Appendix 5.2: Review by William Cowper in *The Analytical Review* 4 (May 1789)

The poet William Cowper (1731–1800) is best known for *The Task* (1785) and his contributions to *Olney Hymns* (1779). He wrote commendatory verses for *The Botanic Garden* that were published in the 1795 and 1799 editions of Volume 1, *The Economy of Vegetation* (see Appendix 1.5).

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ART. VII. *The Botanic Garden, Part* II. *Containing The Loves of the Plants, a Poem; with Philosophical Notes*. 4to. 184 pages, and 8 plates. Price 12s. in boards.[1] Lichfield, Jackson. London, Johnson. 1789.

THE work is introduced by a very elegant frontispiece, the performance of Miss Emma Crewe.[2] It represents Flora at play with Cupid. The goddess has possessed herself of his bow and quiver, and Cupid at her command, shouldering the spade and the rake, quits her to work in the garden.

The motto consists of the following well-chosen lines from Claudian.

Vivunt in Venerem frondes; nemus omne per altum
Felix arbor amat; nutant ad muta Palmæ
Fædera, populeo suspirat Populus ictu
Et Platani Platanis, Alnoque assibilat Alnus.

The author in an advertisement informs us that his design is to recommend the study of Botany, and that the publication of the first part, entitled, The Economy of Vegetation, (for the purpose of repeating some experiments on that subject) is deferred to another year.

Next comes the Preface, containing an account of the Linnæan arrangement, and so much Botanical information as is necessary to enable readers, unskilled in Botany, to understand the poem.

Two plates follow, explanatory of the doctrines of the preface.

These preliminaries are concluded by a short proem, in which the author prepares his readers for the exhibition, to which he is just going to introduce them.

The poem consists of four cantos, and the three first are followed each by a dialogue between the Poet and the Bookseller, which the author calls an interlude. Much critical knowledge is conveyed, and much philosophical too, in these dialogues, but it is impossible not to observe how very inferior a part is assigned in them to the Bookseller, whose short questions serve merely as a trigger to shoot off the poet's charge of deep and abstruse intelligence. They remind us of a fable which we got by heart in our infancy, and which we therefore still remember. A certain carver exhibited the figures of a man

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and a lion, the lion under the foot of the man. It chanced that a lion passing that way observed them, and being naturally offended at the man's partiality to his own kind, told him, with some asperity, that the man should have been undermost, had a lion been the carver. We doubt not but Booksellers may be found who will know how to make the application.

The poetry itself is of a very superior cast, and whether we consider the author's management of his subject, his delicacy of expression, or the sweetness of his numbers, we feel ourselves equally called upon to commend him. He introduces his various objects of description (for they follow in long succession) with so much versatility of genius, that we could not but admire the grace and ease, and the playfulness of fancy with which he conducts himself through this part of his business, perhaps the most difficult of all. His descriptions themselves are luminous as language selected with the finest taste can make them, and meet the eye with a boldness of projection unattainable by any hand but that of a master. Neither is this all the praise that belongs to him. Though Botany so abounds with marvellous realities, that the embellishments of fiction might, on such a subject, seem almost superfluous, yet he has greatly enhanced the beauty of his poem, by a continued series of fictions. All his flowers undergo a change, not a simple one, but each into as many persons, male and female, as there are symptoms of either sex in their formation. For it is on their sexuality that he has built his poem. Reversing the Metamorphoses of Ovid, who transformed persons, human and divine, into trees and flowers, he calls them (as he says in his proem) from their vegetable mansions to their original animality again. He endues them with human passions and propensities; they manifest all the variety of feelings to which amorous inclination subjects its votaries, but always with a strict attention on the poet's part to the discoveries which philosophy has made among them. At the same time, according as the name, the properties, or the history of the several plants suggested the opportunity, he has diversified his plan, either by elegant fancies of his own, by allusions to antient mythology or scripture narrative, or occasionally to l[eg]endary tales concerning them.

