**Pleasure Gardens and the Problems of Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century England**

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*And must all these be burnt up? What will become of us then if we set our hearts upon them?*

John Wesley, on visiting the gardens at Piercefield[[1]](#footnote-1)

When John Wesley confessed to feeling sensual pleasure in a garden he was quick to insist that such pleasures were dangerous to the Christian soul. When Thomas Jefferson and John Adams acknowledged the lure of those same English landscapes, they both went on to claim that the pleasure of American gardens was quite different from the beautiful decadence of their English precursors. And when Abigail Adams visited the great gardens of France—praised over a century earlier by Madame de Scudéry for their intellectual, quite as much as their sensual, pleasures—she embraced those pleasures even as she rejected the tyranny of their origins.

In Wesley’s case, part of the struggle in his encounter with the English garden is a sense of delight and disdain, and so he insistently challenges the spiritual worth of the garden even as he recorded his own feelings of pleasure. His problem, as Wesley himself recognized, is that Christians are always in the wrong garden: gardens may be like the garden of Eden but they are not the garden of Eden, and, worse, by finding pleasure in them, the gardener or garden visitor mistakes their true purpose and the proper object of their contemplation. What Wesley’s dilemma points to is the specific problem of how one should respond to a pleasure garden, the larger problem of what pleasure should or might be, and the endless problem of whether one should, or should not, be having it.

It is this problem of pleasure in pleasure gardens that I want to explore in the following pages, and, to do so, I will be drawing on two kinds of material: the first is those formal statements about pleasure made in philosophical commentaries on pleasure and on pleasure gardens; the second—focusing primarily on the correspondence of the Bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu—is that wide array of personal letters which make the pleasures of the garden their subject. The question I pose is how might our understanding of designers and philosophers’ attempts to elicit and control intellectual and emotional pleasure help us to understand individuals’ engagements with, and attempts to record, the experience of pleasure in pleasure gardens?

There are of course numerous books from the eighteenth century which, one way or another, tell their readers how to behave in a garden, what they should think, how they should feel, and such books tend to work by offering the image of the ideal individual and their equally ideal responses. As Wesley’s question suggests, however, when one turns to the letters and diaries of eighteenth-century individuals, they are often acutely aware that they are themselves less than ideal and that they must therefore attempt to negotiate between a sense of what one is supposed to be feeling and the oddly resistant experience of how one actually feels.

What interests me here is the sense in which encountering the garden—both for owners and for visitors—can so often be a strangely divided experience, one which can sway at any moment from morally or politically ratified narratives of significance and of use to something far less neatly subsumed within, or contained by, such agenda. It is this fractured account of the individual in the garden, and of the individual accounting for themselves in the garden, that remains so intriguing: gardens may be designed as an invitation to easy pleasures, but attempts to record or explain such pleasures remain anything but easy. By turning to this problematic sense of what pleasure might, or should, be we can in turn ask how an individual might engage with, resist, or reinterpret the claims of others even as they encounter and record an experience of the garden for themselves .

**Pleasure Gardens**

Before we set about trying to address what I have termed the problem of pleasure, it is as well to consider just what constitutes a ‘pleasure garden’, what forms the space in which pleasure is expected to occur. When we talk of eighteenth-century pleasure gardens we perhaps tend to think of urban spaces, such as Vauxhall and Ranelagh in both London and New York, that is, those public gardens which emphasize urban sociability, music, spectacle and the stylized pleasures of the masquerade. But the term was in fact used much more widely throughout the period to denote any kind of garden dedicated to leisure rather than labour, to pleasure rather than productivity. In John James’ 1712 translation of Le Blond, he writes of ‘Fine Gardens, commonly called Pleasure Gardens’; in his book on husbandry in 1721, John Mortimer wrote of ‘the Garden of Pleasure or Flower Garden’; in Holdsworth’s essay on Virgil, he notes that the Romans ‘used the word *Tempe* ... for any very pleasing place; or pleasure ground, as our gardeners of late call them’; while, in 1779, James Meader was even less distinct when he chose for the title of his work *The Planter’s Guide: Or, Pleasure Gardener’s Companion*.[[2]](#footnote-2) These broad uses of the term pleasure garden spill over, too, into usage in private letters across the century, and thus while there is indeed a distinct use of the term quite rightly associated with gardens of urban sociability, for eighteenth-century owners, designers, and visitors the term was far more expansive.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is this more expansive use of the term with which I am concerned. Eighteenth-century pleasure gardens could be large or small, attached to town houses or spread across many acres in a country estate. Whatever form they took, and whatever geographical location they occupied, however, they held in common an ability to raise questions about the nature and purpose of pleasure, about the kinds of enjoyment enabled by a place marked out for ‘pleasure’.

