

The Cultivation of the Female Mind: Enlightened Growth, Luxuriant Decay and Botanical Analogy in Eighteenth-Century Texts

Henry Fuseli's frontispiece to Erasmus Darwin's long poem *The Botanic Garden* (Part One, 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, earth, and water, adorn her with flowers. 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) 'Cultivate' is 'to forward or improve', while 'Culture' is 'the act of cultivation' or 'the art of improvement and melioration'.¹ Raymond Williams shows the derivation of 'culture' and 'cultivation' from the Latin, *Cultura* and *Colere*. *Colere* had a range of overlapping meanings such as 'cultivate' and 'inhabit' which developed through *colonus* to colony. *Cultura* became assimilated with 'cultivation', entering the English language as 'culture' with its primary meaning of husbandry or the tending of natural growth. In its early uses 'culture' had been a noun of process—the tending of something; by the eighteenth century this was extended metaphorically to a process of human development.² The interchangeability of 'culture' and 'cultivation' in eighteenth-century literature is common: Johnson, for example, exclaims, 'she neglected the *culture* of her understanding' (1759) while George Colman advises parents to censor their daughters' reading and not to trust 'the *cultivation* of her mind to a circulating library' (1760) [my emphases].³

Cultivated flowers, particularly the tulip, appear frequently in eighteenth-century satires on women.⁴ In Pope's epistle 'To A Lady' (1735), the flamboyant tulip is compared to the richly adorned female figure:

¹ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language, Abstracted from the folio edition by the author, etc.*, 2 vols (London: Printed for J. Knapton; C. Hitch and L. Hawes; A. Millar, R. and J. Dodsley; and M. and T. Longman, 1756).

² Raymond Williams, 'Culture,' *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976) 87-93.

³ Johnson, cited in Raymond Williams, *Keywords* 87; George Colman, *Polly Honeycombe*, lines 194-95, *Eighteenth-Century Afterpieces*, ed. Richard Bevis (London: OUP, 1970) 159.

⁴ For such satires, see Felicity Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires On Women 1660-1750* (Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 1984), Swift, 94-116, Pope, 137-58.

Ladies, like variegated Tulips, show,
 'Tis to their Changes that their charms they owe;
 Their happy Spots the nice admirer take,
 Fine by defect, and delicately weak. (41-44)⁵

Variegated tulips such as feathered or flamed varieties were show flowers, grown solely for competition.⁶ During cultivation, a virus can cause the colours of the tulip to 'break' and tulip 'freaks' to appear.⁷ The curious streaks of such tulips fascinated the florists who, remaining unaware of their true cause, saw an element of unpredictability or 'sport' in the flower.⁸ Pope, an experienced gardener, chose the unique colour changes of the variegated tulip to depict the contrarities that he saw in the female character. Pope's tulips are novel and attract attention but they are also defective; like women, who are equally charming, they are 'fine by defect' and essentially corrupt.

The fashion for cultivated flowers has obvious associations with fashions in adorning the female body. Swift, in 'The Lady's Dressing Room', compares Celia's ablutions, the artifice by which the corrupt nature of the female body is concealed, to the cultivation of exotics:

Such order from confusion sprung,
 Such gaudy *tulips* raised from *dung*. (143-44)⁹

Rotting plaster or pigeon dung applied to tulip bulbs during cultivation was thought to bring about their coveted colour changes.¹⁰ Celia, who 'rose from stinking ooze', is represented as unnatural, putrescent and infected like the cultivated tulip. The vibrant tulip delights the eye while the unclean practices used to rear them remain hidden; Celia, too, is colourfully adorned but Swift discovers the stinking corruption, the foul decaying body, which lies beneath her paint and powder. Swift's association of luxury with infection and decay recalls Forster's account of the new consumerism in England in 1767: 'In such a state as this fashion must have uncontrolled sway. And a fashionable luxury must spread through it like a contagion'.¹¹ Swift saw eighteenth-century

⁵ 'Epistle II. To A Lady (Of The Characters of Women),' *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Routledge, 1968) 561.

⁶ Anna Pavord, *The Tulip* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999) 213.

⁷ Wilfrid Blunt, *Tulipomania* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950) 12

⁸ An eighteenth-century meaning of 'to sport' was 'to vary abnormally from the parent stock or specific type, to exhibit or undergo spontaneous mutilation' (*OED*). Tulip 'sports' are streaky or 'broken' flowers.

⁹ 'The Lady's Dressing Room,' Jonathan Swift, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 452.

¹⁰ Pavord, *The Tulip* 11.

