Elizabeth von Arnim’s Garden Memoirs: Cultivating Feminism?

Horticulture et féminisme dans les récits de jardin d'Elizabeth von Arnim

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The lesson I have thoroughly learnt, and wish to pass on to others, is to know the enduring happiness that the love of a garden gives. I rejoice when I see any one, and especially children, inquiring about flowers, and wanting gardens of their own, and carefully working in them. For the love of gardening is a seed that once sown never dies, but always grows and grows to an enduring and ever-increasing source of happiness. (Jekyll 1)

Although this passage was not written by Elizabeth von Arnim, but by Gertrude Jekyll, one of the first professional female gardeners in 1899, the Australian-born British novelist would undoubtedly have vociferously echoed these enthusiastic remarks about the pleasure of gardening. Mary Annette Beauchamp met and married the Earl Henning August von Arnim-Schlagenthin, cousin of the Romantic poet Achim von Arnim, and had three children by the time she wrote her first two books. On a visit with her husband to their estates in Pomerania, she decided they should settle there in her husband’s family mansion surrounded by a derelict park. Taking pains to become a female gardener by teaching herself how to choose the right floral patterns and the best colour combinations, she also learned how to depict her treasure garden and the emotions and thoughts it aroused in two short books, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898) and *The Solitary Summer* (1899). Adopting her alias ‘Elizabeth’ for the first time, she described the first year spent on the estate in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, an immediate bestseller. It is composed like a diary, a patchwork of reminiscences, of rambles and meditations, of gardening tips and remarks on domestic duties, and was followed by its 1899 sequel and companion *The Solitary Summer*, another literary potpourri of reflections on nature and books, written like entries in a journal spanning from May to September. They were two examples of the...
craze for garden narratives in the 1880s and 1890s, just as women gardeners such as Gertrude Jekyll, Ellen Willmott or Frances Wolseley could start turning gardening into a real profession for women.

In *Margins of Desire: The Suburbs in Fiction 1880–1925*, Lynn Hapgood sometimes uses the term ‘garden romance’ in place of memoirs, diaries or journals of the seasons to describe von Arnim’s books. This term will not be used here although von Arnim’s books sometimes insist on the sentimental fulfilment a woman can enjoy through her gardening experiences and often focus on the painful disintegration of von Arnim’s marriage. The difficulty to find a proper descriptor for this literary form indicates the change in turn-of-the-century literary aesthetics. For Barbara Gates who pores on fin de siècle aesthetic garden-writing in *Women and British Aestheticism*, the traditional paradigm of woman as nature was replaced by women in nature, allowing the cross-fertilization of two major concepts that construct female identity: domesticity and wilderness (Gates 1999, 162). This is precisely what is at stake in von Arnim’s books as she shuffles long-lasting categories of gender and genre, thus producing a very unconventional literary object. As women were just welcomed in the long tradition of garden writing in English, von Arnim adapted the newly feminized literary genre so that it could support both her aesthetic ambition and her political stance. Von Arnim’s heroine is self-willingly embedded in nature when she struggles to find her own identity as a natural aesthete and as a late Victorian mother and wife. The social and political questions raised by a woman suffocating in her domestic environment are tackled through the horticultural experiences she describes in the two memoirs. Hapgood considers these garden narratives ‘transgress the privacy of the gardens that they described to make a dream of women’s empowerment shareable with suburban women readers . . . In both their actual and symbolic existence, gardens embodied (en-natured) and feminised the suburban new’ (Hapgood 111). Yet, if Hapgood sees von Arnim’s garden memoirs as literary means of empowerment, it is noticeable that their form and subject matters make them liable to spread only a moderate feminist message. According to Jennifer Shepherd, von Arnim’s garden writing brought the feminist message to the middle-class women precisely because her subdued feminism in the garden resisted both patriarchal commands and ‘feminist fanaticism and faddishness’ (Shepherd 113). Furthermore, she adds that its diary form makes it a democratic literary pattern whose feminist implications are ‘based in cultural and domestic, rather than political and public, contexts’ (Shepherd 117). In *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, Talia Schaffer takes von Arnim’s example to illustrate how difficult it is to define the female aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century:

> Someone who enthuses over lilies, indulges in wit, and worships beauty in a book published in the 1890s would have to be an aesthete. But von Arnim’s gentle, self-deprecating wit bears little relation to Wilde’s or Beerbohm’s brittle, carefully crafted epigrams that reverse the reader’s expectations. Von Arnim’s passion is for Nature, not the antique artifacts beloved by male aesthetes, and as such owes more to Wordsworth than to Wilde. Von Arnim may love lilies, but she also democratically admires less aesthetic flowers, even weeds like daisies and dandelions.