My suggestion, then, is that if we tend to associate pleasure gardens—of whatever kind—with some notion of easy-going and untroubled leisure, they are as often the occasion for a drama of the senses and form part of that long history of the clash between intellectual and sensual pleasures, of a self understanding and articulating itself in the endless negotiation between desire and restraint. And what interests me here is not simply the range of claims made for the use of pleasure gardens, but the dilemma these conflicting and competing accounts might pose for those who experience them. With that in mind, we can turn to what I have termed the problems of pleasure.

**The problems of pleasure**

If the wide range of garden spaces encompassed by the term pleasure garden presents us with a problem, so too does our tendency to overlook just what *pleasure* might be; however, it is a marker that is worth exploring precisely because it seems so obvious and yet remains so vague in terms of what it defines and what expectations it engenders. Certainly in the various books published on gardens in recent years—even in those that include the term pleasure in their title—there remains an odd unwillingness to address the term itself.[[4]](#footnote-4) While we might of course see that as a failing, it seems to me that it points to something more interesting, and arises perhaps in part because the very pleasure of pleasure includes some sense of the nebulous. Nowhere is that more so than in the pleasure garden.

Gardens, by definition, are liminal spaces, spaces in which we configure, negotiate, and perform that difficult relationship of nature and culture, that intermingling of public and private, that hybridization of sense and sensibility. They also have an ambiguous relationship with the emotion that gives them their name: they are designed both to evoke and to restrain pleasure, to facilitate its experience, and to direct it—quite often—towards political and spiritual goals which much scholarship has told us represent the very antithesis of ‘simple pleasure’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Faced with such ambiguities, many early modern accounts of pleasure in pleasure gardens appear to offer little more than T.E. Brown’s much later and much ridiculed claim (in ‘My Garden’, 1876) that a garden is ‘a lovesome thing, God wot’. However, that ‘God-wotishness’—at once a recognition of, and an inability to articulate, pleasure—is both a powerful experience in gardens and a challenge to modern historians of emotion as we try to tease out the ways in which early modern individuals experienced pleasure as sensually immediate and socially contained.

T.E. Brown’s God-wotish inarticulacy—that heightened sense of the garden as a place in which to enjoy the unutterable—undoubtedly signals a powerfully felt pleasure, but it signals also the resistance or rejection of other kinds of pleasure and other concerns. As an invitation to embrace pleasure, what is contained and rejected by the reach of that embrace makes the garden at once an object of unmediated—‘simple’—pleasure and a confrontation with the complexity of the senses in society. Pleasure gardens offered their eighteenth-century visitors a powerful set of conflicting cultural expectations—at once imposed and inhabited (or even self-inflicted); by design, they invited ambiguous responses because in the garden one is always aware of, one is pushed to be aware of, being in more than one location, of experiencing location through disparate but coexisting frames of reference. Thus, while we may now indeed take for granted the easy 'pleasure' of pleasure gardens, for their creators and visitors the problem of pleasure confronted one with the lure of the senses and the sense of oneself in the world. For all its near-silent inarticulacy, Brown’s ‘God wot’ offers a tantalizingly potent statement about the desires that pleasure embodies.

This sense of pleasure as an easy or dangerous embrace was the stuff of much of the public writing about gardens in the period; it divided on gender lines with expectations about knowledge, both intellectual and sexual; but it also became characteristically the subject of disparate forms of private writing, with the garden providing the opportunity for a peculiar intensity of self reflection. Insisting on a heightened awareness of both sentience and sapience, gardens have always had this potential to pull their visitor in different directions and towards different forms of pleasure. In the early modern period this made them a subject of particular interest to philosophers, but it also made them difficult spaces for the individual to inhabit, spaces in which individuals felt pressured to justify the forms of pleasures.