¹¹ N. Forster, *An Enquiry Into the Present High Price of Provisions. In two parts: I. Of the general causes of this evil. II. Of the causes of it in some particular instances* (London: Printed for J. Fletcher & Co.; and sold by J. Fletcher in Oxford, 1767) 41.

consumerism as the trading of unnecessary commodities, particularly for female consumption, and depicted capitalist society as an attempt to ‘gratify the vanity and pride and luxury of women’.¹² In 1711, Addison made an ironic quip about man’s cultivation of the female sex, stating that ‘the whole sex is now dwarfed and shrunk into a race of beauties that seems almost another species’.¹³ These analogies between women and such cultivated flowers as tulips show how botany became a discourse on luxuriant femininity.

By 1792, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* would appropriate and invert these conventional cultivation metaphors, substituting images of enlightened growth for those of luxuriant decay in order to demonstrate society’s neglect of women’s educational potential. Wollstonecraft illustrates how society cultivates women like exotic flowering plants or ‘luxuriant’, where ‘strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty’.¹⁴ Her rationalist antipastoralism enables her to unmask the false sentiment behind the traditional metaphoric association of women and flowers and explode the familiar tropes, revealing them as embodiments of male desire, indicative of women’s problematic relationship to culture. To understand Wollstonecraft’s strategy we must examine the ways cultivation has been linked with progress in mainstream Enlightenment thought. We should also look at how even Enlightenment thinkers still embraced earlier conventions about women, particularly Rousseau who did, however, provide the foundations for much of Wollstonecraft’s own philosophy.

John Millar’s *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1779) follows the four-stage theory of human progress in which the changing position of women in society is central.¹⁵ Despite the harsh treatment and low status to which women were subject in the early stage of human history, Millar placed considerable faith in the course of human progress, arguing that:

it ought, at the same time to be remembered, that, how poor and wretched soever the aspect of human nature in this early state, it

¹² Jonathan Swift, ‘A Proposal that All the Ladies and Women of Ireland Should Appear Constantly In Irish Manufactures,’ *Prose Works*, ed. H. Davies (Oxford: OUP, 1951) 126-27. For a discussion of the way Swift uses female dress to exemplify commodification, see Laura Brown’s ‘Reading Race and Gender: Jonathan Swift,’ *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1990): 425-43.

¹³ Addison, cited in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London: Europa, 1982) 11.

¹⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (1792; New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co, 1988) 10. All further references to this edition.

¹⁵ *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks: Or, An Inquiry Into the Circumstances Which Give Rise to Influence and Authority in the Different Members of Society*, 4th ed. (1779; Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Longman, Hurst, Rees & Orme, 1806). For a discussion of the four stages theory and the Scottish Enlightenment, see David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) 271-73. For Millar’s analysis of women’s status, see Paul Bowles’s ‘John Millar, The Four Stages Theory and Women’s Position in Society,’ *The History of Political Economy* 16.4 (1984): 619-68.

contains the seeds of improvement, which, by long care and culture, are capable of being brought to maturity.¹⁶

Such Enlightenment optimism over mankind's progress was often voiced in terms of botanical growth. For agriculturists such as Arthur Young (1741-1820), cultivation of the land was itself a civilising process that might bring 'the wastelands of the kingdom into culture'.¹⁷ In France, Enlightenment *philosophes* believed that mankind was advancing in a similar fashion from primitive barbarism to reason, virtue and civilisation. The contemporary stress in educational debates on the cultivation of the mind paralleled this enlightenment faith in a reason that had a potential for open development: Condillac, Turgot and Condorcet all emphasised cultivation as the beginning of the enlightenment process.¹⁸

The motif of the cultivation of the mind in James Thomson's *Spring* (1728) illustrates the Enlightenment celebration of social progress:

Delightful Task! to rear the tender Thought,
To teach the young Idea how to shoot,
To pour the fresh Instruction o'er the Mind,
To breathe th' inspiring Spirit, and to plant
The generous Purpose in the glowing Breast. (1152-56)¹⁹

Already a common trope in early to mid- eighteenth-century poetry, this theme appeared widely in educational writing in the 1780s and '90s. A variant of Thomson's lines appears as a frontispiece to Erasmus Darwin's *A Plan For The Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797): 'Plant with nice hand reflection's tender root | And teach the young Ideas how to shoot',²⁰ while an extended metaphor of tending natural growth by 'careful cultivation' forms the euphoric epilogue to Dr Aikin and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's educational work, *Evenings At Home* (1782-86):

May wisdom's seeds in every mind
Fit soil and careful culture find;
Each generous plant with vigour shoot,
And kindly ripen into fruit!