(Schaffer 3)

One may wonder if it is not precisely the unidentifiable literary form of the two diaries, combined with the choice of the garden as the focal point of all the tensions that make the extent of von Arnim’s feminism hard to grasp. Juliane Roehmild argues that von Arnim’s earliest works, such as the Elizabeth series, reveal the author’s ambiguous
relation with feminism. The Elizabeth diaries simultaneously denounce male domination and poke fun at austere New Woman feminism (cf. Roemhild 123–40). Our task is to show that von Arnim’s equivocal and problematic feminism expresses itself in her garden writing and more precisely in the type of relation she maintains with natural creatures. In both books, the garden is presented as a friend, a peer or an ally able to raise her low spirits. It becomes Elizabeth’s place of silence, solitude and privacy, outside the domestic routine imposed upon her by her aristocratic background. Indulging her love for her garden, she breaks free from the stifling walls of her house and parts with the social conventions weighing upon a landlady. Reclining on her chaise longue with a selection of books or arranging flowers in the most natural way, she longed for solitude as buzzing servants and intrusive friends remind her that she is a lady with domestic and family duties. Both novels follow the seasons and the changes in the greenery, as the garden waxes and wanes.

As von Arnim portrays her own happiness and the blooming garden, essentialism first seems to be the key to understanding the book, the garden becoming the mirror of feminine virtues. A certain common essence and a parallel evolution between Elizabeth and the garden reveal each other’s well-being. Yet von Arnim uses garden writing as a way to express her independence and her freedom of movement and conscience. Her views on gender grow out of the garden because it is propitious to her feminist ideas. Von Arnim’s witty prose does not succumb to the alleged natural affinity with wild creatures because she chooses to consider fauna or flora to be allies, rather than doubles, against masculine prerogatives and domination. Finally, she regards the garden as a liberating force as she sets herself free from domestic constraints and feels reborn as an independent woman through both gardening and garden writing. Never a simple garden of secret pleasures, friendship and love, but a real three-dimensional seasonal garden, her garden is also a social garden, set in the present time and arousing contemporary preoccupations. Nor is it a garden scrutinised by the botanist’s eye, for which plants are only specimens, but a sanctuary abounding with living creatures that grow in number freely and only for the sake of beauty. Hence von Arnim’s problematic feminism and her aestheticized environment cross-fertilize in this eco-friendly study of garden writing.

**Manipulating Essentialism**

As soon as Elizabeth sets foot in her garden, she notes how derelict her ‘own ragged garden’ looks, ‘less a garden than a wilderness’, ‘but even in a sad condition it is the dearest place in the world’ (GG 53). She immediately feels close to it, as it is the place where she will find happiness again. Her failed marriage to her austere husband, whom she nicknames ‘the Man of Wrath’, is replaced by a mystical union with nature, which will bring her all she is missing to be satisfied. She uses the metaphor of the wedding when she rambles through her garden in spring, as does another woman gardener 100 years later. Likening gardening to marriage, Deborah Kellaway told a ‘BBC Woman’s Hour’ programme in 2003: ‘There are times when you are totally fulfilled and happy and others when you may be depressed and disappointed and even jealous of other people’s gardens. But you can’t get divorced from your garden. You’re with it, for better or worse, in sickness and in health.’ As for Elizabeth, ‘[she] vowed [her]self then and there to nature and ha[s] been happy ever since’ (GG 8). She compares it to an ‘oasis’ (GG 4) without geographical and institutional limitations:
My garden is surrounded by cornfields and meadows, and beyond are great stretches of sandy heath and pine forests, and where the forests leave off the bare heath begins again. [...] he bare heaths are beautiful too, for one can see across them into eternity almost, and to go out on to them with one’s face towards the setting sun is like going into the very presence of God.

Finding solace in her garden, Elizabeth cannot but find common features supporting essentialist views that are not unusual in the 1890s and even necessary when one wants to show how nature can be a refuge for women against the oppression that stems from male-centred institutions. However Elizabeth’s enthusiastic essentialism may not be totally shared by von Arnim who pokes fun at those sensitive women, such as her alias who finds all the answers as soon as she enters her garden: ‘When I have been vexed I run out to them [flowers and weeds] for comfort, and when I have been angry without just cause, it is there that I find absolution. Did ever a woman have so many friends? And always the same, always ready to welcome me and fill me with cheerful thoughts’ (GG 33). Though Elizabeth addresses her roses as if they were little girls, thereby supporting gender roles and biological likeness, von Arnim’s biased reconstruction does not hide her ironical stance in the face of her character’s lyricism: ‘Be cool, languid, and reserved. If you don’t do as your mother tells you and are just gushing, frisky, young idiots, snubs will be your portion. If you do do as she tells you, you’ll marry princes and live happily ever after’ (GG 99).

As an unconventional woman, how could von Arnim be championing reticence while enthusing over ‘her bare and desolate garden’ (GG 98)? The comfort she finds there is expressed in sensory saturation. The warbling of nightingales is literally represented in a musical stave (GG 1, 187). The greenery is irradiated by music: ‘the whole garden seems to be singing—not the untiring birds only, but the vigorous plants, the happy grass and trees, the lilac bushes’ (GG 42). She sees her days ‘melt[ing] away in a dream of pink and purple peace’ (GG 10). Congeniality with her garden is a literary means to express Elizabeth’s wish to relinquish indoor and closed spaces traditionally associated with women’s domestic sphere. Both books revolve around this ambivalent opposition that signals women’s closeness to nature and women’s escape from gender roles and gender expectations. The interior world of the mansion is the space of stifling domesticity: ‘[i]ndoors there are servants and furniture’ and ‘in the house are duties and annoyances, servants to exhort and admonish, furniture, and meals’ (GG 2007, 33). Within, dwellers ‘sulk’ (GG 182), feel they are ‘stuffed with sawdust’ (SS 184) and sometimes die because they lack fresh air like the German babies she witnessed: ‘I pitied the little thing, perishing in a heap of feathers, in one close room, with four people absorbing what air there was’ (SS 108). Emotions and extravagance are not to be found in closed spaces copying the reserve expected of ladies and their conventions. Therefore the garden and outdoor activities are highly valued by Elizabeth who balances women’s repetitive, useless and boring duties with pleasures, forgetting to note that these upper-class practices are limited to well-off and idle ladies and that they are surely as feminine as their interior equivalent.