**Philosophies of pleasure**

For Edmund Burke, pleasure and pain are ‘simple ideas’ and, as such, are beyond definition or at least beyond a definition which extends any further than an opposition.[[6]](#footnote-6) Pleasure, for Burke, can only meaningfully be defined as the absence of pain. But even such a simple definition begs further questions of the pleasure garden: if one part of a garden is for pleasure, what, then, is the rest of it for, and is it really to be defined by the absence of pleasure? The most obvious answer to the first part of that question is that beyond the pleasure garden lies the garden of utility, of productivity, the garden as a site for physical, which is also moral, labour. But, awkwardly, Burke’s assertion that the alternative to pleasure is pain implicitly suggests that a landscape beyond the pleasure garden—a landscape of productivity and use—is inevitably the experience of pain. That would bring its own problems for the plethora of theoretical moralists of the eighteenth century (for all that they might wish to dissociate themselves from labour in its manual forms), and thus both forms of the garden here become problematic: the one pleasurable but morally worthless, the other morally righteous but unpleasant. Framed in this way, my formulation demonstrates its own clumsiness; but it also highlights the difficulties of accounting for pleasure. Holding these implications at bay, therefore—though not entirely abandoning them—we might more fruitfully consider the denominating of a place of pleasure as signalling less an interest in the pain of utility and of labour, and more as offering a heightened sense of what pleasure entails, a sense that the value of pleasure must be confronted even as it is felt.

Accounting for pleasure as the imagined absence of its opposite was hardly peculiar to Burke. By the mid-eighteenth century, pleasure was being theorized not only by Burke, but notably by David Hume and Adam Smith, particularly in relation to virtue and sympathy, with pleasure framed as the shameful or anxious other to notions of manly civic virtue.[[7]](#footnote-7) That is, a powerful body of philosophical writing in the period found ways to justify certain kinds of intellectual pleasure, but the immediacy of the felt, of sensual pleasure, was always something of a problem and was far less easy to assimilate into comfortable moral frameworks. Enlightenment philosophers recognized the seductive lure of pleasure, to be sure, but for that very reason they were quick to claim that only some pleasures were virtuous, and that those virtues were only available to some. Linking pleasure with intellect, the power of the senses remained seductive, and dangerous.

While it is tempting to dwell on such theoretical model, to turn to Burke, or Smith, or Hume, and to use this as an explication of individual experience, it seems to me that those individual experiences and the articulation of those experiences is often more woolly, less certain, and finally more interesting: that is, I am suggesting that the representation of pleasurable experiences in the garden offers us insights into the relation between pleasure and ideology in the eighteenth-century which cannot simply be contained or explained by the formal statements and the models of understanding offered to us by eighteenth-century philosophers.

Certainly when the politician and garden writer, George Mason, addressed the experience of pleasure in gardens in his *Essay on Modern Gardening*, he concluded that ‘writers on gardening are strangely out of their track, when they lose themselves in the dreary wastes of metaphysical extravagancy’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Mason seems to have had in mind the likes of Thomas Whately, perhaps Burke too, and while this is a distinctly 1790s sentiment, with its fear of the foreign abstraction of theoreticians, it is also a helpful warning that we should be wary of mapping sophisticated philosophical texts too neatly onto experience and expression. Burke, Hume, and Smith undoubtedly offer influential philosophical models of pleasure; and by the 1790s, we can add the likes of William Godwin, for whom pleasure once again becomes central because it acts as a marker for that endlessly problematic relation between body and mind. Less clear, however, is how coherent an account of ‘pleasure’ is being repeated or rehearsed in the design and in the individual experiences of eighteenth-century gardens. More likely perhaps is a much broader awareness which continues to exhibit that larger cultural anxiety about pleasure, an anxiety joked about by Byron in a famous line from *Don Juan* that ‘Pleasure’s a Sin, and Sometimes Sin’s a Pleasure’, but one we can also trace back to the likes of Lucretius and Ovid:

From the midst of the fountains of pleasures there rises something of

bitterness which torments us amid the very flowers.

        Lucretius—*De Rerum Natura* IV. 11. 26.

No one possesses unalloyed pleasure; there is some anxiety mingled with the joy.