¹⁶ Millar, *Ranks* 198.

¹⁷ Arthur Young, quoted in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes In England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 255. The life and works of Arthur Young are discussed in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 66-67, and in Keith Thomas 221, 248 and 255.

¹⁸ Condillac, *Traité des Systèmes* (1749), Turgot, *On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind* (1750) and Condorcet, *Sketch For A Historical Picture of the Human Mind* (1795).

¹⁹ *Spring, A Poem* (London: A. Millar & G. Straham, 1728).

²⁰ Erasmus Darwin, *A Plan For The Conduct of Female Education In Boarding School* (London: J. Johnson, 1797).

Hope of the world, the rising race,
 May heaven with fostering love embrace,
 And turning to a whiter page,
 Commence with them a better age!
 An Age of light and joy, which we
 Alas! in promise only see.²¹

Here an investment in the ‘careful culture’ of ‘wisdom’s seeds’ is shown to have its returns in the fruit of ‘generous’ plants. As vigorous young plants, Barbauld’s youthful readers represent the promise of the next generation; they are members of ‘the rising race’ who, with their new-found knowledge, carry with them the ‘hope of the world’. Like seeds or plantlets, all children, regardless of sex, have an equal capacity for growth. It is this universal potential which Barbauld’s plant imagery celebrates.²²

Barbauld, writing for the juvenile market, stresses the importance of education as a means to start society afresh by ‘turning to a whiter page’ in order to begin again, an image reminiscent of John Locke’s *tabula rasa*. In principle, due to its universalism, Enlightenment theories of human learning such as Locke’s applied equally to women. However, the utopian drive for social progress during the Enlightenment encountered such barriers to female development as inadequate education and doubts about women’s capacity for reason.²³ Women were regarded as being closer to nature, more emotional, incapable of objective reasoning and guided by different principles than men.²⁴ Gendered assertions such as these challenged those strands in Enlightenment thought that emphasised a universal human nature and human history.

²¹ A.L. Barbauld and J. Aiken, ‘Epilogue’, *Evenings At Home: or The Juvenile Budget Opened*, 6 vols, vol. 6 (London: J. Johnson, 1792-6) 152.

²² Although Barbauld was an educationalist she had limited views on female education. She saw no reason for women to learn foreign languages, for example, and appears fairly conservative compared to radicals such as Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macaulay. For Barbauld’s educational ideas, see Lucy Aikin’s ‘Memoir’ prefixed to *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld*, ed. Lucy Aikin, 2 vols. (London: Longman *et al.*, 1825).

²³ The answer to the question of what Enlightenment has meant for feminism is highly contentious; a cross-section of the debate can be found in: E. Fox-Genovese, ‘Property and Patriarchy in Classical Bourgeois Political Theory,’ *Radical History Review*, 4.23 (1977), and Ludmilla Jordanova, ‘Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality,’ in *Nature, Culture, Gender*, ed. Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge: CUP, 1980) 42-70; Sabina Lovibond, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism,’ *New Left Review* 178 (1989): 5-28; Katherine B. Clinton, ‘Femme et Philosophe: Enlightenment Origins of Feminism,’ *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8.3 (1975): 283-99; Pauline Johnson, ‘Feminism and the Enlightenment,’ *Radical Philosophy* 63 (1993): 3-12; Sylvana Tomaselli, ‘The Enlightenment Debate on Women,’ *History Workshop Journal* 20 (1985): 101-124; Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) 80-95; Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States, 1780-1860*, (London: Macmillan, 1985) 32; and Phyllis Mack, ‘Women and the Enlightenment,’ *Women and History* 9 (1984): 1-11.

²⁴ Religious, medical and philosophical discourses linked women both to the life-giving forces of nature as instruments of moral regeneration and to the forces of anarchy and disorder. See Maurice Bloch and Jean H. Bloch, ‘Women and the Dialectics of Nature in Eighteenth-Century French Thought,’ in *Nature, Culture, Gender*, ed. MacCormack and Strathern, 25-42. See also Jordanova’s aforementioned essay in the same collection, ‘Natural Facts’, 42-70. And the many satires on the female sex from this period show that women were still regarded as differently principled—coquettish, deceitful and vain.