Physical, moral and spiritual health is attained in the garden, ‘a place of health’ (SS 145): ‘[f]rom its contemplation the ideal visitor returns to the house a refreshed and better man’ (SS 145) and ‘it makes one so healthy to live in a garden, so healthy in mind as well as body’ (SS 146). Elizabeth has ‘only to come down the verandah steps into the garden to be at once restored to quiet, and serenity, and [her] real and natural self’ (SS 149). The
same type of comfort and healing power of the garden is expressed by von Arnim’s contemporary garden-writer and gardener, Gertrude Jekyll, when she comments on the gardens of clergymen in *The Beauties of a Cottage Garden* (1899):

> And then, among the many anxieties and vexations and disappointments that must needs grieve the heart of the pastor of the people, his garden, with its wholesome labour and all its lessons of patience and trust and hopefulness, and its comforting power of solace, must be one of the best of medicines for the healing of his often sorrowing soul.

(Jekyll 12)

One could wonder what von Arnim’s ‘natural self’ is, since this concept could back both her essentialist views and her protofeminist arguments. This ambivalence is prevalent insofar as she uses the same words for women and plants, for whose development freedom is necessary: ‘I am looking forward to the flowering of these roses, and not a German gardening book that does not relegate all teas (tea roses) to hot-houses, imprisoning them for life, and depriving them for ever of the breath of God’ (GG 21).

While earlier female gardeners saw moral and physical virtues of window-gardens in an urban environment, Elizabeth sees indoor cultivation and bedding out, on the one hand, as being as noxious to plants as they are to women, and growth and blossoming outdoors, on the other hand, as ensuring physical and moral development. She criticizes ‘perfect’ English gardens which never allow anyone to feel unfettered by the power of the house: ‘The loveliest garden I know is spoilt to my thinking by the impossibility of getting out of sight of the house, which stares down at you, Argus-eyed and unblinking, into whatever corner you may shuffle . . . . [G]o where you will, you are overlooked’ (SS 149–50). Perfect gardens support the panoptical obsession of control from the referential centre of the prison/house. The freedom of the nature-lover is threatened when the eyes of domesticity see what the garden of abundance has to offer.

This is why the extravagant Elizabeth seeks refuge in her unkempt garden whose lavishness protects her from the gaze of intruders. She writes that ‘the garden is the place I go to for refuge and shelter, not the house’ (GG 33) and ‘oh a garden is a sweet, sane refuge to have!’ (SS 148). It is also a place one has to protect as a haven of peace or a hidden paradise: ‘I felt I wanted to put my arms right round my garden and hide it from [visitors]’ (GG 66). Mutual protection and preservation create a feeling of communion and a sense of spirituality at the roots of a nature-based religion. A divine and protective presence is felt among trees, plants and animals giving birth to a sort of animism: ‘it seemed as though a quiet hand had been laid on the garden, soothing and hushing it into silence’ (SS 4), and ‘you feel as though you must have reached the very gates of heaven’ (SS 130). It is no surprise that the garden becomes associated with the Garden of Eden, not before the Fall, but preserved from the Fall whose consequences can be seen in all cultural and social constructions, be they houses, institutions or behaviours. The garden is Elizabeth’s place of forgiveness, blessing and purification: ‘[I]t is there that all my sins and silliness are forgiven, there that I feel protected and at home, and every flower and weed is a friend and every tree a lover’ (GG 33). She ends her first memoir by giving thanks to her garden and to the holy presence in it: ‘I do sincerely trust that the benediction that is always awaiting me in my garden may by degrees be more deserved, and that I may grow in grace, and patience, and cheerfulness, just like the happy flowers I so much love’ (GG 207). Eventually the garden purifies the visitor if he or she is willing and ready to receive this natural blessing: ‘a garden—that divine filter that filters all the
Having been blessed by grace, she is ready to give thanks to her garden and irradiate happiness in return: ‘ashamed of asking when I have received so much, the only form of prayer I would use would be a form of thanksgiving’ (SS 166). References to her happiness pervade almost every page as if the garden’s grace was illuminating writing: interjections (‘How happy I was!’ GG 9), hyperboles (‘I had been literally too happy to think of writing’ GG 15), oxymora (‘my first happy struggles and failures’ GG 23), and metaphors (‘treasures of happiness’ GG 49). All these literary devices show that the identities of the garden and of Elizabeth are closer in her experience of happiness, which turns the physical and sensory experience of nature into the disincarnate experience of fiction. Communion is reached when the garden and the narrator go through the same experience, be it horticultural or psychological: ‘there is confusion out of doors and despair in my heart’ (GG 158). However, disorder does not imply depression since low spirits are cast aside in Elizabeth’s world: ‘it is a beautiful life, full of wholesome outdoor work, and with no room for these listless moments of depression and boredom’ (GG 46–7). The reader cannot really make out whether the garden is anthropocentrically reconstructed or whether the character of Elizabeth herself is constructed as a piece of nature since both the garden and the character bloom in unison. The presentation of their natural affinities confirms von Arnim’s sympathy for essentialist views. It also helps her convince the moderate feminists that freedom will not be found within the domestic sphere but within themselves, gardens being extensions or metaphors of their identities and women being no different from the free and frolicsome creatures of the gardens.

