

ROMAN ROAD

After the Garden
An essay by Anna Souter
After the Garden

Blackberry

Through briar and bramble, shrubs thick with prickles,
clothing caught in the abundance.

Picking the fruit for nourishment, the leaves for
stomach ulcers, the stems for rope. Impenetrable
thickets keeping livestock in, keeping the circling
unseen night terrors out.

Grandmother tells us not to pick them after Old
Michaelmas Day (risk of toxic mould) or by roadsides
(risk of toxic lead). She forgets they don't put lead in
petrol anymore.

Staining fingers and mouths, dark red juice drips like
Christ's blood from his crown of brambles. Far away, a
princess lies asleep in a tower defended by vegetation,
a briar rose who punctured her finger on a needle and
dreams ever after of prickings. Maybe the plant is the
saviour she is seeking.

Blackberries aren't written into history, perhaps
because they've always been available, always been free
for the taking. One of the earliest known cases of
human consumption of blackberries dates from 2500
years ago. The body of the Haraldskaer Woman was
preserved in a Danish bog, buried naked with her
clothes placed over her body, pinned down by branches
and wooden poles. Scientists think she was a victim of
ritual sacrifice.

In her stomach was a last meal of blackberries. Perhaps
she died with a sweet taste in her mouth.

Cherry

Pop her cherry, they said. Take her, they said. Possess her, they said.

Cherries were introduced to England on the orders of Henry VIII, who had tasted their sweet flesh abroad. Did he feed them to his wives and mistresses before he divorced them, executed them, or put them through the horrors of royal childbirth and miscarriage? Did he give them red fruit to hang from their fingers and ears and necks like jewels, the teenaged virgins and the twice-married women of the court both?

Hieronymus Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* was finished around the time Henry VIII ascended the English throne. The canvas is dotted with red berries. These cherry-like fruits are worn as fashionable hats, shaken in dance, lifted towards heaven, and speared on the bills of fantastical birds.

Plucking fruit; a well-known symbol for sexual conquest. In this garden of delights, carnal desire takes many forms, strange and familiar.

For Bosch's contemporaries, the garden symbolised a place of courtly love and of lust. As in the painted triptych, this trope was held in a complex balance with the story of the prelapsarian Garden of Eden, where sin was unknown – but where its possibility was held ever-ripe in Eve's naked body and in the garden's proliferation of delicious fruit, permitted and forbidden.

The symbolism is juicy, irresistible, sexy.

Sexist.

The kernel at the heart of the hard cherry stone contains the chemical amygdalin which, when ingested, releases hydrogen cyanide. A poison.

Grape

A cup that overfloweth-

Grapes were first cultivated around 8000 years ago. For millennia, they have been pressed to make wine, trodden in huge vats, juice and flesh and seeds squelching up between the toes in the sensuous touch of foot to fruit.

Skins alive with yeasts, lively colonies of microscopic animacy, the symbiotic push and pull of fermentation. The full body of the wine poured from the long-necked bottle into the waiting cup.

Every plant within a grape cultivar is genetically identical, propagated by grafting part of the chosen plant onto another rootstock. This means that seedless grapes don't pose a problem for reproduction through these artificial methods, but the genetic uniformity does make vines vulnerable to disease. Wines from geographically disparate regions taste different because of how the cultivar responds to its environment: terroir, climate, weather, altitude, local cultivation techniques.

In the King James Version of Genesis, we are told that a man shall 'cleave' unto his wife; that strange word simultaneously meaning to split and to join. Like the story of the Garden of Eden, propagation is a narrative of cleaving: separating and rejoining.

The world is full of contradictory doublings and infinite kaleidoscopic refractions.

Fern

Pteridomania: fern fever.

In the 19th century, many Victorians became obsessed with seeking, studying, and collecting ferns.

It was deemed a particularly appropriate hobby for women because ferns are flowerless; they don't brazenly display their reproductive organs to the refractive eyes of insects or the narrow gaze of the specimen collector.

Ironic, considering ferns have a long-standing association with female genitalia and with pubic hair. The scientific name for the maidenhair fern genus – *adiantum* – means “does not get wet,” because water slides quickly off the delicate leaves. The fern is therefore associated with purity, innocence, and virginity.

Understanding this visceral symbolism requires sexual knowledge; its meaning would be lost on the truly innocent woman the fern is supposed to represent. A paradoxical exclusion.

As writer Anne Enright puts it in an essay on the “genesis of blame,” debarred from the innocence of prelapsarian nakedness in the Garden by the eating of the fruit, we are all made voyeurs.

Women in long skirts and corsets peering into the dark crevices of woodlands. Unaccompanied, free, happy. Samples plucked and pressed for specimen books or dug up for urban garden displays. Exploring fingers brushing filigree fronds and damp earth.

Society began to mutter about hysterical women, alone in the woods. When men hunted for ferns, it was for the

sake of science. When women tried, it became a “mania.”

Female behaviour was pathologized and then dismissed.

Eventually, fern fever was forgotten.

Water lily

The lotus. The womb. The bride.

Across cultures and centuries, the water lily has been used as a symbol of the ‘exotic’ mysteries of the female body. Imagined as a virginal bride, the flower has been stripped of its biological qualities as a plant and forced to stand-in for the paradoxical patriarchal notion of both inviolate purity and sexualised female fertility.

Writer Prudence Gibson and biologist Monica Gagliano have presented the water lily as a feminist plant, reclaiming it from male-driven narratives that attempt to centre the flower as a reductive symbol. They present water lilies as agential living beings in their own right, which flourish in clusters and communicate via hormonal signals across their communities.

Capable of asexual reproduction, the water lily cleaves to itself, opening its petals to invite insects to carry seed from the anther to the stigma, defying gender categorisation. Simultaneously rooted in the earth and suspended on the water, they inhabit a threshold, ripe with transformation.

Gibson and Gagliano write, “in terms of the water lily as a feminist plant, it is time to speak together about the potential to learn from the behaviour of plant life in order to formulate better models of human collectivity and communicative cooperation.”

The bride stands waiting for no one; after the garden, the world is her lover.

Further reading:

Anne Enright, ‘The Genesis of Blame’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 40 No. 5 (March 2018)

Prudence Gibson & Monica Gagliano, ‘The Feminist Plant: Changing Relations with the Water Lily’, *Ethics and the Environment*, Vol. 22 No. 2 (December 2017)

Luce Irigaray & Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (2016)