Hegel's account of difference contains a memorable analogy between woman and plant. In attributing a plant-like fixity to women, Hegel is a major example of how universal humanism still managed to exclude women:

Women may well be educated, but they are not made for higher sciences, for philosophy and certain artistic productions *which require a universal element*. Women may have insights [Einfälle], taste, and delicacy, but they do not possess the ideal. The difference between man and woman is the difference between animal and plant; the animal is closer in character to man, the plant to woman, for the latter is a more peaceful [process of] unfolding whose principle is the more indeterminate unity of feeling [Empfindung].²⁵

The male mind, therefore, is active and acquires knowledge through struggle and exertion; the female mind is more placid and plant-like, being rooted and fixed in its immediate surroundings. Thus for Hegel, women's behaviour is prompted by instinct and local knowledge, by the particular and private rather than the universal. Notions of sexual difference of this kind are not in accord with Enlightenment universalism as elaborated by Condorcet, for instance, who argued that women be given the rights of citizenship and proposed the principle of their equality before the law.²⁶ Hegel's comparison between woman and plant is particularly striking in this context.

Other contemporary discussions of cultivation illustrate women's relationship to culture. For example, education and cultivation become gender-specific terms in Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). The task of early nurturing, of tending natural growth, belongs to the mother while the father is assigned the role of educator: 'The real nurse is the mother and the real teacher the father'.²⁷ Rousseau declares that 'Plants are fashioned by cultivation, man by education' (6) whilst simultaneously appealing to the 'tender anxious mother' using images of husbandry and cultivation: 'You can remove this young tree from the highway and shield it from the crushing force of social conventions. Tend and water it ere it dies. One day its fruit will reward your care' (6).

'Cultivation' is an appropriate term for the type of home learning available to women where they are reared to be good wives and mothers. It indicates Rousseau's emphasis on a mother's responsibility for the moral growth of her children: 'The earliest education is most important and it undoubtedly is woman's work' (5). That Rousseau recommends the exercise of careful cultivation is apparent in his enthusiastic description of Sophy, Emile's 'helpmeet': 'Her mind knows little but it is trained to

²⁵ George Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (1821; Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1991) 207.

²⁶ Condorcet, 'On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship' (1790), in *Condorcet: Selected Writings*, ed. K.M. Baker (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976) 97-105.

²⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (1762; London: J.M. Dent, 1911) 16. All references to this edition.

learn, it is well-tilled soil ready for the sower' (373). This hint of authoritarianism is at odds with his earlier critique of the type of education whereby 'man must learn his paces like a saddle-horse and be shaped to his master's hand like the trees in his garden' (5).

According to Rousseau, men's education leads them to be 'imprisoned by our institutions' while women undergo a process of cultivation within the home. Sophy's cultivation, however, does not involve the freedom which Rousseau values elsewhere. Emile's radical style of education is carefully planned by Rousseau so as not to stifle 'nature' in him; hitherto, he could have expected his adult life to be a struggle against control, compulsion and constraint.²⁸ In contrast, we learn that Sophy and her sex 'should early be accustomed to restraint' as 'their childish faults, unchecked and unheeded, may easily lead to dissipation, frivolity, and inconstancy' (322). The cultivation of the mind was thought to bring enlightenment; the cultivation which Rousseau advocates for Sophy, however, reveals a need for order and containment akin to that symmetry and regularity which husbandry imposed onto crops and where flowers and herbs were planted in uniform ranks.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* of 1792 turned Rousseau's own rhetoric of cultivation against his gendered view of education. Wollstonecraft confronted the contradictions implicit in Enlightenment ideas of gender by drawing attention to the ill effects suffered by women through inadequate education. Women who are denied the opportunity to develop rationally become bound to stasis and sensuality, becoming 'insignificant objects of desire' who 'are made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over' (11). According to Wollstonecraft's theory, society has cultivated women, rearing them as if they were exotic flowering plants or 'luxuriants' where 'strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves,—the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage' (10).

The extended metaphor of the cultivation of the mind found in both Rousseau and Millar is taken a stage further by Wollstonecraft and is transformed in the process. She inverts its meaning, with images of sterility and decay replacing those of growth and maturity. By pushing the analogy further, she demonstrates how the limited nature of women's education has resulted in a 'barren blooming' and attributes the blame to those who consider 'females rather as women than human creatures' (7). Women's unenlightened state is described thus:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious

²⁸ 'The infant is bound up in swaddling clothes, the corpse is nailed down in his coffin. All his life long man is imprisoned by our institutions' (10).

eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long after the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. (7)

‘Maturity’ is used here in Millar’s sense.²⁹ Wollstonecraft assumes an anti-pastoral rationalist stance, simultaneously using floral imagery to mimic the ‘sickly delicacy’ of taste that she abhors.³⁰ Her aim is to unmask the false sentiment behind the traditional metaphoric association of women and flowers by identifying such fanciful embellishment in educational writing as ‘the language of men’ whereby male desire conspires to make women ‘alluring mistresses’ rather than ‘affectionate and rational mothers’. She calls for a return to ‘the language of simple unadorned truth’ in place of ‘that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversations’ (10).