        Ovid—*Metamorphoses*. VII. 453.33

It would certainly seem to be this broader kind of Lucretian or Ovidian sentiment that Elizabeth Montagu had in mind when she wrote to her friend, Elizabeth Carter, in 1770, of a proposed visit to the natural beauties of Derbyshire and concluded, ‘If my dear Mrs Carter was of ye party ye pleasure wd be compleat but alas! pleasure in this World is not to be so.’[[9]](#footnote-9) It is this longer, looser, and seemingly rather clichéd account of pleasure that seems to me so interesting: it invites us to concern ourselves not only with modern philosophers talking one to another, but also with an understanding of pleasure which merges individual moments of experience with those longer-term narratives to which people might turn when attempting to make sense of their own lives.

Before we abandon philosophy entirely, there is one more model of pleasure to which I wish to turn, because it helps to pull together some of the differing accounts I have rehearsed so far. Burke’s implication that pleasure is the absence of pain may seem rather stark, but the sense that pleasure might be understood as an opposition, even as an absence, is repeatedly found in the letters and diaries of those who visited gardens in the period. So too is a rather different account of how it might be experienced, that is perhaps best summarized in the words of Bishop Berkeley, who argued that we should recognize three sorts of pleasure: ‘pleasure of reason, pleasure of imagination, and pleasure of sense’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For Berkeley, those three kinds of pleasure formed a clear hierarchy, with reason at the top, and the senses at the bottom. And we can see that model of thinking being played out throughout the century, not least in the writings of Lord Kames, whose *Elements of Criticisms* (1762) is one of the century’s most sustained attempts to merge philosophical abstractions with the experience of being in a garden.[[11]](#footnote-11) With its repeated turn to examples drawn from landscape, one of the most striking features of *Elements of Criticism* is its assertion that natural forms have particular and inevitable emotional affects: ‘Such is our nature that upon perceiving certain external objects, we are instantaneously conscious of pleasure or pain: a gently-flowing river, a smooth extended plain, a spreading oak, a towering hill, are objects of sight that raise pleasant emotions: a barren heath, a dirty marsh … raise painful emotions.’ According to Kames this happens, ‘without the least reflection’ (vol.1, pp.36-7), and it is this embodied reaction which, he insists, makes such responses natural, and shared.

However, like Berkeley before him, Kames then goes on to make one further assertion: immediate bodily responses—what Kames refers to as the ‘organic’ senses—may be natural, but for that very reason they are also ‘primitive’, and ‘childish’, and so have to be set beneath the higher pleasures of intellect and rationality. Thus, while ‘a taste for natural objects is born with us in perfection … the author of nature, by qualifying the human mind for a succession of enjoyments from low to high, leads it by gentle steps from the most grovelling corporeal pleasures, for which only it is fitted in the beginning of life, to those refined and sublime pleasures that are suited to its maturity’ (vol.1, pp.5-6).

Great gardens, for Kames, are marked by their facility to move between these different states, between happiness and melancholy, between beauty and disgust. It is the ability to achieve this repeated movement between states of mind and feeling which in turn makes the garden for Kames one of the great achievements of civilization, an achievement at once underpinned by, and underpinning, the hierarchy of pleasure. In this idealized account of the garden, Kames—like so many other theorists—turns to an equally idealized garden visitor. What makes pleasure gardens such exciting places in the period, however, is that they may assume an interplay between reason, imagination and the senses, to be sure, but not always the kind of hierarchy upon which Bishop Berkeley or Lord Kames insists. In both garden design and in the responses of individuals to gardens, the pleasures of the senses could all too often outweigh the more lofty claims of reason. Thus, while theorists and philosophers might insist on the importance of rational pleasure and might champion gardens for their intellectual merit, what marks out the garden’s peculiar status—as Kames himself was acutely aware— is its own insistent physicality, a physicality that cannot be abstracted into pure intellect, a physicality that demands a somatic confrontation with the corporeality of the senses. That clash between body and mind, between the physical and the intellectual was characteristic of pleasure gardens throughout the eighteenth century; but it also represented a challenge for the individual as they considered the use of their time, the nature of leisure, the sense of a moment set apart from their everyday experience of life.

