

The cultivation of the female mind: enlightened growth, luxuriant decay and botanical analogy in eighteenth-century texts

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Abstract

Enlightenment optimism over mankind's progress was often voiced in terms of botanical growth by key figures such as John Millar; the mind's cultivation marked the beginning of this process. For agriculturists such as Arthur Young cultivation meant an advancement towards virtue and civilization; the cultivation of the mind can similarly be seen as an enlightenment concept which extols the human potential for improvable reason. In the course of this essay I aim to explore the relationship between 'culture' and 'cultivation' through botanical metaphor. By using the recurring motif of the mind's cultivation as a site from which to explore enlightenment views on female understanding, I investigate how far concerns with human progress extended to the female mind.

I examine the language of botany and cultivation in texts by authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Laetitia Barbauld alongside that of Rousseau and Millar. Wollstonecraft's appropriation and subsequent inversion of the conventional cultivation metaphor, for example, demonstrates her desire to draw attention to society's neglect of women's educational potential by substituting images of enlightened growth with those of luxuriant decay. By pushing this analogy further she indicates how society has cultivated women rearing them like exotic flowering plants or 'luxuriants' where 'strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty'. I discuss the antipastoral rationalism which enables her to unmask the false sentiment behind this traditional metaphoric association between women and flowers arguing that such familiar tropes are the language of male desire and are indicative of women's problematic relationship to culture.

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Henry Fuseli's frontispiece to Erasmus Darwin's long poem *The Botanic Garden* (1791) depicts Flora as the goddess of botany, being attired by the elements. Flora gazes into a mirror held before her by the nymph of fire while the other elements, air,

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earth, and water, adorn her with flowers (see Fig. 1). An allegorical reading of Fuseli's design suggests that botany is a mirror in which femininity can be examined: similarly, women's relationship to Enlightenment culture can be illuminated through an analysis of literary comparisons between women and cultivated flowers. I will examine floral motifs in eighteenth-century poetry and investigate the relationship between images of cultivation and growth and those of luxuriant decay in texts by Enlightenment figures such as John Millar and Rousseau, alongside Mary Wollstonecraft's more subversive practice. Many works of this period demonstrate that, while cultivation is connected with Enlightenment progress, femininity is either located within a discourse of luxury and consequent degeneration (i.e. over-cultivation) or in a realm of minimal cultivation, close to a state of nature.

Images of husbandry and cultivation in Enlightenment literature indicate the close relationship that exists between 'culture' and 'cultivation'. In Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) to 'Cultivate' is 'to forward or improve', while 'Culture' is 'the act of



Fig. 1. Henry Fuseli, 'Flora Attired by the Elements' (frontispiece to *The Botanic Garden*). Reproduced from Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts* (London: J. Johnson, 1791; facs. repr. Menston: Scolar Press, 1973).

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