Linguistic conventions were already in place whereby flowers were emblems of purity, beauty and fragility—the so-called female virtues—and whose ephemeral beauty was associated with the female body. By the eighteenth century, such floral imagery proliferated not only in poetry, essays, and letters but had extended to philosophic and scientific writing.³¹

In Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), the ‘fair sex’ are associated with ‘the flowery species so remarkable for its weakness’. According to Burke’s aesthetic theory, delicacy is as much a prerequisite for beauty in women as it is in ‘the vegetable creation’:

It is not the oak, the ash, or the elm, or any of the robust trees of the forest, which we consider as beautiful . . . it is the delicate myrtle . . . it is the jessamine, it is the vine, which we look on as vegetable beauties. It is the flowery species, so remarkable for its weakness and momentary duration, that gives us the liveliest idea of beauty and elegance. . . . The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it.³²

These sentimental analogies between women and flowers perpetuate notions of the feminine in which women are not only defined by, but are assumed to identify with, the beautiful, innocent and delicate. Fanciful language of this kind permeates treatises on female education. Wollstonecraft called for a return to ‘unadorned’ language to

²⁹ See note 15 above.

³⁰ Alan Bewell has stated that Wollstonecraft’s anti-pastoralism ‘is a direct expression of the way that gender differences become cultural differences, and it seeks to provide women with a gender-neutral language’, ‘Jacobin Plants: Botany as Social Theory in the 1790s,’ *Wordsworth Circle* 20 (1989): 13.

³¹ The most influential being the work of Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus.

³² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (1756; Oxford: OUP, 1990) 105-06.

ensure that women's reading would become a 'rational pursuit', developing a femininity based on utility rather than luxury. She challenges Kant's assumption that the fair sex will always 'prefer the beautiful to the useful',³³ borne out by their supposed penchant for adornment: 'Women have a strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful, elegant and decorated. Even in childhood they like to be dressed up and take pleasure when they are adorned'.³⁴

Rousseau, too, characterised pleasure in adornment and delight in the visual and decorative as feminine, asserting that it is through things 'which appeal to the eye' that 'the art of pleasing finds its physical basis in personal adornment';³⁵ the use of flowers as adornment, from the wreath to the flower garland, is commonplace. Rousseau's assumption that women are 'using their knowledge for their own adornment' shares the general prejudice that a woman's senses and instincts determine her behaviour more than her reasoning powers. Wollstonecraft fiercely disputed 'prevailing opinions' which claimed that women 'were created rather to feel than to reason' (62), exclaiming: 'Understanding, strictly speaking, has been denied to women; and instinct, sublimated into wit and cunning, for the purposes of life, has been substituted in its stead' (69).

Women have 'fallen prey to their senses' as a consequence of sentimental education, their passions and sensations heightened in a 'hotbed of luxurious indolence' and their understandings consequently neglected.³⁶ Wollstonecraft uses hackneyed floral epithets ironically—'the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man'—to illustrate what women are reared to (62). It is through this sensibility that they 'obtain present power' (69).

That discourse on luxuriant femininity expressed through floral language, which we saw in the poetry of Pope and Swift, resurfaces in the work of Anna Laetitia Barbauld; Wollstonecraft will mimic this to further her progressive feminism. Barbauld's 'To a Lady With Some Painted Flowers' contains a sentimental analogy between flowers, 'the sole luxury which nature knew', and the 'fair' sex, nature's 'soft family':

FLOWERS to the fair: to you these flowers I bring,
And strive to greet you with an earlier spring.
Flowers SWEET, and GAY, and DELICATE LIKE YOU;
EMBLEMS OF INNOCENCE, AND BEAUTY TOO.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Observations On the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (1763; Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1991) 77.

³⁴ Kant, *Observations* 77. Kant sets up a gendered juxtaposition of beauty and sublimity whereby women identify with, and are identified by, 'the mark of the beautiful' while the sublime is promoted as a masculine quality befitting the 'noble sex'. All 'judgement', 'education' and 'instruction' must, according to Kant's theory, refer to these criteria.

³⁵ Rousseau, *Emile* 330-31

³⁶ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 69. Hotbeds were used for 'forcing' plants—i.e. accelerating growth or causing premature flowering.

