

Appendix 5.1: Review in *The Monthly Review* 80 (April 1789)

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ART. XIII. *The Botanic Garden*. Containing, *The Loves of the Plants*; a Poem: with Philosophical Notes. 4to. pp. 184. 12s, Boards.¹ Printed at Litchfield; and sold in London by Johnson. 1789.

THE *general* design of this very singular work is (according to the advertisement prefixed to it) ‘to inlist Imagination under the banner of Science, and to lead her votaries from the looser analogies, which dress out the imagery of poetry, to the stricter ones, which form the ratiocination of philosophy. The *particular* design is, to induce the ingenious to cultivate the knowledge of BOTANY; by introducing them to the vestibule of that delightful science, and recommending to their attention the immortal works of the celebrated Swedish naturalist, LINNEUS.’

The whole work consists of two parts, but only *the second* is now published; in which ‘the sexual system of Linneus is explained, with the remarkable properties of many particular plants.’² The first part is entitled, the *Economy of Vegetation*, and in this the *physiology* of plants is delivered, with the operation of the elements, so far as they may be supposed to affect the growth of vegetables: but the publication of this part is deferred to another year, for the purpose of repeating some experiments on vegetation.

By way of preface, the author gives a general view of the sexual system; and in the poetical exhibition of each particular plant, he has distinguished its place in the system, by printing the name or number of the class, or order, in *Italics*. Thus, *Two* brother swains—*Five* sister nymphs—*One* house contains them—*Secret* or *clandestine* loves.

Previous to the opening of the poem,³ he invites the reader, if perfectly at leisure for such trifling amusement, to walk in, and view the wonders of his INCHANTED GARDEN.

‘Whereas P. Ovidius Naso, a great necromancer in the famous court of Augustus Cæsar, did, by art poetic, transmute men, women, and even gods and goddesses, into trees and flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions; and have here exhibited them before thee: which thou mayst contemplate as divers little pictures suspended over the chimney of a lady’s dressing room, *connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons*: and which, though thou mayst not be acquainted with the originals, may amuse thee by the beauty of their persons, their graceful attitudes, or the brilliancy of their dress.’

We have accordingly walked in, and viewed the whole exhibition; and we have received from it so much pleasure and instruction, that we give our readers a warm invitation to follow us, and do not hesitate to enroll the author among the dis-

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tinguished favorites, as well of the Muses, as of Minerva. Though the different objects are connected, as he acknowledges, but by *slight* festoons, they are rendered interesting by high poetic imagery, and many beautiful allusions, both to classic fable, and to modern persons, manners, and inventions. The versification is, in general, harmonious and elegant; but we will transcribe the exordium, and let our readers judge for themselves:

‘Descend, ye hovering Sylphs! aerial quires,

And sweep with little hands your silver lyres;
With fairy footsteps print your grassy rings,
Ye Gnomes! accordant to the tinkling strings;
While in soft notes I tune to oaten reed
Gay hopes, and amorous sorrows, of the mead.
From giant Oaks, that wave their branches dark,
To the dwarf Moss, that clings upon their bark,
What beaux and beauties crowd the gaudy groves,
And woo and win their vegetable loves;
How Snow-drops cold, and blue-eyed Harebells blend
Their tender tears, as o'er the stream they bend;
The love-sick Violet, and the Primrose pale
Bow their sweet heads, and whisper to the gale;
With secret sighs the virgin Lily droops,
And jealous Cowslips hang their tawny cups.
How the young Rose, in beauty's damask pride
Drinks the warm blushes of this bashful bride;
With honey'd lips enamour'd Woodbines meet,
Clasp with fond arms, and mix their kisses sweet.