In short, if the study of Botany can be more powerfully recommended than it is by the delight that belongs to it, it must be by the pen of such a writer.

It will be proper to add before we proceed to give extracts, that the notes are rich in curious information, and that the reader is accommodated with a good index. We will also just touch upon an expression in the proem, the only one in the book that caused us any displeasure.[3] There, the author speaks of disuse, and of disability the consequence of it. Of the latter we have no proof, therefore can say nothing about it; but as

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to the former, unless his health or avocations make it necessary, we cannot but say that we deem unpardonable the neglect of so uncommon a talent.

Our extracts shall be made from passages where the poet treats of plants or flowers with which every reader, whether botanist or not, must be familiar.

Thus he celebrates the Anemone,

> 'All wan and shivering in the leafless glade
> The sad ANEMONE* reclin'd her head;
> Grief on her cheeks had paled the roseate hue,
> And her sweet eye-lids drop'd with pearly dew.
> —"See, from bright regions, borne on odorous gales
> The Swallow†, herald of the summer, sails;

' * *Anemone*.] Many males, many females; Pliny says, this flower never opens its petals, but when the wind blows, whence its name; it has properly no calix, but two or three sets of petals, three in each set,

which are folded over the stamens and pistil in a singular and beautiful manner, and differs also from ranunculus in not having a melliferous pore on the claw of each petal.'

' † *The Swallow*.] There is a wonderful conformity between the vegetation of some plants, and the arrival of certain birds of passage. Linnæus observes that the wood anemone blows in Sweden on the arrival of the swallow; and the marsh mary-gold, Caltha, when the cuckoo sings. Nearly the same coincidence was observed in England by Stillingfleet. The word Coccux in Greek signifies both a young fig and a cuckoo, which is supposed to have arisen from the coincidence of their appearance in Greece. Perhaps a similar coincidence of appearance in some parts of Asia gave occasion to the story of the loves of the rose and nightingale so much celebrated by the eastern poets. See Dianthus. The times however of the appearance of vegetables in the spring seem occasionally to be influenced by their acquired habits, as well as by their sensibility to heat: for the roots of potatoes, onions, &c. will germinate with much less heat in the spring, than in the autumn, as is easily observable, where these roots are stored for use; and hence malt is best made in the spring. 2d. The grains and roots brought from more southern latitudes germinate here sooner than those which are brought from more northern ones, owing to their acquired habits.—Fordyce on agriculture. 3d. It was observed by one of the scholars of Linnæus, that the apple-trees sent from hence to New England blossomed for a few years too early for that climate, and bore no fruit; but afterwards learnt to accommodate themselves to their new situation.—Kalm's travels. 4th. The parts of animals become more sensible to heat after having been previously exposed to cold, as our hands glow on coming into the house after having held snow in them; this seems to happen to vegetables, for vines in grape-houses, which have been exposed to the winter's cold, will become forwarder and more vigorous than those, which have been kept during the winter in the house.—Kennedy on Gardening. This accounts for the very rapid vegetation in the northern latitudes, after the solution of the snows.'

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'Breathe, gentle AIR! from cherub-lips impart
Thy balmy influence to my anguish'd heart;
Thou, whose soft voice calls forth the tender blooms,
Whose pencil paints them, and whose breath perfumes;
O chase the fiend of Frost, whose leaden mace
In death-like slumbers seals my hapless race;
Melt his hard heart, relase his iron hand,
And give my ivory petals to expand.
So may each bud, that decks the brow of spring,
Shed all its incense on thy wafting wing!"—
To her fond prayer propitious Zephyr yields,
Sweeps on his sliding shell through azure fields,
O'er her fair mansion waves his whispering wand,
And gives her ivory petals to expand:
Gives with new life her filial train to rise,
And hail with kindling smiles the genial skies.
So shines the Nymph in beauty's blushing pride,
When Zephyr wafts her deep calash aside;
Tears with rude kiss her bosom's gauzy veil,
And flings the fluttering kerchief to the gale.
So bright, the folding canopy undrawn,
Glides the gilt Landau o'er the velvet lawn,
Of beaux and belles displays the glittering throng;
And soft airs fan them, as they roll along.'[4]

Next follows the Cinchona, or Peruvian bark-tree.