With flowers the Graces bind their yellow hair,
 And flowery wreaths consenting lovers wear.
*Flowers, the sole luxury which nature knew,
 In Eden's pure and guiltless garden grew.
 To loftier forms are rougher tasks assign'd;
 The sheltering oak resists the stormy wind,
 The tougher yew repels invading foes,
 And the tall pine for future navies grows;
 But this soft family, to cares unknown,
 Were born for pleasure and delight ALONE.*
 Gay without toil, and lovely without art,
 They spring to CHEER the sense, and GLAD the heart.
 Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these;
*Your BEST, your SWEETEST empire is—TO PLEASE.*³⁷

Barbauld's 'pretty superlatives' (Wollstonecraft) imply that women have a decorative function and should display all the female virtues by which they can prove themselves 'delicate', 'innocent' and 'sweet' (unlike the masculine trees who are allotted nationalistic rôles in 'future navies'). A leisured existence is deemed appropriate for those 'born for pleasure and delight alone'. Utilitarian principles are not suitable for women who are 'Gay without toil' (evoking the 'lilies of the field' who 'toil not, neither do they spin'³⁸). Like Man before the Fall, women exist in a state of luxuriant innocence; they do not labour and yet they are provided for. Wollstonecraft cites Barbauld's poem to demonstrate that: 'This has ever been the language of men, and fear of departing from a supposed sexual character has made even women of a superior sense adopt the same sentiments'.³⁹

By ingeniously incorporating metaphors of cultivation and horticulture into her text Wollstonecraft exposes this construction of femininity through language as a 'sensual error' which 'robs the whole sex of its dignity, and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers which only adorn the land'.⁴⁰ Drawing an analogy between fashionably educated women (regarded as mere 'beautiful flaws of nature') and over-cultivated flowers or luxuriant, she portrays the stasis and sterility wherein women 'languish like exotics' when they ought to be developing towards enlightened maturity.

Like Barbauld, Wollstonecraft explores women's relation to luxury through botanical metaphor, suggesting that society has reared women as luxuriant. She departs from the sentiments of Barbauld by indicating that luxuriant do not create delight—they spread corruption. Her imagery is a further engagement with those debates around luxury in which Swift and Pope participated.

³⁷ Cited with these emphases in Wollstonecraft's notes, *Vindication* 53.

³⁸ Matthew 6: 28.

³⁹ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 53.

⁴⁰ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication* 53.

The associations that had grown up concerning women and flowers, luxury and adornment, can be traced in such publications as *The Florist: or, An Extensive and Curious Collection of Flowers, for the Imitation of Young Ladies, Either in Drawing or in Needle-work* by A. Heckle (1759) which appealed to ‘feminine’ attributes, to the decorative and visual and to aspects of leisure rather than utility. Floral pursuits such as the art of painting, drawing or embroidering flowers, and particularly flower gardening, were widely recommended to the growing number of leisured women.

The flower garden was commonly perceived to be a feminine locale; its sensual appeal being ideally suited to satisfy the senses, curiosities and inclinations of women. The vogue for botany which developed among leisured women (especially in the early nineteenth century) is clearly related to this idea of flower gardening as a genteel feminine pursuit.⁴¹ One of the most popular introductions to botany in English was a translation from Rousseau by Thomas Martyn entitled *Letters On the Elements of Botany Addressed To A Lady* (1785).⁴² Rousseau considered botany to be ideally suited to the female character, being both ‘amusing’ and ‘agreeable to delicacy’. He urged the fair sex not to attach any great importance to this charming occupation, believing it to be ‘a study of pure curiosity’.⁴³ The ‘true’ study of botany, he claimed, comes from ‘pure and disinterested contemplation’; it is a series of ‘pleasant impressions’ obtained through the senses, a ‘recreation for the eyes’.⁴⁴ This passive impressionism indicates how the ‘virtuous’ study of botany can be accommodated by femininity while acting as a form of self-regulation whereby women can ‘go forth into the garden and fields, and there become familiar with beauty, order, [and] regularity’.⁴⁵

It is in Rousseau’s *Letters on Botany* that we see his distaste for the unnatural practices of the florist. Florists’ flowers (hyacinths, tulips, *Ranunculi*, anemones, auriculas, narcissi, carnations and pinks) were luxuriant which had been constantly improved by new cultivation techniques. Luxuriant were highly susceptible to disease due to the special conditions needed to rear them and, although exceedingly beautiful, were barren, sickly and short-lived. Their over-refinement through cultivation resulted in artificial hybrids, double blooms, freakish colours and out-of-season flowering. Rousseau, writing in his capacity as a botanist, mistrusts double flowers reared in luxury. He advises his botanising ladies not to examine luxuriant because:

⁴¹ Women such as Maria Elizabetha Jacson promoted a floriculture which embraced both botany and flower gardening. Writing on flowers, she confessed to an ‘almost hereditary liking for this lovely order of creation’ (*A Florist’s Manual: Hints for the Construction of a Gay Flower Garden* (London: Henry Colburn, 1816) 3).