Stay thy soft-murmuring waters, gentle Rill;
Hush, whispering Winds; ye rustling Leaves, be still;
Rest, silver Butterflies, your quivering wings;
Alight, ye Beetles, from your airy rings;
Ye painted Moths, your gold-eyed plumage furl,
Bow your wide horns, your spiral trunks uncurl;
Glitter, ye Glow-worms, on your mossy beds;
Descend, ye Spiders, on your lengthen'd threads;
Slide here, ye horned Snails, with varnish'd shells;
Ye Bee-nymphs, listen in your waxen cells.——⁴

The BOTANIC MUSE is then invoked, to
‘Say, on each leaf, how tiny Graces dwell;
How laugh the Pleasures in a blossom's bell;
How insect-Loves arise on cobweb wings,
Aim their light shafts, and point their little stings.’⁵

The plants which the poet has selected for his exhibition, are chiefly those which have some peculiarities in their own œconomy and process of fecundation, or some remarkable properties, beneficial or injurious, to man or other animals. By judiciously availing himself of these circumstances, he has produced a most pleasing variety in his poetic descriptions, and made every plant an entire new object. We shall cite one or two of the shortest examples:

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‘The fair OSMUNDA* seeks the silent dell,
The ivy canopy, and dripping cell;
There hid in shades, *clandestine* rites approves,
Till the green progeny betrays her loves.’⁶

- - - - -
Five sister-nymphs to join Diana's train
With thee, fair LYCHNIS†! vow,—but vow in vain;
Beneath one roof resides the virgin band,

Flies the fond swain, and scorns his offer'd hand;
But when soft hours on breezy pinions move,
And smiling May attunes her lute to love,
Each wanton beauty, trick'd in all her grace,
Shakes the bright dew-drops from her blushing face;
In gay undress displays her rivals charms
And calls her wondering lovers to her arms.⁷

- - - - -
The fell SILENE‡ and her sisters fair,
Skill'd in destruction, spread the viscous snare.
The harlot-band *ten* lofty bravoës screen,
And frowning guard the magic nets, unseen.—
Haste, glittering nations, tenants of the air,
Oh, steer from hence your viewless course afar!
If with soft words, sweet blushes, nods, and smiles,
The *three* dread Syrens lure you to their toils,
Lim'd with their art, in vain you point your stings;
In vain the efforts of your whirring wings!—
Go, seek your gilded mates and infant hives,
Nor taste the honey purchas'd with your lives!⁸

* 'This plant grows on moist rocks; the parts of its flower or its seeds are scarce discernible; whence Linneus has given the name of *clandestine marriage* to this class. The younger plants are of a beautiful vivid green.'

† 'The flowers, which contain the five females, and those which contain the ten males, are found on different plants; and often at a great distance from each other. When the females arrive at their maturity, they rise above the petals, as if looking abroad for their distant husbands; the scarlet ones contribute much to the beauty of our meadows in May and June.'

‡ 'Silene, Catchfly—The viscous material which surrounds the stalks under the flowers of this plant, and of the Cucubulus Otites, is a curious contrivance to prevent various insects from plundering the honey, or devouring the seed. In the *Dionæa Muscipula* there is a still more wonderful contrivance to prevent the depredations of insects; the leaves are armed with long teeth, like the antennæ of insects, and lie spread upon the ground round the stem; and are so irritable, that when an insect creeps upon them, they fold up, and crush or pierce it to death.—The flower of the *Arum muscivorum* has the smell of carrion; by which the flies are invited to lay their eggs in the chamber of the flower, but in vain endeavour to escape, being prevented by the hairs pointing inwards; and thus perish in the flower, whence its name of Fly-eater.'

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Though this bard professes to have counteracted the spells of Ovid, yet on some occasions he takes up the very wand of that great enchanter; and how skilfully he can manage it, the following transmutation will shew:

'On Dove's green brink the fair TREMELLA* stood,
And viewed her playful image in the flood;
To each rude rock, lone dell, and echoing grove,
Sung the sweet sorrows of her *secret* love.—
"Oh, stay!—return!"—along the sounding shore
Cried the sad Naiads,—she return'd no more!—

Now, girt with clouds, the sullen Evening frown'd,
And withering Eurus swept along the ground;
The misty Moon withdrew her horned light,
And sunk with Hesper in the skirt of Night;
No dim electric streams (the northern dawn)
With meek effulgence quiver'd o'er the lawn;
No star benignant shot one transient ray,
To guide or light the wanderer on her way.
Round the dark craggs the murmuring whirlwinds blow,
Woods groan above, and waters roar below;
As o'er the steeps with pausing foot she moves,
The pitying Dryads shriek amid their groves;