'Where Andes hides his cloud-wreath'd crest in snow,
And roots his base on burning sands below;
CINCHONA*, fairest of Peruvian maids,
To Health's bright Goddess in the breezy glades
On Quito's temperate plain an altar rear'd,
Trill'd the loud hymn, the solemn prayer preferr'd:
Each balmy bud she cull'd, and honey'd flower,
And hung with fragrant wreaths the sacred bower;
Each pearly sea she search'd, and sparkling mine,
And piled their treasures on the gorgeous shrine;
Her suppliant voice for sickening Loxa raised,—
Sweet breath'd the gale, and bright the censor blazed.
—"Divine HYGEIA! on thy votaries bend
Thy angel-looks, oh, hear us, and defend!
While streaming o'er the night with baleful glare
The star of Autumn rays his misty hair;
Fierce from his fens the Giant AGUE springs,
And wrapt in fogs descends on vampire-wings;
Before, with shuddering limbs cold Tremor feels,
And Fever's burning nostril dogs his heels;
Loud claps the grinning fiend his iron hands,
Stamps with his marble feet, and shouts along the lands;

' * *Cinchona*.] Peruvian bark-tree. Five males, and one female. Several of these trees were felled for other purposes into a lake, when an epidemic fever of a very mortal kind prevailed at Loxa in Peru, and the woodmen accidentally drinking the water were cured, and thus were discovered the virtues of this famous drug.'

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Withers the damask cheek, unnerves the strong,
And drives with scorpion-lash the shrieking throng.
Oh, Goddess! on thy kneeling votaries bend
Thy angel-looks, oh, hear us, and defend!"
—HYGEIA, leaning from the blest abodes,
The crystal mansions of the immortal gods,
Saw the sad Nymph uplift her dewy eyes,
Spread her white arms, and breathe her fervid sighs;
Call'd to her fair associates, Youth, and Joy,
And shot all-radiant through the glittering sky;
Loose waved behind her golden train of hair,
Her sapphire mantle swam diffus'd in air.—
O'er the grey matted moss, and pansied sod,
With step sublime the glowing Goddess trod,
Gilt with her beamy eye the conscious shade,
And with her smile celestial bless'd the maid.
"Come to my arms," with seraph voice she cries,
"Thy vows are heard, benignant Nymph! arise;
Where yon aspiring trunks fantastic wreath

Their mingled roots, and drink the rill beneath,
Yield to the biting axe thy sacred wood,
And strew the bitter foliage on the flood."
In silent homage bow'd the blushing maid,—
Five youths athletic hasten to her aid,
O'er the scar'd hills re-echoing strokes resound,
And headlong forests thunder on the ground.
Round the dark roots, rent bark, and shatter'd boughs,
From ocherous beds the swelling fountain flows;
With streams austere its winding margin laves,
And pours from vale to vale its dusky waves.
—As the pale squadrons, bending o'er the brink,
View with a sigh their alter'd forms, and drink;
Slow-ebbing life with refluent crimson breaks
O'er their wan lips, and paints their haggard cheeks;
Through each fine nerve rekindling transports dart,
Light the quick eye, and swell the exulting heart.
—Thus ISRAEL's heaven-taught chief o'er trackless sands
Led to the sultry rock his murmuring bands.
Bright o'er his brows the forky radiance blazed,
And high in air the rod divine He rais'd.—
Wide yawns the cliff!—amid the thirsty throng
Rush the redundant waves, and shine along;
With gourds and shells and helmets press the bands,
Ope their parch'd lips, and spread their eager hands,
Snatch their pale infants to the exuberant shower,
Kneel on the shatter'd rock, and bless the almighty Power.[5]

The personification of Ague in the above passage is singularly terrific, and a proof of a strong romantic imagination.