⁴² Translated from Rousseau’s *Lettres élémentaires sur la botanique* (1771).

⁴³ Rousseau, ‘Letter VII: ‘On Fruit Trees’, *Letters on the Elements of Botany Addressed To A Lady. By The Celebrated J.J. Rousseau, Translated into English With Notes and Twenty-Four Additional Letters, Fully Explaining the System of Linnaeus, By Thomas Martyn, B.D. F.R.S. Professor of Botany in the University of Cambridge*, 2nd edn (London: Printed for B. White & Son, 1787) 72.

⁴⁴ Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (1783; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 114, 109.

⁴⁵ Rousseau, ‘Preface’, *Letters* ix.

Nature will no longer be found among them, she refuses to reproduce anything from monsters thus mutilated. For if the most brilliant part of the flower, namely the corolla, be mutilated, it is at the expense of the more essential parts, which disappear under this addition of brilliancy.⁴⁶

In the wild flower or natural species, which represented health and vitality, an unmodified, essential character could be observed. In comparison, the luxuriant was a gaudy, sickly product of society whose true lineage was disguised. If the wild or native species embodied purity or the unadorned, the luxuriant was a painted courtesan, a degenerate, signifying wantonness and moral decay (as we have seen in the poetry of Pope and Swift where fashionable women are seen to resemble cultivated exotics).

Rousseau's contempt for the artistry of the florist, distaste for luxuriant and preference for pure or native species are symptomatic of anxieties concerning the effects of luxury. Elsewhere, he claimed that cultural and social progress had only led to moral degeneration, attributing the blame to the cultivation of the arts and sciences which had been nourished by luxury. Flowers—luxuriant or otherwise—conceal the true nature of a decadent civilisation which suffocates authenticity:

the Sciences, Letters, and Arts . . . spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sentiment of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples.⁴⁷

For Wollstonecraft, luxury is a false refinement of which monarchy and the corruption of the court are a part. In this 'unnatural state', inequality of rank arrests progress. Women who exist in a state of luxuriance, or who are raised in a premature unnatural manner like exotics, 'undermine the very foundation of virtue and spread corruption through the whole mass of society'. Corruption, according to Wollstonecraft, is 'most quickly spread by luxury and superstition' which rapidly grows from a 'baneful lurking gangrene' into a 'contagion'. The delineation of barrenness and ill health which Wollstonecraft takes from botanical descriptions of cultivated flowers is emblematic of the thwarted progress which all 'weak artificial beings raised above the common wants and affectations of their race represent' (18). Luxury will hinder the expansion of the intellect and prevent the establishment of true civilisation.

⁴⁶ Rousseau, 'Letter II: On Cruciform Flowers', *Letters* 28.

⁴⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Sciences and Arts' (1750), *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 2, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992) 5. See also 'Luxury, Commerce and the Arts,' *Collected Writings*, vol. 4, trans. Judith R. Bush and others, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (1994) 44-51.

John Millar felt that the improved status of women which the introduction of commerce had brought had subsequently been reversed by the continued accumulation of wealth. A deterioration in women's status had occurred in Rome at a time when great wealth had corrupted the manners of the ancients and produced a 'great revolution in their tastes and sentiments'.⁴⁸ Similarly, Europe was now affected by 'rapid advances of luxury and refinement' just as changes were occurring in the social position of women. Despite its ideologies of progress, the commercial stage of human history had failed women. In drawing attention to luxuriant femininity, Wollstonecraft had exposed the contradictions implicit in Enlightenment universalism; educators may claim to want to improve women but, in fact:

the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement . . . the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mahometanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improvable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand. (8)

Pope and Swift impugn women as disseminators of luxury, comparing them to exotic tulips; Rousseau instead seems intent on shielding women from any taint of luxury, instructing lady botanists not to meddle with double blooms. In *Julie: ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, we see a fusion of Rousseau's ideas concerning women, cultivation and luxury, most notably in the account of the community at Clarens and the description of Elysium. Julie lives a life of duty and discipline, never yielding to her passion for St. Preux, her former lover. The uncultivated garden she has created is emblematic of her new morality; it is a wild and solitary place which she has named 'Elysium' for its soothing, feminine properties. This maternal haven is the only part of the estate over which Julie has authority, it has undergone much care and culture, yet St Preux sees no trace of cultivation: 'The gardener's hand is not to be seen: nothing belies the idea of a desert island which came to my mind as I entered, and I see no human foot-prints'.⁴⁹ All is planted so as to look 'natural', without luxury or ornament:

I began to roam ecstatically through this orchard thus metamorphosed; and although I did not find exotic plants and products of the Indies, I found the local ones arranged and combined in a manner that yielded a cheerier and pleasanter effect. The verdant grass, lush, but short and thick was mingled with wild thyme, balsam... and other aromatic herbs. A thousand wild flowers shone there, among

⁴⁸ Millar, *Ranks* 223.

⁴⁹ *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* (1761), *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 6, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997) 393. All references to this edition.

which the eye was surprised to detect a few garden varieties, which seemed to grow naturally with the others. (388)

The alluring effect of the garden has in fact been skilfully contrived; the affected irregularity of the winding paths prolongs the walks, hides the boundaries of the island and appears to enlarge it, while the rivulet has been made to flow in meanders to keep the grounds refreshed so that it may continually yield fresh flowers. The apparent contradictions in Rousseau's description of this uncultivated garden surround his discussions on femininity. For Rousseau, Julie's wild garden suggests an ideal femininity; thick foliage renders it impervious to the eye and yet 'it is always carefully locked' (387). This garden wilderness hidden from view but kept under lock and key resembles Rousseau's model female, Sophy, who was brought up 'by nature'; uncultivated yet constantly in need of containment.

Life at Clarens offers an antidote to the ills uncovered in Rousseau's two discourses. Julie's Arcadia provides a delightful asylum from the 'masculine' world of labour and commerce; humanity's lost 'state of nature' can be recaptured in its uncultivated Elysian landscape. The setting for St. Preux's conversion from pleasure seeker to virtuous citizen resembles a former, more desirable, stage of human history, a pre-civilized golden age: 'I thought I was looking at the wildest, most solitary place in nature, and it seemed to me I was the first mortal who ever had set foot in this wilderness' (387). He experiences Elysium as a traveller who had stumbled upon a pre-cultural island in the South Seas.⁵⁰ This sanctuary where no marks of human labour can be detected has been created by Julie, a woman.

Rousseau sees the uncultivated woman as a survival from the second stage of human society as it emerges from the state of nature, found 'at an equal distance from the stupidity of brutes, and the fatal ingenuity of civilised man'.⁵¹ The exalted femininity of Julie and Sophy is an immature, pre-enlightenment state, existing prior to the cultivation of 'all those arts which are exercised in the shade of the study'⁵²—hence his attacks on the typical learned lady who 'is always trying to make a man of herself' (371-2). Sophy is 'without deep study', lacking 'art' or 'learning': 'Her mind has been formed not by reading but by conversation with her father and mother, by her own reflections, and by her own observations in the little world in which she has lived' (358). The value of this ideal femininity lies in its stasis.

⁵⁰ He is reminded of the Juan Fernandez Islands made famous by Anson's account of his voyage. On arriving at these islands, the crew observe that 'It is in this place . . . that the simple productions of unassisted nature may be said to excel all the fictitious descriptions of the most animated imagination' (Lord Anson, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years 1740-4 by Lord Anson* (London: J.M. Dent, 1911) 115).

⁵¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality' (1755), *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, new ed. (London: Everyman, 1973) 91.

⁵² Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences' 16.

Wollstonecraft opposed these regressive inclinations of Rousseau and his desire to keep women in sensualised ignorance. Instead, she vehemently advocated the cultivation of the female mind, drawing attention to society's neglect of female potential. Once women acquire rationality through the proper cultivation of the mind, enlightened maturity will supplant luxuriant decay and they will achieve the equality that Millar had foreseen—that true civilisation in which:

women become neither the slaves, nor the idols of the other sex, but the friends or companions. The wife obtains that rank and station which appears most agreeable to reason, being suited to her character and talents.⁵³

Thus Wollstonecraft, by extending rationality and sociality to women, adheres more purely to the Enlightenment ideals of progress, cultivation and universality. She counters the primitivism of Rousseau's prescriptions, Barbauld's exclusion of women from the public sphere and the accusations of decayed luxury from Pope and Swift. In Wollstonecraft, like Fuseli's *Flora*, Enlightenment femininity examines itself in botany's mirror in order to correct the distorted reflections of those who would keep the female mind barren.

⁵³ Millar, *Ranks* 219.