* —'I have frequently observed fungusses of this genus on old rails and on the ground, to become a transparent jelly, after they had been frozen in autumnal mornings; which is a curious property, and distinguishes them from some other vegetable mucilage; for I have observed that the paste, made by boiling wheat-flour in water, ceases to be adhesive after having been frozen. I suspected that the *Tremella nostoc*, or star-jelly, also had been thus produced; but have since been well informed, that the *Tremella nostoc* is a mucilage voided by Herons after they have eaten frogs; hence it has the appearance of having been pressed through a hole; and limbs of frogs are said sometimes to be found amongst it; it is always seen upon plains, or by the sides of water, places which Herons generally frequent.'

It may here be proper to add, from a note in a different part of the book (p. 166.),⁹ what the author says of another vegetable mucilage, bird lime, made from the bark of hollies; viz. that 'it seems to be a very similar material to the elastic gum, or Indian rubber as it is called.'¹⁰ This intimation may probably give rise to further inquiries, which will doubtless prove interesting to science, if they should not be productive of any immediate utility in arts.

'Some of the funguses are so acrid, that a drop of their juice blisters the tongue; others intoxicate those who eat them. The Ostiachs in Siberia use them for the latter purpose; one fungus, of the species *agaricus muscarum*, eaten raw, or the decoction of three of them, produces intoxication for 12 or 16 hours.—As all acrid plants become less so if exposed to a boiling heat, it is probable the common mushroom may sometimes disagree from being not sufficiently stewed. The Ostiachs blister their skin by a fungus found on birch trees, and use the officinal *agaricus* for soap.'

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She flies,—she stops,—she pants,—she looks behind,
And hears a demon howl in every wind.
—As the bleak blast unfurls her fluttering vest,
Cold beats the snow upon her shuddering breast;
Through her numb'd limbs the chill sensations dart,
And the keen ice-bolt trembles at her heart.
"I sink, I fall! oh, help me, help!"—she cries,
Her stiffening tongue the unfinish'd sound denies;
Tear after tear adown her cheek succeeds,
And pearls of ice bestrew the glistening meads;
Congealing snows her lingering feet surround,
Arrest her flight, and root her to the ground;
With suppliant arms she pours the silent prayer,
Her suppliant arms hang crystal in the air;
Pellucid films her shivering neck o'erspread,

Seal her mute lips, and silver o'er her head,
Veil her pale bosom, glaze her lifted hands,
And shrined in ice the beauteous statue stands.'—¹¹

The reader will, by this time, have observed, that though the *Loves of the Plants* be the groundwork of the poem, a great variety of collateral poetic ornaments very naturally branch out; and we shall give a specimen of one or two of those that can be the best detached from the subjects that gave rise to them—

'Fair CISTA, - - - - -
Hail'd with rude melody the new-born MAY,
As cradled yet in April's lap she lay.

I.

"Born in yon blaze of orient sky,
Sweet May! thy radiant form unfold;
Unclose thy blue voluptuous eye,
And wave thy shadowy locks of gold.

II.

For thee the fragrant zephyrs blow,
For thee descends the sunny shower;
The rills in softer murmurs flow,
And brighter blossoms gem the bower.

III.

Light Graces dress'd in flowery wreaths
And tiptoe Joys their hands combine;
And Love his sweet contagion breathes,
And laughing dances round thy shrine.

IV.

Warm with new life, the glittering throngs,
On quivering fin, and rustling wing,
Delighted join their votive songs,
And hail thee, goddess of the Spring."