Central here, then, is the range of expectations that a designed landscape might engender; and this sense that the garden might acknowledge, suppress, and manipulate conflicting accounts of pleasure is repeatedly acknowledged not only in theoretical works, such as Kames’ *Elements*, but in the plethora of topographical prints of gardens produced throughout the eighteenth century. If we turn by way of the briefest of examples to a series of four views of West Wycombe engraved by William Woollett in 1757 we can see how these problems of pleasure became a central focus of attention.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The home of Sir Francis Dashwood, the notorious rake, and a founder of the Hellfire Club, West Wycombe had become closely associated with the infamy of its owner. Little of this, however, is directly on display in Woollett’s images. In each of the images, Woollett offers the usual combination of work and leisure which marks out the garden as a scene of pleasure for the well-to-do, and of labour for servants and gardeners. In *A View of the House and Part of the Garden*, groups of figures, set in elegant poses, point to the pleasures of architecture or engage in al fresco tea drinking and conversation. But the kinds of pleasure on display are also characteristically gendered. The women are mostly aligned with domestic pleasures, while it is the men who point to architectural features and, in doing so, point also to their own good taste and intellectual abilities. Placed prominently in the foreground, however, is a mixed group of two women and one man, perhaps a courtship group, perhaps—with one of the women looking into what appears to be a mirror—a gesture towards female vanity. And that hint of other kinds of pleasure, of pleasures which should not be seen, becomes perhaps the central concern of another image in the series – *A View of the Walton Bridge, Venus’s Temple*, &c. Here, the temple of Venus is carefully distanced and, set behind a bridge, partially obscured. The traditional figure of Venus can certainly be seen in the rotunda atop the mount, but the structure’s more risqué features — including the distinctly anatomical gestures of the mound with grotto beneath (designed to suggest the open legs of a woman) — are carefully hidden from view. In the foreground of the image, a couple stand directly in front of the temple and the bridge, to the left is a family group, to their right is the bridge leading to the Temple of Venus. One implication, then, in this careful arrangement of foreground figures is that the couple must choose between the responsibilities of family life exemplified by the group to the left of the foreground, or the pleasures of sexual desire made explicit by the Temple of Venus. Pleasure once again becomes a matter of choice, and while we may be tempted to consign the various figures in these engravings of West Wycombe to the merely ‘conventional’, we might see them also as insisting that pleasure gardens raise questions about pleasure, and that choices of pleasure are to be recognized as an account of oneself.

Pleasure, then, is never quite as easy as it seems, for the lure of the senses and the retreat into leisure always confronts the individual with their sense of themselves, of what they value, and of how they will be judged by others. The immediacy of the sensual world and the knowledge of more complex intellectual commitments remain in tension. Both sets of responses to the garden are always possible, and images of gardens must inevitably engage with these conflicting accounts of pleasures at once sensual and intellectual. But so, too, must individuals, and, in the last part of this essay, I want to suggest that the problems of pleasure—abstract or otherwise—are among the most immediate responses of those who rehearse, or attempt to explain, what it feels like to be in a garden.

**Still greater pleasure**

The problems of pleasure are not of course unique to pleasure gardens, but in pleasure gardens the recognition of those problems is, I am suggesting, particularly acute. So far I have been trading in some fairly broad accounts of both pleasure gardens and of pleasure. Lord Kames, with his insistent evocation of landscape but a distinctly didactic agenda, brings us some way towards the individual experience of pleasure in the garden; but I want to turn in this final section of the essay to examples drawn from the plethora of private letters and diaries in which we find individuals dealing directly with their own experiences, and their own expectations of pleasure.

We have already seen how John Wesley struggled with the experience of pleasure, and we have seen, too, how Elizabeth Montagu might frame her expectations of pleasure in terms of its inevitable limitations. Wesley exploded at times when confronted by gardens full of heathen deities and nude statues, and thus by gardens which explicitly celebrated the wrong kinds of pleasure. But his central anxiety about the pleasures of the garden was driven by something more disturbing, which was his own sense that he could be seduced by the sensual pleasures of this world rather than the spiritual pleasures of the next. For Montagu that anxiety seems far less acute, and it is to Montagu that I now want to return, because her correspondence with family and friends in the later decades of the eighteenth century provides us with strikingly articulate and sustained encounters with those shifting experiences and expectations of pleasure in pleasure gardens that I have been mapping out so far.

