Appendix 5.4: Review in *The Critical Review* 68 (November 1789)

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The Botanic Garden. Part II. Containing The Loves of the Plants, a Poem, with Philosophical Notes. Volume the Second. 4*to.* 12*s. in Boards.*[1] Johnson.

EVERY pastoral writer has diversified his fields with the daisy and violet; has adorned his rustic cottage with jasmine and woodbine, or blended in his landscape the varied hues of the ash, and the beech, the chestnut and the oak. It was reserved for our author to describe, in elegant and flowing language, the minuter parts and more philosophical distinctions of botany, and even to adorn his poems with characteristic descriptions, which, in the uncouth language of Linnæus, are harsh and unpleasing. The sexual system has afforded him the hint, which he has expanded with genius and diligence: each plant has its loves; each stamen is a husband; each pistil a wife; and each flower a house. From the peculiarities of different flowers, therefore, arise the various descriptions in this volume, whose elegant and finished poetry is only equalled by the accuracy of the botanical observations. One inconvenience has, however, arisen from the author having chosen the most curious peculiarities, and from the little unavoidable obscurity of poetical language. When we read the poem, almost the whole, even to a botanist, is at first ænigmatical, and to the less learned reader, appears to be a string of riddles, whose solution is to be found in the notes. But we can venture to assure the reader, that if the perusal be at first attended with a little difficulty, he will be amply repaid by the pleasure which he will reap from his future examinations;

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and if, from this poem he attends only to some of the common flowers of a common garden, his views of nature will be greatly extended, many cheerless moments will be filled with the most rational entertainment, and what at first began in amusement, may terminate in scientific acquisition. Our author is no common guide in this respect, and his notes contain a more judicious selection, and a better connected view of the arguments in favour of the sexual system, than any *one* work that we have yet seen. The œconomy of vegetation, and the physiology of plants, form the first volume; but this didactic poem is deferred till another year, to afford time for the repetition of some experiments.[2]

In the preface an outline of the sexual system, so far as it may enable the reader to understand the descriptions, is given; and in the proem, written in a whimsical style, is a good contrast between the Loves of the Plants and the Metamorphoses of Ovid. The Roman poet transmuted men, women, and even gods and goddesses into trees and flowers; our author has 'undertaken, by a similar art, to restore some of them to their original animality.' They are, he says, like little 'pictures, suspended over the chimney of a lady's dressing-room, *connected only by a slight festoon of ribbands*,' which may amuse, though we are not acquainted with the originals. But we must now turn to the poem.

The introduction is singularly happy, and truly correct, except in one single instance, which we have marked. The *glittering* of the glow-worm is, we believe, only conspicuous in its exertions, and he is here directed to be still and attentive, when he probably would not glitter. In the

subsequent lines, indeed, the spider is told to descend, and the snail to slide; but these are brought from a distance.—Suppose he had said:

'Come glittering glow-worms from your mossy beds.'

We should however have transcribed the lines before we had the presumption to have endeavoured to amend them:

'Descend, ye hovering Sylphs! ærial Quires,
And sweep with little hands your silver lyres;
With fairy foot-steps print your grassy rings,
Ye Gnomes! accordant to the tinkling strings;
While in soft notes I tune to oaten reed
Gay hopes, and amorous sorrows of the mead.—
From giant Oaks, that wave their branches dark,
To the dwarf Moss, that clings upon their bark,
What Beaux and Beauties croud the gaudy groves,
And woo and win their vegetable Loves.
How Snow-drops cold, and blue-eyed Harebels blend
Their tender tears, as o'er the stream they bend;

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The love-sick Violet, and the Primrose pale
Bow their sweet heads, and whisper to the gale;
With secret sighs the Virgin Lily droops,
And jealous Cowslips hang their tawny cups.
How the young Rose in beauty's damask pride
Drinks the warm blushes of his bashful bride;
With honey'd lips enamour'd Woodbines meet,
Clasp with fond arms, and mix their kisses sweet.—
'Stay thy soft-murmuring waters, gentle Rill;
Hush, whispering Winds, ye rustling Leaves, be still;
Rest, silver Butterflies, your quivering wings;
Alight, ye Beetles, from your airy rings;
Ye painted Moths, your gold-eyed plumage furl,
Bow your wide horns, your spiral trunks uncurl;
Glitter, ye Glow-worms, on your mossy beds;
Descend, ye Spiders, on your lengthen'd threads;
Slide here, ye horned Snails, with varnish'd shells;
Ye Bee-nymphs, listen in your waxen cells!'—[3]

The peculiarities of this poem consist not only in the easy and often elegant style in which the different descriptions are conveyed, but in the vast variety of uncommon facts introduced, and the address with which the different ornaments (the adventitious descriptions) are conducted. It is by this clue that we shall be led in our choice of extracts, for it is not easy to give, in a short

compass, an adequate idea of this beautiful poem, unless we follow some general plan, since the author seems not to have adopted any particular, at least any apparent design. The lychnis is a common plant in our hedges, and of no extraordinary beauty; yet it is extremely beautiful in our author's hands:

> '*Five* sister-nymphs to join Diana's train
> With thee, fair LYCHNIS*! vow,—but vow in vain;
> Beneath one roof resides the virgin band,
> Flies the fond swain, and scorns his offer'd hand;
> But when soft hours on breezy pinions move,
> And smiling May attunes her lute to love,
> Each wanton beauty, trick'd in all her grace,
> Shakes the bright dew-drops from her blushing face;
> In gay undress displays her rival charms,
> And calls her wondering lovers to her arms.'[4]

The sun-flower, for instance, we all have seen; though we never saw it in greater perfection than in our author's description:

' * Ten males and five females. The flowers, which contain the five females, and those which contain the ten males, are found on different plants; and often at a great distance from each other. Five of the ten males arrive at their maturity some days before the other five, as may be seen by opening the corol before it naturally expands itself. When the females arrive at their maturity, they rise above the petals, as if looking abroad for their distant husbands, the scarlet ones contribute much to the beauty of our meadows in May and June.'

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> 'Great HELIANTHUS* guides o'er twilight plains
> In gay solemnity his Dervice-trains:
> Marshall'd in *fives* each gaudy band proceeds,
> Each gaudy band a plumed Lady leads†;
> With zealous step he climbs the upland lawn,
> And bows [i]n homage to the rising dawn;
> Imbibes with eagle-eye the golden ray,
> And watches, as it moves, the orb of day.'[5]

Once more; the honeysuckle:

> 'Fair LONICERA‡ treads the dewy lawn,
> And decks with brighter blush the vermil dawn;
> Winds round the shadowy rocks, and pancied vales,
> And scents with sweeter breath the summer gales;
> With artless grace and native ease she charms,
> And bears the Horn of Plenty in her arms.
> *Five* rival Swains their tender cares unfold,
> And watch with eye askance the treasured gold.'[6]

We have found no little difficulty in selecting a passage which will give a proper idea of our author's interesting digressions, not because any were exceptionable, but because they were in general too long. The following, after some care, we have preferred: the lines are beautiful; and the transition is not obvious or expected. There are however some others, that are too extensive, which we think more wildly poetical, and more strikingly picturesque:

'Where vast Ontario rolls his brineless tides,
And feeds the trackless forests on his sides,
Fair CASSIA§ trembling hears the howling woods,
And trusts her tawny children to the floods.—

' * Sun-flower. The numerous florets, which constitute the disk of this flower, contain in each five males surrounding one female, the five stamens have their anthers connected at top, whence the name of the class "confederate males." The sun-flower follows the course of the sun by nutation, not by twisting its stem. (Hales Veg. Stat.) Other plants, when they are confined in a room, turn the shining surface of their leaves, and bend their whole branches to the light. See Mimosa.'

' † The seeds of many plants of this class are furnished with a plume, by which admirable mechanism they are disseminated by the winds far from their parent stem, and look like a shuttlecock, as they fly.'

' ‡ Caprifolium. Honeysuckle. Five males, one female. Nature has in many flowers used a wonderful apparatus to guard the nectary, or honey-gland, from insects. In the honey-suckle the petal terminates in a long tube like a cornucopiæ, or horn of plenty; and the honey is produced at the bottom of it.'

' § Ten males, one female. The seeds are black, the stamens gold-colour. This is one of the American fruits, which are annually thrown on the coasts of Norway; and are frequently in so recent a state as to vegetate, when properly taken care of, the fruit of the anacardium, cashew-nut; of cucurbita lagenaria, bottlegourd; of the mimosa scandens, co-

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Cinctured with gold while *ten* fond brothers stand,
And guard the beauty on her native land,
Soft breathes the gale, the current gently moves,
And bears to Norway's coasts her infant-loves.
—So the sad mother at the noon of night
From bloody Memphis stole her silent flight;
Wrap'd her dear babe beneath her folded vest,
And clasp'd the treasure to her throbbing breast,
With soothing whispers hushed its feeble cry,
Pressed the soft kiss, and breathed the secret sigh.—
—With dauntless step she seeks the winding shore,
Hears unappall'd the glimmering torrents roar;
With Paper-flags a floating cradle weaves,
And hides the smiling boy in Lotus-leaves;
Gives her white bosom to his eager lips,
The salt tears mingling with the milk he sips;
Waits on the reed-crown'd brink with pious guile,
And trusts the scaly monsters of the Nile.—
—Erewhile majestic from his lone abode,
Embassador of Heaven, the Prophet trod;

Wrench'd the red Scourge from proud Oppression's
hands,
And broke, curst Slavery! thy iron bands.'[7]

The following, our last extract, is exquisitely beautiful; and we have selected it not only on account of the admirable description; but to say, that the chundali borum is beautiful only by our author's dressing it. It is a papilionaceous flower of a yellow dusky hue:

'When from his golden urn the Solstice pours
O'er Afric's sable sons the sultry hours;
When not a gale flits o'er her tawny hills,
Save where dry Harmattan breathes and kills;
When stretch'd in dust her gasping panthers lie,
And writh'd in foamy folds her serpents die;
Indignant Atlas mourns his leafless woods,
And Gambia trembles for his sinking floods;
Contagion stalks along the briny sand,
And Ocean rolls his sickening shoals to land.
—Fair CHUNDA* smiles amid the burning waste,
Her brow unturban'd, and her zone unbrac'd;

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coons; of the poscidia erythrina, logwood-tree, and cocoa-nuts are enumerated by Dr. Tonning. (Amæn. acad. 149) amongst these emigrant seeds. The fact is truly wonderful, and cannot be accounted for but by the existence of under currents in the depts of the ocean; or from vortexes of water passing from one country to another through caverns of the earth.'