Most of our readers have suffered at times by the distressing incubations of the NIGHT-MARE, and all who have, will taste the following passage,

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Avaunt, ye Vulgar! from her sacred groves
With Maniac step the Pythian LAURA* moves;
Full of the God her labouring bosom sighs,
Foam on her lips, and fury in her eyes,
Strong writhe her limbs, her wild dishevel'd hair
Starts from her laurel-wreath, and swims in air.—
While *twenty* Priests the gorgeous shrine surround
Cinctured with ephods, and with garlands crown'd,
Contending hosts and trembling nations wait
The firm immutable behests of Fate;
—She speaks in thunder from her golden throne
With words *unwill'd*, and wisdom not her own.
So on his NIGHT MARE through the evening fog
Flits the squab fiend o'er fen, and lake and bog;
Seeks some love-wilder'd maid with sleep oppress'd,
Alights, and grinning sits upon her breast.

—Such as of late amid the murky sky
Was mark'd by FUSELI's poetic eye;
Whose daring tints, with SHAKESPEAR's happiest grace,
Gave to the airy phantom form and place.—
Back o'er her pillow sinks her blushing head,
Her snow-white limbs hang helpless from the bed;
While with quick sighs, and suffocative breath,
Her interrupted heart pulse swims in death.
—Then shrieks of captured towns, and widow's tears,
Pale lovers stretch'd upon their blood-stain'd biers,
The headlong precipice that thwarts her flight,
The trackless desert, the cold starless night,
And stern-eye'd Murderer with his knife behind,
In dread succession agonize her mind.
O'er her fair limbs convulsive tremors fleet;
Start in her hands, and struggle in her feet;
In vain to scream with quivering lips she tries,
And strains in palsy'd lids her tremulous eyes;

' * *Laura*.] Prunus. Lauro-cerasus. Twenty males, one female. The Pythian priestess is supposed to have been made drunk with infusion of laurel-leaves, when she delivered her oracles. The intoxication or inspiration is finely described by Virgil. Æn. l. vi. The distilled water from laurel-leaves is perhaps the most sudden poison we are acquainted with in this country. I have seen about two spoonfuls of it destroy a large pointer dog, in less than ten minutes. In a smaller dose it is said to produce intoxication; on this account there is reason to believe it acts in the same manner as opium and vinous spirit; but that the dose is not so well ascertained. See note on Tremella. It is used in the ratafie of the distillers, by which some dram-drinkers have been suddenly killed. One pint of water, distilled from fourteen pounds of black cherry stones bruised, has the same deleterious effect, destroying as suddenly as Laurel-water. It is probable Apricot-kernels, Peach-leaves, Wallnut-leaves, and whatever possesses the kernel-flavour, may have similar qualities.'

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In vain she *wills* to walk, swim, run, fly, leap;
The WILL presides not* in the bower of SLEEP.
—On her fair bosom sits the Demon-Ape
Erect, and balances his bloated shape;
Rolls in their marble orbs his Gorgon eyes,
And drinks with leathern ears her tender cries.[6]

Observe, lastly, how much genius a true poet can display on a subject seemingly so poor as a Double Daisy.

'Spring! with thy own sweet smile, and tuneful tongue,
Delighted BELLIS† calls her infant throng.
Each on his reed astride, the Cherub-train
Watch her kind looks, and circle o'er the plain;
Now with young wonder touch the sliding snail,
Admire his eye-tip'd horns, and painted mail;