In a series of letters from the early 1760s, Montagu writes both from and of her distinctly old-fashioned gardens at Sandleford, in Berkshire, repeatedly recording moments of pleasure, but repeatedly also joining with her friends in shaping the account of pleasure they seek to offer. We can see this, for example, by turning to two letters written in close succession, one that Montagu wrote to her husband Edward in August 1762, and another that she received a month later from her close friend, George Lord Lyttelton, the owner of the much admired pleasure gardens at Hagley. Both letters would appear to offer something close to that ideal of easy, almost thoughtless, pleasure; both finally offer something rather more complex. Responding to Edward’s account of the fine views from Harrow on the Hill, Montagu described the pleasures of their own estate at Sandleford, and wrote:

The garden is delightfully sweet, & every plant seems as if recovering from a fever. The weather ever since I came down, except yesterday, has been the most delightful imaginable. I passd almost every hour in the garden, never were the zephirs more gentle & pleasing, the wood was delightfull & if such weather had not its bad consequences one should have been glad to have had continue.[[13]](#footnote-13)

And from Lyttelton she received the following:

As I sat today at dinner I could not help crying out, “what a lovely Day! what a lovely Lawn! and what a lovely flock of sheep are feeding upon it!” to which Mr Rust added, and what dear Deer! In short, Madam, you should be here and behold all these charms …[[14]](#footnote-14)

Lyttelton’s exclamation perhaps comes closest to T.E. Brown’s inarticulate ‘God wot’ over a century later, but the sense of easy pleasure is hardly complete. In Lyttelton’s case, it is not simply that his friend Mr Rust undercuts his exclamations with a bathetic pun, but that those exclamations are themselves knowingly inadequate, with the jokey manner signalling a recognition that it is not enough simply to respond in this way, even as the response signals a sense of unmediated delight and the urge to embrace it. However, we might also say that in registering this ambiguity Lyttelton’s exclamations offer us an authentic account of pleasure, both because they express and are unable to express or to settle upon a singular emotional state. Lyttelton’s turn to knowing self-mockery registers the dilemma of self-expression, the awareness that sensual pleasure must always compete with its intellectual counterpart, and the recognition that the experience of one state is felt by the awareness of another. This last is of course crucial also in Montagu’s letter to her husband, from the opening gambit of changed state to the complex final phrasing—‘if … one should have been’—with its suggestion of pleasure not quite complete. It is a mode that Montagu develops, and insists upon, through her correspondence.

We can see it, for example, if we turn to a letter Montagu wrote to her husband the previous summer during a visit to Tunbridge Wells.

I wish to share your walks you so well describe, & should find a heartfelt pleasure in accompanying you. No one can be better qualified than you are for tasting the noble & natural pleasures offerd by a fine summers day, which as Milton says can chace all sorrows but despair. The brightest sun cannot dispell the glooms of guilt, nor the softest zephyrs calm ambition … but the well regulated mind, & the innocent heart must enter into & partake the general joy. That ear has lost the finest senses that cannot taste the joyfull songs of the feather’d choiresters, & the eye the best discernment who does not from the magnificent scenery of nature find beauties superior to all the works of art. You have advantages beyond those of a common spectator, & can reflect with admiration and delight on the laws that keep the vast machinery in order, & science like a telescope leads your eye to objects & things unperceived by the unassisted vision of ignorance.[[15]](#footnote-15)

For all the pleasures on offer here, they are nonetheless framed by their negatives: of longing and absence, of sorrow held at bay, of gloom, of loss, of failure, and, finally, of ignorance. If this would seem to echo Burke, then threaded through this account of pleasure made apparent by its alternatives is also an insistence on that hierarchical model of pleasures to be found in Berkeley and Kames: no one is better qualified than Edward Montagu, who, with his fine senses, discernment, and advantages beyond those of the ‘common spectator’ can turn from the sensual pleasures of sight to the intellectual pleasures of ‘objects and things unperceived by … unassisted vision’. Here, then, Edward’s pleasures are most clearly understood, and most sharply in focus for Elizabeth Montagu when set beside the things they are not; and this response to, and shaping of, the pleasures of nature is a dialogue in two senses. Most obviously that dialogue emerges as a discussion between husband and wife which carefully transforms the sensual into the intellectual, heartfelt absence into rational engagement; but it is a dialogue, too, in that while this account of pleasure turns on apparently ‘natural’ beauties, in Montagu’s correspondence the designed pleasures of the pleasure garden also form part of the wider conversation.