A Feminist Garden: the Garden as an Ally

For Jennifer Shepherd, ‘Elizabeth’s garden succeeds in literally “naturalizing” von Arnim’s brand of cultural feminism and displacing any anxiety created by Elizabeth’s less feminine pursuits’ (Shepherd 120). Therefore the garden plays two roles, opposite but complementary, in the diaries: that of a place of beauty allowing the heroine to indulge in all its democratic treasures and that of a refuge helping her voice her claims on gender roles, expectations and limitations. Indeed it supports what Talia Schaffer writes about von Arnim who, along with other female writers such as Ouida, used aestheticism as the way to reconcile ‘the two incompatible models of traditional loveliness and New Woman independence’ (Schaffer 71). The combination of aestheticism and wit in the depiction of women leads to what one could call von Arnim’s ‘aesthetic feminism’. Von Arnim’s use of the garden is certainly as ambiguous as John Ruskin’s in his famous essay, ‘On Queens’ Gardens’. Though it is not perceived as a place exclusively for women as Ruskin’s metaphorical garden can be, the garden is nevertheless considered in terms of balance of power. For Ruskin, ‘outside of that little rose-covered wall, the wild grass, to the horizon, is torn up by the agony of men’ (Ruskin 172). Unlike Ruskin, von Arnim would probably not conceive of the separation between outside and inside as two spheres of gender but as opposite spheres of power. The garden, unspoilt by figures of power and submission and beautified by the eye and the hand of the nature-lover, allows von Arnim to regard fauna or flora as allies in the fight against figures of domination, most of them being masculine. To make a manifesto of her reflections, von Arnim refers to nature and its creatures as friends: ‘the friendly frogs and owls’ (GG 12), flowers are ‘kindred spirit’ (GG 42), and ‘every tree is a lover’ (GG 33). ‘Did ever a woman have so many friends?’ (GG 33), she asks.
the reader. Animals feel drawn to her, even worms and bugs crawling in her lap: ‘All sorts of beasts come and stare at me, and larks sing above me, and creeping things crawl over me, and stir in the long grass beside me’ (SS 22). She is so close to nature that she feels ‘wholly a joyous animal in an ecstasy of love with life’ (SS 26), as if her garden was liberating her own sensuous, if not sexual, energy. As birds of a feather, Elizabeth and her garden suffer from the same hardships: ‘Drought is our great enemy . . . the soil was like hot pastry’ (GG 73). Creatures of the garden are personified, ‘harassed and helpless inhabitants, who cannot pull their roots up out of the ground and run for their lives’ (SS 62).

Siding with the downtrodden in her garden, Elizabeth denounces oppression that leads to the loss of beauty, be it caused by acts of God or by human intervention. It is thus easier to feminize nature and to naturalize feminism when one wants to fight abusive power. Flowers are fragile girls in petticoat (GG 199) but they are not depicted as flippant or light-headed. Rejecting artificial horticulture such as bedding-out and resorting as little as possible to greenhouses, Elizabeth mocks flowers and girls in need of ‘coaxing and petting’: ‘I never could see that delicacy of constitution is pretty, either in plants or women’ (GG 70). Similarly, comparing flowers to girls, von Arnim plays with culturally gendered representations: indeed she generally first takes advantage of the traditional affinity, always stressing the beauty of the lady garden; then she discards inappropriate judgements on sex-typing female representations. George McKay reminds readers in his book on gardens and politics, Radical Gardening, that suffragettes trampled on flowers in 1913 at the Kew Royal Botanic Garden in protest against the allegedly essentialist link between plants and femininity. As she wants to insist on flowers being victims of oppression, von Arnim chooses to present them as members of the lower class. She saves dandelions and daisies from being weeded out and writes how thankful they are: ‘They certainly look very jolly when I come out, and I rather fancy the dandelions dig each other in their little ribs when they see me, and whisper, ‘here comes Elizabeth; she’s a good sort, ain’t she?’—for of course dandelions do not express themselves very elegantly’ (SS 16). In a later novel, The Enchanted April (1922), von Arnim once again takes the example of dandelions and daisies several times when she advocates democracy in the garden. She uses the dandelion metaphor again to show that happiness can be found in the garden, the epicentre of democracy, and that it does not relate to rank and fortune: ‘See how everything has been set in together,—the dandelions and the irises, the vulgar and the superior, me and Ms Fisher—all welcome, all mixed up anyhow, and all so visibly happy and enjoying ourselves.’

