

**Appendix 4.5: Opening lines of Erasmus Darwin, *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791)**

Selection copied from *The Economy of Vegetation*. London: J. Johnson, 1791.

THE  
ECONOMY OF VEGETATION.



CANTO I.



“STAY YOUR RUDE STEPS! whose throbbing breasts infold  
The legion-fiends of Glory, or of Gold!  
STAY! whose false lips seductive simpers part,  
While Cunning nestles in the harlot-heart!—  
For you no Dryads<sup>1</sup> dress the roseate bower,                   5  
For you no Nymphs their sparkling vases pour;

[ 2 ]

Unmark'd by you, light Graces swim the green,  
And hovering Cupids aim their shafts, unseen.

“But THOU! whose mind the well-attemper'd ray  
Of Taste and Virtue lights with purer day;                   10  
Whose finer sense each soft vibration owns  
With sweet responsive sympathy of tones;  
So the fair flower expands it's lucid form  
To meet the sun, and shuts it to the storm;—  
For thee my borders nurse the fragrant wreath,                   15  
My fountains murmur, and my zephyrs breathe;  
Slow slides the painted snail, the gilded fly  
Smooths his fine down, to charm thy curious eye;  
On twinkling fins my pearly nations play,  
Or win with sinuous train their trackless way;                   20  
My plumy pairs in gay embroidery dress'd

Form with ingenious bill the pensile<sup>2</sup> nest,

*So the fair flower*. l. 13. It seems to have been the original design of the philosophy of Epicurus to render the mind exquisitely sensible to agreeable sensations, and equally insensible to disagreeable ones.

[ 3 ]

To Love's sweet notes attune the listening dell,  
And Echo sounds her soft symphonious shell.

“And, if with Thee some hapless Maid should stray,  
Disasterous Love companion of her way, 26  
Oh, lead her timid steps to yonder glade,  
Whose arching cliffs depending alders shade;  
There, as meek Evening wakes her temperate breeze,  
And moon-beams glimmer through the trembling trees,  
The rills, that gurgle round, shall soothe her ear, 31  
The weeping rocks shall number tear for tear;  
There as sad Philomel,<sup>3</sup> alike forlorn,  
Sings to the Night from her accustomed thorn;  
While at sweet intervals each falling note 35  
Sighs in the gale, and whispers round the grot;

*Disasterous Love*. l. 26. The scenery is taken from a botanic garden about a mile from Lichfield, where a cold bath was erected by Sir John Floyer.<sup>4</sup> There is a grotto surrounded by projecting rocks, from the edges of which trickles a perpetual shower of water; and it is here represented as adapted to love-scenes, as being thence a proper residence for the modern goddess of Botany, and the easier to introduce the next poem on the Loves of the Plants according to the system of Linneus.

[ 4 ]

The sister-woe shall calm her aching breast,  
And softer slumbers steal her cares to rest.—

“Winds of the North! restrain your icy gales,  
Nor chill the bosom of these happy vales! 40  
Hence in dark heaps, ye gathering Clouds, revolve!  
Disperse, ye Lightnings! and, ye Mists, dissolve!  
—Hither, emerging from yon orient skies,  
BOTANIC GODDESS! bend thy radiant eyes;

O'er these soft scenes assume thy gentle reign,                   45  
Pomona, Ceres, Flora<sup>5</sup> in thy train;  
O'er the still dawn thy placid smile effuse,  
And with thy silver sandals print the dews;  
In noon's bright blaze thy vermil<sup>6</sup> vest unfold,  
And wave thy emerald banner star'd with gold."                   50

Thus spoke the GENIUS, as He stept along,  
And bade these lawns to Peace and Truth belong;  
Down the steep slopes He led with modest skill  
The willing pathway, and the truant rill,

[ 5 ]

Stretch'd o'er the marshy vale yon willowy mound,                   55  
Where shines the lake amid the tufted ground,  
Raised the young woodland, smooth'd the wavy green,  
And gave to Beauty all the quiet scene.—

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<sup>1</sup> Wood nymphs.

<sup>2</sup> Suspended; also a zoological term for birds and animals that make such nests.

<sup>3</sup> The nightingale. In Greco-Roman mythology, Philomela was raped by her sister Procne's husband, Tereus, who then cut out her tongue. Philomela sent her sister a tapestry that revealed the crime. Procne stabbed her son to death, served his flesh to his father, then presented the boy's severed head. When Tereus drew his sword to slay the sisters, he was turned into a hoopoe, Procne into a swallow, and Philomela into a nightingale (though in some versions Philomela is the swallow and Procne the nightingale). The story is most famously told in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (6:401–674).

<sup>4</sup> ED's own botanic garden. Around 1777 he bought land a mile from his house in Lichfield and made the garden over the following years (see Seward's description, Appendix 4.1). John Floyer (1649–1734) practiced as a physician in Lichfield from around 1675; he wrote several books on medical and theological subjects.

<sup>5</sup> Pomona is the Roman goddess of fruit. Ceres is the Roman goddess of grain, identified with the Greek goddess Demeter. Ceres appears in *LOTP* IV:73n. Flora, Roman goddess of flowers and Spring, appears in the frontispieces to both *LOTP* and *The Economy of Vegetation*.

<sup>6</sup> Vermilion; bright red.