Strikingly, while at Tunbridge Wells much earlier in life (this time in 1752) Montagu claimed that she could—and would—dissociate herself from the mere detail of the natural world in order to enjoy its intellectual pleasures, writing of the ever-changing groups of people passing through the town that, ‘I regard it no more than the succession of vegetables in the garden: they vary the prospect indeed, but make little difference in the pleasure of the walk, and one scarce observes whether the early primrose, or Michaelmas daisy enamels the pastures’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nearly forty years later, we can see an extended exploration of this claim, complete with an apparent rejection of pleasure gardens, in a letter to her nephew’s wife, Elizabeth (Charlton) Montagu, of 1788. Here she writes,

… had this morning been fair, I should have had a still greater pleasure in sitting on a bench in our Grove … I would not have you imagine, that I mean to insinuate, that the prospects here are so fine, or the place so noble; but in the splendor of a Summers day I receive a higher delight in the general contemplation of nature, & attention to the energies of omnipotencein the animal, & vegetable World, before me, than from attention to local circumstances, the improvements made by taste & the innovations of Art. On such occasions I get rid of my individuality, & I am every thing; I am litterally as busy as a bee, & as gay as a butterfly; I flutter in the air with the birds; & graze on the lawn with the sheep; till from this view of universal benefits conferred, & the general harmony of things, my mind is led with gratefull veneration to the source, & *The Parent of Good*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

There are two oddities here: one is that this letter of the 1780s draws almost word for word on a similar letter written to Lyttelton in those exchanges of the early 1760s; the other is that even this apparent rejection of the pleasure garden is not quite what it seems. Certainly Montagu introduces this moment of reverie and loss of self as triumphing over ‘the improvements made by taste & the innovations of Art’, but—quite characteristically—she does so by offering those moments of higher delight as themselves taking place while on a bench in her grove. The bench, a marker of art and of ease, is a signal that here pleasure is to be found; but the problem of pleasure returns with that characteristic need to distance oneself from pleasures even as one situates oneself within them. Once again, then, the pleasure garden is an invitation to think of pleasure, and if here the spiritual and the intellectual rise above the sensual, the sensual and the physical are not finally abandoned. For Montagu, one flower may be much like another, but more significant is the recognition that in gardens which proclaim their invitations to pleasure, it is the nature of pleasure which must be addressed.

As this account of Montagu’s careful manoeuvres suggests, pleasure is always a negotiation. ‘I must’, she wrote, ‘add rational to animal pleasures … tender emotions of the heart to pleasures of the imagination’, and that understanding of pleasure, of at once distinction and nuanced difference, of opposition and of relation is to be found throughout her correspondence.[[18]](#footnote-18) Pleasure is to be set against the ‘bourgeois blessing’ of comfort, to be disparaged—even as it is embraced—because it is ‘an inconstant coquette, sometimes an errant jilt’, while that most peculiar form of pleasure, the pleasure of melancholy, is constantly a reminder that pleasure may be no pleasure at all.[[19]](#footnote-19)

I began this essay by turning from urban pleasure gardens to a wider account of the term, but we can return to those urban pleasures for a moment with one last—and again wholly characteristic—manoeuvre on Montagu’s part. Writing to Elizabeth Carter in that set of exchanges in the early 1760s, she aligns her gardens at Sandleford with ‘the more enlarged, the nobler, and the softer pleasures of the Mind’ but imagines an old age where ‘I suppose if we live long enough, we shall grow much more indifferent whether we walk together in the finest rural scenes, or make a party with some foolish or worthless body to take a walk in Mary bone gardens’.[[20]](#footnote-20) That need to distinguish between, but not abandon, sensual and intellectual, public and private, pleasures makes the pleasure garden a place of instant emotion and of intense speculation, a place in which one’s pleasures and one’s sense of self must constantly be negotiated. As Montagu wrote to the Rev. William Friend after returning from another London pleasure garden, ‘I had the pleasure of your letter on Saturday, at my return from Ranelagh Gardens; I was glad to see the evening of a day spent in diversion improve into friendship. The various pleasures the general world can give us, are nothing in comparison of the collected comforts of friendship. The first play round the head, but come not to the heart; the last are intensely felt; however, both of these kinds of pleasures are necessary to our satisfaction …’[[21]](#footnote-21) Montagu offers us here, and throughout her correspondence, a particularly acute account of pleasure as intellect and emotion, as opposition and as hierarchy, and in doing so her letters highlight for us a much wider eighteenth-century engagement with pleasure and its dilemmas. Certainly we can find in philosophical tracts and treatises the kinds of careful distinctions I mapped out at the beginning of this essay—and at times Montagu herself comes close to this language—but those who experienced gardens and attempted to write of that experience provide us with something more complex, and perhaps more compelling, as they negotiated—or ignored—the competing claims made upon them.