' * *The Will presides not*.] Sleep consists in the abolition of all voluntary power, both over our muscular motions and our ideas; for we neither walk nor reason in sleep. But at the same time, many of our muscular motions, and many of our ideas continue to be excited into action, in consequence of internal irritations, and of internal sensations; for the heart and arteries continue to beat, and we experience variety of passions, and even hunger and thirst in our dreams. Hence I conclude, that our nerves of sense are not torpid or inert during sleep; but that they are only precluded from the perception of external objects, by their external organs being rendered unfit to transmit to them the appulses of external bodies, during the suspension of the power of volition; thus the eye-lids are closed in sleep, and I suppose the tympanum of the ear is not stretched, because they are deprived of the voluntary exertions of the muscles appropriated to these purposes; and it is probable something similar happens to the external apparatus of our other organs of sense, which may render them unfit for their office of perception during sleep: for milk put into the mouths of sleeping babes occasions them to swallow and suck; and, if the eye-lid is a little opened in the day-light, by the exertions of disturbed sleep, the person dreams of being much dazzled. See first Interlude.

'When there arises in sleep, a painful desire to exert the voluntary motions, it is called the Nightmare, or Incubus.—When the sleep becomes so imperfect, that some muscular motions obey this exertion of desire, people have walked about, and even performed some domestic offices in sleep; one of these sleep-walkers I have frequently seen; once she smelt of a tube-rose, and sung, and drank a dish of tea in this state; her awaking was always attended with prodigious surprise and even fear; this disease had daily periods, and seemed to be of the epileptic kind.'

' † *Bellis prolifera*.] Hen and chicken Daisy, in this beautiful monster not only the impletion or doubling of the petals takes place, as described in the note on Alcea; but a numerous circlet of less flowers on peduncles, or footstalks, rise from the sides of the calyx, and surround the proliferous parent. The same occurs in Calendula, marigold, in Heracium, hawk-weed, and in Scabiosa, Scabious. Phil. Botan. p. 82.'

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Chase with quick step, and eager arms outspread,
The pausing Butterfly from mead to mead;
Or twine green oziers with the fragrant Gale*,
The azure harebell, and the primrose pale,
Join hand in hand, and in procession gay
Adorn with votive wreaths the shrine of May.
So moves the Goddess to the Idalian groves,
And leads her gold-hair'd family of Loves.
These, from the flaming furnace, strong and bold,
Pour the red steel into the sandy mould;
On tinkling anvills, (with Vulcanian art,)
Turn with hot tongs, and forge the dreadful dart;
The barbed head on whirling jaspers grind,
And dip the point in poison for the mind;
Each polish'd shaft with snow-white plumage wing,
Or strain the bow reluctant to its string.
Those on light wing, above, with busy hands
From bough to bough extend the flowery bands;
Scar the dark beetle, as he wheels on high,
Or catch in silken nets the gilded fly;
Call the young Zephyrs to their fragrant bowers,

And stay with kisses sweet the Vernal Hours.'[7]

There is a beauty in that expression, the *eye-tipt horns of the snail*, which an ordinary writer would not have attained in half a dozen laboured couplets. P. P.[8]

' * *The fragrant Gale*.] The buds of the Myrica Gale possess an agreeable aromatic fragrance, and might be worth attending to as an article of the materia medica. Mr. Sparman suspects, that the green waxlike substance, with which at certain times of the year the berries of the Myrica Cerisera, or Candleberry Myrtle, are covered, are deposited there by insects. It is used by the inhabitants for making candles, which he says burn rather better than those made of tallow. *Voyage to the Cape, V.* 1. p. 345.'

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[1] Books in boards had covers made of pasteboard and covered with paper. Purchasers would pay extra to have books more permanently bound.

[2] Emma Crewe (1780–1850) was an amateur artist. She provided designs to innovative potter and industrialist Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795), ED's friend and fellow Lunar Society member, to be used for reliefs in jasperware, a fine, dense stoneware that he developed and became famous for (especially in its most popular background color, Wedgwood Blue). Crewe features in *LOTP* II:295–304.

[3] The reference is actually to the Advertisement to *LOTP* rather than the Proem.

[4] *LOTP* I:317–46.

[5] *LOTP* II:347–414.

[6] *LOTP* III:39–78.

[7] *LOTP* IV:143–70.

[8] Cowper signed his *Analytical Review* contributions as G. G. or P. P..