Nature*. Fountains, springing from basons [*sic*] of white marble, cooled the air with perpetual showers; and the walls were entirely covered by jessamine, vines, and honey-suckles ... and the nightingale poured forth her melodious murmur from the shelter of an *artificial wilderness*. (p. 47, my emphases)

The artful arrangement which receives such praise here is the very principle on which the landscape garden relies. It is man-made nature which does not give away its craftedness. What is more, Lewis's abbey garden contains a hermitage in the shape of a grotto, complete with bench and inscription and in this sense holds some of the stock features of those gardens. There is no mention of enclosing walls or of the actual extension of the place, and its apparent openness differs from the abbey as an inside space. With its openness as well as its serenity and calm, Lewis creates a striking contrast to the austerity of the abbey and provides for the abbot and the supposed novice a place for private conversation where feelings may be revealed. The garden itself both reflects and influences the characters' present moods.

The abbot enjoys the open space with its pure air and the sweet song of the nightingale and thus overcomes his former uneasiness. For Rosario (not yet revealed as Matilda), on the other hand, the grotto situated within the relative openness of the garden offers reclusion similar to that of the abbey itself, but while the abbey is a place for communal withdrawal, the grotto provides for its occupant a solitary exile. In this place, Rosario can give way to his self-pity and lament his unrequited love. In this respect, the garden is clearly a place for introspection. The inscription placed inside the grotto is a piece of verse in which a hermit boasts of his voluntary and unregretting retirement from the world, pitying those who leave it with unanswered hopes and feelings. This is not an emblematic message which could be read in a predictable way, rather, it elicits a very personal response on the part of Rosario. The inscription speaks to Rosario's heart, who would follow the hermit's example of complete retirement from society only too gladly, were it not for the fact that he is pining for Ambrosio. In all this, Lewis's abbey garden reveals itself as an expressive landscape garden. The author has thus anachronistically created an eighteenth-century garden in medieval Spain to exploit its expressive potential for his narrative ends.

Another garden which provides an important setting in the novel is the convent garden of St Clare. Young Agnes de Medina, a new member of the nuns' convent, is in the habit of coming here to converse with the prioress or with one of her fellow nuns. Disappointed by Raymond, who has failed to

---

15. Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk*, ed. Christopher MacLachlan (1796; London: Penguin, 1998). Subsequent references to the text are taken from this edition, and will be included in parenthesis in the essay.

abduct her from the castle of her aunt and uncle, Agnes has at last resigned herself to her parents' wish that she dedicate her life to God. Raymond at length discovers Agnes's whereabouts and, hoping that he may yet convince her to leave the convent, assumes the role of gardener's assistant in order to be admitted to the grounds. Their nightly meetings in the convent garden continue for some weeks before Raymond avails himself of the opportunity to deprive her of her virginity. Compared with the abbey garden, the narrator gives strikingly few indications as to the layout and character of the convent garden. All that is revealed is that there is a bench and that it takes a gardener to maintain the place (p. 158). Clearly, it is not so much the details of its layout as its symbolic potential which makes the convent garden central to the plot. Part of the convent, the garden shares the sanctity of the buildings. It is shut in by walls on all sides and provides a protective space for its occupants. In this respect it is an example of the medieval *hortus conclusus*, literally a 'closed garden'. Such medieval gardens separated their occupants or visitors from the outside world and were a space for religious contemplation. In a figurative sense, the *hortus conclusus* served as a Christian allegory of the Virgin Mary, who is conceptualized in medieval painting and thinking as an impenetrable garden, the impenetrability symbolizing her maidenhood.<sup>16</sup> The convent garden in Lewis's *The Monk* also has both a literal and a symbolic function. It literally separates Agnes from the world and at first hides her from her lover. However, when Raymond gains access to the garden, this allegorically foreshadows the imminent violation of the virgin. If Raymond's seduction of the young woman is an immoral act in itself, it is heightened to monstrosity by the fact that it occurs in a place where females ought to be shielded from such danger.

By using an expressive landscape garden on the one hand and the *hortus conclusus* on the other, Lewis has at his disposal two very evocative sources of meaning. While the landscaped abbey garden chiefly serves to create mood and to reflect the characters' own feelings, the convent garden is used for symbolic purposes deriving from a traditional allegory, and in this respect it resembles an emblematic landscape garden.

It is apparent that Lewis with his *hortus conclusus* reaches much further back than Radcliffe does with her formal seventeenth-century garden. But while the *hortus conclusus* is consistent with the period in which *The Monk* is set, Lewis's abbey garden as well as Radcliffe's seventeenth-century garden are not. Lewis's novel also differs from Radcliffe's in that his gardens serve as mere settings, partly with a symbolic meaning, whereas Radcliffe goes beyond this by thematizing different tastes in garden design on the level of fictional discourse and in this way makes a comment on contemporary taste. Even so, the co-existence of older models of gardens alongside more recent ones in both novels proves to be an astonishingly fertile source for the creation of meaning.

---

16. Gisela Ecker, 'Hortus conclusus: Weiblicher Körper und allegorischer Raum in der Literatur der Moderne', *Allegorien und Geschlechterdifferenz*, ed. Sigrid Schade, Monika Wagner, and Sigrid Weigel (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994), pp. 171–85, pp. 172–3.

## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2000 Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research, and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used has been properly credited in the appropriate manner (e.g. through bibliographic citation, etc.).

This essay is the revised version of a paper given at the conference 'Exploring the Romantic-Era Novel, 1780–1840' in Groningen, 17–19 November 1999.

## REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

EGBERT, M.-L. 'The English Landscape Garden and the Romantic-Era Novel: Changing Concepts of Space', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 5 (Nov 2000). Online: Internet (date accessed): <[http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc05\\_n01.html](http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc05_n01.html)>.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Marie-Luise Egbert studied English and French at Osnabrück University to become a teacher at German Gymnasium, spending terms abroad at the Institut Marie Haps in Brussels and at York University (UK). She took a post-graduate course in literary translation at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich. From 1994 onwards, she has been teaching graduate-level courses in translation studies and English literature at Chemnitz University of Technology and took her PhD there in December 1998 with a thesis on Lexical Repetition in English-German Literary Translation (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1999). Her present research interests are in 18th-century English literature and, more particularly, in literary anticipations and reflections of the English landscape garden.