Why should we concern ourselves with pleasure gardens as a site of pleasure? One kind of answer is that they are spaces which confront the individual with a sense of something beyond themselves, whether we call that nature, or creation, or just otherness, but are insistently the product of a historical culture, and are so often the occasion for the immediate—if sometimes nebulous—feeling of pleasure. And when pleasure appears in the letters and diaries of eighteenth-century men and women in the garden, it characteristically does so as a point of friction, and as a moment in which we see the individual confronting a sense of self as it will be socialized by others. By focusing on the problem of pleasure—too much, not enough, the wrong kind, the wrong place—I’m suggesting that we might move beyond didactic literature and philosophical statements and so gain at least some access to what it *feels* like to be in a garden.

1. Journal entry for Friday, 25 August, 1769, in Nehemiah Curnock, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., sometime fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, enlarged from original mss., with notes from unpublished diaries, annotations, maps, and illustrations*, 8 vols. (London: Charles Kelly, 1909-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville, *The theory and practice of gardening*, transl. John James (London: George James, 1712)**;** John Mortimer, *The Whole Art of Husbandry, in the Way of Managing and Improving of Land* (London: Robinson & Mortlock,1707); Edward Holdsworth, *Remarks and dissertations on Virgil, publ. with notes by Mr. Spence* (London: J. Dodsley, 1768); James Meader, *The Planter's Guide: or, Pleasure Gardener's companion. Giving plain directions, with observations, for the proper disposition and management of the various trees and shrubs for a pleasure garden plantation* (London: G. Robinson, 1779). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. But for urban pleasure gardens see especially Jonathan Conlin, ed., *The Pleasure Garden, from Vauxhall to Coney Island* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is no need to name names here, but this is oddly true of recent work on both sides of the Atlantic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For this dilemma see R. Porter & M. Mulvey Roberts, eds., *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (London: MacMillan, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1757), section 2.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an exploration of these ideas see Emma Clery, ‘The Pleasures of Terror’, in R. Porter & M. Mulvey Roberts, eds, *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (London: MacMillan, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. George Mason, *An Essay on Design in Gardening. . .now greatly augmented. Also a Revisal of several later publications of the same subject* (London: B. & J. White, 1795) p.155. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Huntington Library Ms, MO 3273 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, Stratford on Avon, 23rd June 1770. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. George Berkeley, *Alciphron; or, The minute philosopher* (London: J. Tonson, 1732), 2 vols., vol.1, ii. xiv. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 6th edition, with the Author’s last corrections and additions, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Bell, Creech, Cadell & Robinson, 1785). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. William Woollett, after William Hannan, *Four Views of the House and Gardens of Sir Francis Dashwood, Bart. at West Wycombe*, London, 1757, British Library Maps K.Top.8.23.a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Huntington Library Ms, MO 2457 Elizabeth Montagu to Edward Montagu, Sandleford, 5th August, 1762 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Huntington Library Ms, MO 1300 Lord Lyttelton to Elizabeth Montagu Hagley 17th September, 1762, [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Huntington Library Ms, MO 2445 Elizabeth Montagu to Edward Montagu, Tunbridge Wells [?] 29th July, 1761 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *The Letters of Elizabeth Montagu, with some of the letters of her correspondents*, 4 vols. (London: Cadell & Davis, 1809-13), vol.3, letter to Gilbert West, September 2nd, 1752. [**Thank you Shirley: it’s vol. 3!**.] [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Huntington Library Ms, MO 2966 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth [Charlton] Montagu, Sandleford, 30th May, 1788. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Huntington Library Ms, MO 3157 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, Sandleford, 17th October, 1765. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Huntington Library Ms, MO 6444 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Handcock Vesey, Sandleford, 11th June, 1775. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Huntington Library Ms, MO 3072 Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, London, 15th May, 1762. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *The Letters of Elizabeth Montagu, with some of the letters of her correspondents*, 4 vols. (London: Cadell & Davis, 1809-13), vol. 1, p.135 [no date]. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)