In order to make the garden a place of freedom from male-centred domination, von Arnim stresses how ungroomed and yet beautiful it is, beauty stemming from nature not nurture. The process of arranging the garden is never finished as far as time and space are concerned: ‘the garden should be beautiful from end to end’ (SS 144) without excessive human monitoring. Thus she refrains from weeding as all creatures, beautiful but lacking in utility, deserve to live: ‘I have a large heart in regard to things that grow, and many a weed that would not be tolerated anywhere else is allowed to live and multiply undisturbed in my garden . . . . [W]hy not let the poor creatures enjoy themselves quietly, instead of going out with a dreadful instrument?’ (SS 15–6). And one must not forget that breathing freely and basking in the sun is exactly what Elizabeth enjoys doing every day and that this dreadful instrument for trimming could stand for any tool of emasculation or censorship. The garden must remain un pampered because
coaxing makes it delicate, vulnerable and artificial: ‘Nature herself is untidy, and in a
garden she ought to come first, and Art with her brooms and clipping-shears follow
humbly behind. Art has such a good time in the house, where she spreads herself over the
walls, and hang herself up gorgeously at the windows, and lurks in the sofa cushions’ (SS
150–1). Creatures of the garden are thus free to breathe and move, even those springing
from our imagination. There was a ‘fairy bower’ (SS 84) and ‘the forest was an enchanted
forest leading into fairyland’ (GG 183).

16 The world of childhood and natural beauty protected from masculine encroachment and
feminine order exhorts Elizabeth to defend it against all forms of oppression, for most
part male representatives of institutions or of power structures. Her husband, as his
nickname ‘the Man of Wrath’ suggests, embodies the forces of repression: he consistently
denigrates or belittles his wife’s outdoor activities while claiming mastery over animals
(by killing partridges or putting owls into a cage) and using physical strength as proof of
masculine superiority:

Nature, while imposing this agreeable duty [having babies] on the woman, weakens
her and disables her for any serious competition with man. How can a person who
is constantly losing a year of the best part of her life compete with a young man
who never loses any time at all? He has the brute force, and his last word on any
subject could always be his fist.

(GG 79)

17 For Elizabeth, violence against women is the prerogative of husbands because marriage as
an institution binds husbands and wives as masters and servants respectively. The
gardener is Elizabeth’s second best enemy as he imposes his own law on the surrounding
nature and the frail flower. First, he makes flowers weeds by calling them weeds. Then, he
is keen on planting flowers in lines rather than groups because he has a military mindset
‘arranging poor plants like soldiers at a review’ (GG 24). According to Elizabeth, only a
poet should be in charge of gardening, because it requires imagination (GG 29). Her
refusal to abide by horticultural law is justified when she tells the story of the ‘gloomy
gardener’ (GG 28) who went mad and was sent to an asylum for wielding not only his
spade but also a gun. This allows Elizabeth to verbalize her own denunciation of gender
roles. The garden is not a feminine ‘province of knowledge’ but the place where gender
tensions can come to light and be denounced. She complains of having to do the talking
while the gardener, however murderous he may be, has to do the gardening ‘with his
fangs’ (SS 151). She naively dreams of being a gardener or a goose girl because she would
be as free as a cloud and would also be her own master: ‘I wish with all my heart I were a
man, for of course the first thing I should do would be to buy a spade and go and garden,
and then I should have the delight of doing everything for my flowers with my own hands
and need not waste time explaining what I want to somebody else’ (emphasis mine, GG
97–8). Forgetting to take into account the limitations of class, Elizabeth lives in a world
where only antagonistic forces, and gender forces in particular, are at play.

18 Freedom and its limitations compel her to consider all forms of oppression at stake
within the domestic sphere. Being free to move out of the house, she condemns various
crippling domestic female values and duties: entertaining one’s guests instead of reading
(GG 38, 43), gossiping out of boredom (GG 43), eating at regular times (GG 11) instead of
indulging her ‘fantaisie déréglée’, writing letters of invitation, and observing various
customs such as the ones requiring ‘both mother and child to remain shut up and
invisible till after the christening’ (SS 107) and poor people to save their best clothes for
their funeral. Having first castigated domestic duties and conventions, Elizabeth feels free
to state her own feminist opinions. Shielding herself from bitter commentary from the
womanly women when she uses her feminine love of nature as proof of her moderate
feminism, she can condemn the unbridgeable gender gap touching on issues as familiar to
us today as the pay differential between the sexes (GG 75), maternity leave (GG 79),
battered women (GG 80), male-dominated occupations and gender inequality in law
enforcement (GG 136).

Von Arnim’s garden-writing can be analysed as a proto-ecocritical text, as she denounces
masculine encroachment on nature and as she refuses to support the allegedly long-
lasting and essentialist link between women and green spaces. The ecological Elizabeth
does not intend to monitor her garden, whereas the ecocritical von Arnim tries to be as
inartificial as possible in her use of language, avoiding the linguistic reconstruction of
science or horticulture and discarding highbrow references. This attempt at freeing
herself from male-centred prerogatives is made in her diary, which fosters the creation of
two tension-free natural areas, the garden and the garden book.