The account of a medicinal plant introduces Hygeia,—Contagion,—BENEVOLENCE,¹²—and an Encomium on Mr. Howard, as just as it is poetic:

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'From realm to realm, with cross or crescent crown'd,
Where'er Mankind and Misery are found,
O'er burning sands, deep waves, or wilds of snow,
Thy HOWARD journeying seeks the house of woe.
Down many a winding step to dungeons dank,
Where anguish wails aloud, and fetters clank;
To caves bestrewed with many a mouldering bone,
And cells, whose echoes only learn to groan;
Where no kind bars a whispering friend disclose,
No sunbeam enters, and no zephyr blows,
HE treads, inemulous of fame or wealth,
Profuse of toil, and prodigal of health;
With soft assuasive eloquence expands
Power's rigid heart, and opes his clenching hands;
Leads stern-ey'd Justice to the dark domains,

If not to sever, to relax the chains;
Or guides awaken'd Mercy through the gloom,
And shews the prison, sister to the tomb!—
Gives to her babes the self-devoted wife,
To her fond husband liberty and life!——
————— Disease and Death retire,
And murmuring Demons hate him, and admire.’¹³

The circumstances of Cassia ‘trusting her tawny children to the floods,’ and of the fruits of some other American trees being conveyed by currents to the coasts of Norway, frequently in so recent a state as to vegetate,¹⁴ produces, by way of simile, a highly pathetic episode of the preservation of Moses, in the cradle of Lotus leaves, on the Nile.¹⁵ But the poet does not stop at the preservation of the *infant*;—he sketches out, in glowing colours, the first great act of the *adult*;

————— ‘majestic from his lone abode,
Embassador of Heaven, the prophet trod;
Wrench'd the red scourge from proud OPPRESSION's hands,
And broke, curst SLAVERY! thy iron bands.’¹⁶

It is not to be expected that the warm imagination, and the benevolent heart, of our philosophic poet, could quit this idea without some animated touches on the present slavery of the Africans; which he concludes with an address to the British senate:

‘Ye bands of Senators! whose suffrage sways
Britannia's realms,—whom either Ind obeys;—
Who right the injur'd, and reward the brave;
Stretch your strong arm, for ye have power to save!
Stern Conscience - - - - -
With still small voice the plots of GUILT alarms,
Lights his dark mind, his lifted hand disarms;
But wrap'd in night with terrors all his own,
He speaks in thunder when the deed is done.
Hear him, ye Senates! hear this truth sublime,
“HE, WHO ALLOWS OPPRESSION, SHARES THE CRIME.”¹⁷

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The poem is divided into four Cantos, and between them are prose *interludes*, in the form of dialogues betwixt the poet and his bookseller; in which various literary subjects are critically discussed, and placed in a new and, we think, a just light; such as, the *essential difference* between poetry and prose;¹⁸ the degree of *analogy* requisite in similes;¹⁹ the relationship between poetry and painting;²⁰ the suitability of allegoric figures for the former, and their unsuitableness for the latter;²¹ an affinity between poetry and music, respecting their measure or time;²² some advantages of the English language for poetical composition, above those of Rome or Greece,²³ &c. &c. But we have already made such large extracts from the poem itself, that our limits will not admit of any more particular account, either of the interludes, or of the notes; and we shall only add, that the notes have great merit, and that science is not less indebted to the philosopher, than classic taste is to the poet.

¹ Books in boards had covers made of pasteboard and covered with paper. Purchasers would pay extra to have books more permanently bound.

² This quotation, and the rest of the paragraph, are drawn from *LOTP*, Advertisement.

³ In *LOTP*, Proem.

⁴ *LOTP* I:1–30.

⁵ *LOTP* I:31–8.

⁶ *LOTP* I:93–6.

⁷ *LOTP* I:107–16.

⁸ *LOTP* I:139–50.

⁹ In 1789, the passage appeared in the first of the Additional Notes.

¹⁰ *LOTP* I:161n. in this edition.

¹¹ *LOTP* I:427–62.

¹² *LOTP* II:423–42.

¹³ *LOTP* II:443–62, 471–72.

¹⁴ *LOTP* III:413–18.

¹⁵ *LOTP* III:419–32.

¹⁶ *LOTP* III:433–36.

¹⁷ *LOTP* III:445–50, 451–56.

¹⁸ *LOTP* Interlude, pp. 49–51.

¹⁹ *LOTP* Interlude, p. 51, Interlude II p. 93.

²⁰ *LOTP* Interlude III, pp. 133–36.

²¹ *LOTP* Interlude, pp. 51–3.

²² *LOTP* Interlude III, pp. 137–39.

²³ *LOTP* Interlude III, pp. 142–43.