' * Chundali Borum is the name, which the natives give to this plant; it is the Hedysarum movens, or moving plant; its class is two brother-

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Ten brother-youths with light umbrella's shade,
Or fan with busy hands the panting maid;
Loose wave her locks, disclosing, as they break,
The rising bosom and averted cheek;
Clasp'd round her ivory neck with studs of gold
Flows her thin vest in many a silky fold;
O'er her light limbs the dim transparence plays,
And the fair form, it seems to hide, betrays.'[8]

There are some parts of this volume which we have not mentioned: they are styled Interludes, and consist of Dialogues between the Author and his Bookseller. Fielding[9] has already told us, that booksellers are not the worst judges of literary merit, and our author's friend seems very sagacious and penetrating. The author forgot to tell us whether the scene is laid at Litchfield or in London.[10]

In the first Interlude, the author informs us that he is a flower-painter, or occasionally attempts a landscape, leaving the human figure, with the portraits of history, to abler artists. He proceeds

to instruct his bookseller in the difference between poetry and prose; but he falls into one little error. It is not sublimity, he says, which constitutes poetry, for sublime sentiments are often better in prose. He instances the dying scene of Warwick, where he observes, that no measure of verse could add to the sentiment.[11] Unfortunately, the whole scene is in blank verse, and his quotation, 'Oh! could you *but* fly,' is erroneous. In Read's edition, vol. VI. p. 563, it is:

——— ——— Ah could you fly.
War. Why then I would not fly. ———

The measure is more strictly observed, and more poetical images occur in this scene, than in many of a greater extent in Shakspeare.

We are not clear that the author is perfectly accurate when he says, that poetry is distinguished from prose by admitting very few words of perfectly abstract ideas,[12] for Pope's Essay on Man[13] is, we think, poetical, though few ideas, except abstract ones, are admitted. He is however probably near the truth; and his illustrations are in general very just. His criticism on sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourse, delivered in 1786, where he asserts, that 'the higher styles of painting, like the higher styles of the drama, do not aim at any thing like deception,'[14] is very

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hoods ten males. Its leaves are continually in spontaneous motion, some rising and others falling, and others whirling circularly by twisting their stems; this spontaneous movement of the leaves, when the air is quite still, and very warm, seems to be necessary to the plant, as perpetual respiration is to animal life.'

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accurate; and he might have instanced an example of worse taste than the president accuses Fielding of, in the introduction of the figures in the back-ground of Mrs. Siddons' admirable portrait.[15] If it be alledged that he represents an ideal rather than a real personage, the tragic Muse, the fault is equally glaring, in choosing features which we know to be those of an individual.

In the second Interlude is a very correct and philosophical discrimination between what is merely tragic, and what is horrid. The third interlude contains some remarks on the relations between poetry, painting, and music, in which the author displays an accurate taste, and no inconsiderable knowledge of these different subjects. In one or two points our opinions may differ; but, on these doubtful subjects, we mean not to insinuate that the author is wrong, or that we are right.

On the whole, we have perused this volume with great pleasure, where novelty of subject is united with animated poetry, and an intimate acquaintance with botany, natural history, and various collateral subjects. Though we have transcribed much, if our readers have any taste, they will turn to the work; for we have never met with any performance where it was so difficult to convey, within the compass of an article, a proper view of its contents and its merits.

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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] *LOTP*, Advertisement.
[3] *LOTP* I:1–30.
[4] *LOTP* I:107–16.
[5] *LOTP* I:223–30.
[6] *LOTP* I:243–50.
[7] *LOTP* III:411–36.
[8] *LOTP* IV:321–40.
[9] Henry Fielding (1707–1754), known for originating the English comic novel.
[10] The title page of *LOTP* 1789 indicates that the book was "Printed by J. Jackson" in "Lichfield" and "Sold by J. Johnson, St. Paul's Church Yard, London."
[11] *LOTP* Interlude, p. 49.
[12] *LOTP* Interlude, p. 49.
[13] Alexander Pope (1688–1744) published his *Essay on Man* in 1733–1734, a philosophical poem in four epistles which, according to their Arguments, explore "the Nature and State of Man, with respect to the Universe," "to Himself, as an Individual," "to Society," and "to Happiness," respectively.
[14] *LOTP* Interlude, p. 53.
[15] Joshua Reynolds's painting, *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784).