Being Reborn as an Independent Woman

In their book on domesticated landscapes as in-between places for women artists, Judith
W. Page and Elise Lawton Smith suggest that the garden was for Victorian women a ‘zone
for experimentation, a place to flex their physical and mental muscles, thus prompting
greater freedom and experimentation in their lives’ (Page & Smith 7). Sarah Bilston adds
that Elizabeth’s account insists on her ‘opportunity for self-creation as much as garden
creation’ (Bilston 9). Her garden is full of new possibilities (SS 85) that allow her to rebuild
herself as a new woman but not exactly in the sense of the feminist ideal of the liberated
woman contained in the expression ‘New Woman’. The garden allows Elizabeth to be born
again either as a child—'the smell of wet earth or rotting leaves brought back my
childhood with a rush’ (GG 8)—or as a new being—: ‘It was the beginning of my  real life,
my coming of age as it were . . . there I stood feeling the same rapture of pure delight in
the first breath of spring that I used to as a child, and the five wasted years fell from me
like a cloak, and the world was full of hope’ (GG 8). The garden allows her to abandon the
time of domestic preoccupations and to live in another time of her own: ‘To me it is a
beautiful life, full of wholesome outdoor work, and with no room for those listless
moments of depression and boredom, and of wondering what you will do next, that leave
wrinkles round a pretty woman’s eyes’ (GG 6–7). In her new life, Elizabeth draws no
distinction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, unlike those for
whom duty cannot bring satisfaction, let alone happiness, such as the Man of Wrath who
tells his wife, ‘your garden is not your Duty, because it is your pleasure’ (GG 95). Elizabeth
manages to combine the two Freudian concepts leaving no room for frustration or a
guilty conscience. The overwhelming sense of fulfilment created by her isolation in her
garden allows her to compensate for all the unmet needs of a social being. Buying new
rose-trees instead of new dresses is an imperative as well as an act of self-gratification
showing not only that she is beyond social constraints but also that she does not yield to
unreasonable selfish urges.

Elizabeth feels refreshed, cleansed from the polluting social life of an upper-class lady: ‘to
go into the garden in its snowed-up state is like going into a bath of purity’ (GG 87). The
garden washes away physical and moral dirt so that one is born again into a better life:
‘What a resurrection of beauty there is in my garden, and of brightest hope in my heart!’ (
Paradise is regained for Elizabeth who basks in a purer and healthier environment similar to the untarnished world before the Fall, both unpolluted and unpolluting. Spirituality meets environmental awareness in this proto-ecocritical memoir.

It is thus no surprise to see that the garden is a place of soothing silence, both the silence of a church and the silence prevailing before language. Elizabeth lets 'its blessedness descend into [her] very soul' (GG 187) and at the same time the only sounds made by the songs of nightingales are set to music, a non-referential language, and represented in a stave. Apart from croaking frogs and hooting owls (GG 26), which are natural dwellers of the garden, there is 'everywhere the breathless silence' (GG 3). Silence evokes peace. It sometimes evokes death, but without any macabre connotation, because it is the sign that Elizabeth is freed from social mayhem and that von Arnim is unhampered by literary conventions. Silence accentuates the feeling of solitude but never means solitariness, desolation and loneliness, since it creates the possibility of plentiful literary production. Being reborn, she insists on being as ignorant as a newborn and praises innocence as a blessing. Unblemished by socialization, she is, however, prone to failure and error (GG 18, 23) in the way an innocent new-sprung creature or redeeming believer would be: 'every failure must be used as a stepping-stone to something better' (GG 66). In this rewriting of Genesis, Elizabeth remains free from blame because of the purifying power of the garden.

Elizabeth feels so regenerated that she starts defending a return to nature. She cuts herself off from consumer society choosing a simple life where natural abundance does not lead to over-consumption and excessive indulgence: 'It makes one very humble to see oneself surrounded by such a wealth of beauty and perfection anonymously lavished' (GG 206). Elizabeth rejects the laws of exchange and profit-making as she supports free access to resources:

What a waste of life, just getting and spending. Sitting by my pansy beds, with the slow clouds floating leisurely past, and all the clear day before me, I look on at the hot scramble for the pennies of existence . . . . They are only pennies, after all—unpleasant, battered copper things, without a gold piece among them, and never worth the degradation of self, and the hatred of those below you who have fewer, and the derision of those above you who have more.

(SS 37)

Forsaking consumption, she would also renounce her social status in exchange for everlasting happiness in her garden. A piece of bread, a pot of geraniums and books are enough for someone who wishes to live in a world outside constraints, all the more so because she is well-provided for by her social background. Nevertheless, the middle/upper-class reader knows that it is her social and economic comfort that allows her to exclude herself from her society in order to live in a rejuvenated world.

The Man of Wrath continues denigrating his wife telling her that she is an idiot, as all women are, and that the garden is the place of these foolish and crazy, hysterical women. For him, are women not necessarily fools since they are banned from attending political meetings as are children and idiots (GG 136)? The question of mental health arises in both novels, which insist one never really knows if madness is kept inside or outside the garden. Being excluded from Law and Reason, women find a place in the garden, which is neither an institutionalized area nor an extension of the domestic sphere. Elizabeth feels born again in her aesthetically pleasing and poetic garden where only books and poetry are welcomed. She recreates her natural environment so as to make it a world of beauty. Even her emotions, including sadness, are depicted in an idealized or artistic manner: 'It
is so sweet to be sad when one has nothing to be sad about’ (GG 58). The world surrounding her is reconstructed through the eyes and the pen of the aesthete who has cut herself off not only from the constraints but also the simple pleasures of an indoor life. ‘The sugar on the bread and butter has lost its charm, but I love the dandelions and daisies . . . I live in a world of dandelions and delights’ (GG 9). She lives in a time that is not organized according to domestic activities any longer and that instead follows the pastoral succession of seasons: ‘my spring happiness bears no resemblance to my summer or autumn happiness’ (GG 2). Nature is a world of personified creatures that have a conscience as well as desires and that replace the individuals who have social and family commitments. The reader never learns the names of Elizabeth’s three children whom she calls April, May and June. Babies belong to Elizabeth’s natural world as they have no social name of their own and are considered on a par with other green beings: ‘What a happy woman I am living in a garden, with books, babies, birds, and flowers, and plenty of leisure to enjoy them!’ (GG 26) Here the alliteration of [b] binds the three elements now on the same natural and poetical level.

Books are the only products of society that Elizabeth cordially invites into her garden and into her life. They contribute to the construction of her protecting cocoon of beauty. She borrows them from her library, which is an in-between room, not really part of the house, and opening onto the garden. In this room, Elizabeth is free to find the perfect reading for her time of rest and her walks in the garden. Her descriptions of her visits to the library combine words linking gardening, day-dreaming and indulging in simple pleasures: ‘rummaging amongst the books, making plans for my garden, building castles in the air, writing, dreaming, doing nothing!’ (GG 85) However, books are pleasurable only if read in the garden (GG 88) because it is their natural place. Elizabeth chooses authors according to the places where she reads them: Goethe when she faces south, Whitman by the rose beds, Keats in the forest, Spenser on the moss and, of course, Thoreau by the pond . . . The combination of the green spaces and books as the perfect one for freedom is complete when Elizabeth imagines herself rejoicing and chatting with Thoreau, he making statements and herself laughing and thinking. She indulges in his vision of nature, philosophy and wisdom yet never lets herself be influenced by his judgment when his behaviour becomes too domineering and uncompromising. The philosophy of the great thinkers and the poetry of the major artists, all male and unchallenged models, legitimize Elizabeth’s modus vivendi, but, in the end, she is the one who decides when and where it is appropriate not to learn from them but simply to enjoy the beauty of their writing. Books picked with care and gardens tended with close attention encourage both Elizabeth’s rebirth as an independent character and von Arnim’s literary construction as an aesthete.

Conclusion

Von Arnim’s version of feminism is deeply rooted in the late nineteenth century fascination for gardens. She renews the Victorian love for cottage garden by refreshing the language of flowers that can speak out their own claims, being ecological or more gender-oriented. The closeness to nature and the aesthetic reconstruction of the garden contribute to consolidate von Arnim’s personal engagement against patriarchal forces of domination. Von Arnim’s very personal intervention into garden writing enables the construction of her equivocal female double who uses the alleged complicity between women and plants to show that they are both victims of oppression and that the
democratic system in the garden plot is at war with the privileges of the power holders within the house walls.

However von Arnim’s garden writing can sometimes be irritating to those who are aware that her form of feminism rather resembles the hedonism of the affluent. That being said, one must admit that the pleasures she indulges in do not stem from the accumulation of wealth but from a genuine wish for emancipation through artistic devices. She never creates a mawkish world of flowers, books and birds because nature is never feminized; she rather revisits the pastoral tradition without chartering nature or reconstructing it as a muse and introduces elements of denunciation so as to balance moderate feminism and garden writing. This is Elizabeth’s own garden as the title shows and never becomes a woman’s garden because it is not a hortus conclusus that would circumscribe and define femininity. Thus von Arnim’s garden of words plays with the tools of feminine identification, while offering a witty version of aestheticized garden writing.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIE**


NOTES

1. According to Lynn Hapgood, the fashion for garden writing in a novel form was short-lived from 1898 to 1914. She identifies The Garden That I Love (1894) by the Poet Laureate Alfred Austin as the model for this new literary trend. It was followed, among other titles, by Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden by Maria Theresa Earle in 1896 or by The Garden of Pleasure by Eleonor Vere Boyle in 1895, memoirs or diaries exclusively written by women. The trend even crossed the Atlantic with Mabel Osgood Wright’s The Garden of a Commuter’s Wife (1901) and The Garden, You, and I (1906). Hapgood considers Kathleen L. Murray’s My Garden in the Wilderness (1915) to be the last garden memoir, integrating problematic colonial issues. See Lynn Hapgood, Margins of Desire: the Suburbs in Fiction and Culture 1880-1925. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009.


3. Elizabeth von Arnim, Elizabeth and Her German Garden, 1898 (London: Virago, 2007) 2. In the rest of the text, both memoirs will be referred to as GG (Elizabeth and Her German Garden) and SS (A Solitary Summer). The page numbers of the two memoirs will be given directly after quotations.


5. See Elizabeth Twining’s suggestions in What Can Window-Gardens Do For Our Health? quoted in Barbara Gates’ In Nature’s Name: an Anthology of Women’s Writing and Illustrations, 1780-1930 (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 2002) 285–97 or Jane Loudon’s advice in A Lady’s Country Companion (1845) in the same volume (283–5). On the contrary, Gertrude Jekyll’s gardening tips both support and put into perspective von Arnim’s opinion about the unnaturalness of the bedding fashion: ‘[B]edding, though it is gardening of the least poetical or imaginative kind, can be done badly or beautifully’ (75).
6. In her introduction to Wild Nature Won by Kindness (1893), Elizabeth Brightwen also insists on the solace brought by her friendship with animals, birds, and insects of her garden. Kindness and care are required to protect animals and create bonds between living creatures. But the study of natural science has also allowed Brightwen to 'regard every created thing, great or small, attractive or otherwise, as an object well worth reverent study.' Elizabeth Brightwen, Wild Nature Won by Kindness (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893) 2–3. In Kindred Nature, Barbara Gates underlines Brightwen's use of analogies between human and animal feelings as a strong argument in her fight against animal slaughter. Contrary to Brightwen, von Arnim is not committed to any animal cause; creatures of her gardens as well as her pets participate in the construction of her own egoistic hedonism. In All the Dogs of My Life, von Arnim tells how she had her fat dog, Pincher, put down because it hindered her own freedom to travel.

7. McKay quotes the Journal of Horticulture and Home Farmer: 'Kew has been marked out by suffragettes as one of the scenes of their exploits. They smashed a quantity of glass in the orchid house, and in a manner that one can scarcely accredit to sane adults, wantonly tried to destroy the plants. Rare and delicate plants, under bell-glasses, attracted the special venom of these feminists.' George McKay, Radical Gardening: Politics, Idealism, and Rebellion in the Garden (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011) 140.


9. Weeding is a complex process for garden writers compared with professional gardeners. Gertrude Jekyll never hesitates to advise massive extermination of weeds, but garden-lovers as von Arnim and Mrs C. W. Earle admit that weeds are often the most attractive flowers. Earle's opinion is ambivalent concerning weeds. As a gardener, she knows that they have to be pulled out, but as a nature-lover she praises the beauty of some weeds: 'One of the prettiest weeds that we have in our modern gardens, and which alternates between being our greatest joy and our greatest torment is the Welsh Poppy.' Maria Theresa Earle, Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden: The Classic Diary of a Victorian Lady (1897), (London: Summersdale, 2004) 141.

10. The cultural historian of gardens, Catherine Horwood, reminds readers in her history of gardening women that they were in charge of weeding, as a low-paid job, in the early sixteenth century. See Catherine Horwood, Gardening Women: Their Stories from 1600 to the Present (London: Virago, 2010) 271. Most female gardeners and nature writers insist on the gender implications of weeding, always showing the bond between agricultural and human misfits. For example, in one of her socialist poems, the late Victorian poet Edith Nesbit complains of a male gardener with sadistic impulses who pulls out the plants he has himself identified as weeds and thus as feeble creatures that do not deserve to live:

So he uprooted, one by one,
The free things that had loved the sun,
The happy, eager, fruitful seeds
Who had not known that they were weeds.


11. Gertrude Jekyll also found that children, along with cats, were appropriate creatures in the garden. She would take numerous photographs of children in her gardens.
RÉSUMÉS

Ce sont les promenades dans son jardin de Poméranie et l’apprentissage de l’art du jardinnage qui conduisent Elizabeth von Arnim (1866–1944) à écrire Elizabeth and Her German Garden (1898) et The Solitary Summer (1899), deux récits sous la forme hybride du journal intime ou du mémoire. Dans son jardin, l’amatrice enthousiaste trouve un espace de liberté et d’indépendance, en dehors de la routine imposée par des contraintes de classe et de sexe. Alors que les deux récits suivent le rythme des saisons et les changements de la végétation, von Arnim joue avec certaines associations essentialistes en présentant le jardin non comme un double, mais comme un allié dans sa lutte contre diverses forces masculines de domination. En effet, refusant de contrôler les créatures naturelles, elle remet aussi en cause les prétendues affinités entre femme et nature. Le jardin lui permet d’exprimer une résistance aux injonctions sociales et de manifester un désir de liberté en détournant les éléments qui construisent traditionnellement la féminité — la promenade dans le jardin ou le récit de jardin. C’est à travers l’esthétisation du jardin poétique que s’exprime toute la force des revendications féministes de von Arnim.

As Elizabeth von Arnim (1866–1944) becomes a self-taught woman gardener, she also learns how to depict her treasure garden and the thoughts it arouses in two short books, Elizabeth and Her German Garden (1898) and The Solitary Summer (1899). In the garden, the enthusiastic amateur finds in the garden an appropriate place to create her own place of solitude and privacy, outside the domestic routine imposed upon her by her aristocratic background. While both novels follow the seasons and the changes in the vegetation, von Arnim’s witty prose presents the garden as an ally against masculine domination. As she is reluctant to monitor nature, she also challenges its feminine attributes. The garden empowers von Arnim to articulate her feminist views because the very weapons of femininity—the gender—oriented motifs of garden walking and garden writing—are manipulated so as to use garden—romance as the expression of her relative independence. Her views on gender grow out of the garden because it is propitious to her feminist ideas. Von Arnim’s unusual feminism and her aestheticized environment cross-fertilize in her garden writing.

INDEX

Keywords : Arnim (Elizabeth von), feminism, garden writing, gardens, aestheticism, nature
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