Appendix 5.10: From Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females* (1798)

Richard Polwhele (1760–1838), author and Anglican clergyman, published poetry, topography, sermons, translations of ancient Greek writers, and contributions to journals such as *The Gentleman's Magazine* and *The Anti-Jacobin Review*. He is now best known for *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), a poem with notes, which praises ED's poetry but then criticizes the sexualized botany of *LOTP* as part of targeting an array of women writers as "A female band despising NATURE's law" (p. 6), envisioned to be led by Mary Wollstonecraft. Polwhele praises other female writers, though, including ED's friend Anna Seward. *The Unsex'd Females* takes its title from a passage in Mathias's *The Pursuits of Literature* (Preface to the Fourth Dialogue, p. 238) that serves as an epigraph: "Our unsex'd female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves, in the labyrinth of politics, or turn us wild with Gallic frenzy." Polwhele had made the acquaintance of ED's son Erasmus in 1780 and wrote commendatory verses for *The Botanic Garden*, published in Volume 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, 1795 and 1799 (see Appendix 1.5).

Selections copied from Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature*. London: Cadell and Davies, 1798.

On *The Botanic Garden*

[p. 4]

I agree with the Author of "the Pursuits," both in his praises and his censures of the writers of this country, with a few exceptions only. To his eulogia, indeed, I heartily assent: but, I think, his animadversions on Darwin and Hayley[1] in particular, are unmerited. In composing his Botanic Garden, Dr. Darwin was aware, that though imagination refuse to enlist under the banner of science,[2] yet science may sometimes be brought forward, not unhappily, under the conduct of imagination: and of the latter, if I am any way a judge, we are presented with a complete specimen in that admirable poem. With respect to the structure of the poem, we have been told, that it wants connexion—that there is a reciprocal repulsion between the scientific and imaginative particles, and so little affinity even between the latter, that they cannot possibly cohere. But on this topic, let us hear the Author himself; who invites us to contemplate, in his poem, "a great variety of little pictures, connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons."[3] And they are pictures glowing in the richest colours—the most beautiful, in short, that were ever delineated by the poetic pencil. I defy any one of Dr. Darwin's censurers, to point out a single picture, which is not finished with touches the most exquisite—"with all the magic charms of light and shade."[4] I had intended to examine the style, the versification, the poetry; but rather let me desire my Reader to open either of the volumes,[5] at a venture, and take the first description that presents itself: and he will find painting sublime as Fuseli's,[6] or beautiful as Emma Crewe's.[7] It is easy to run over the changes of "artificial glitter"—"glaring varnish"—"deliciousness that

[p. 5]

cloys." Thus was Gibbon[8] treated. Gibbon, forsooth, was required to bring down the haughtiness of his style to a level with that of vulgar "prosers." And Darwin must lower his eagle wing, to silence the clamour of the poetic sparrow-hawks, that, whilst they arraign his flights, are pining at their own imbecility.

On unsex'd females and their botanizing

[p. 7]

I shudder at the new unpictur'd scene,
Where unsex'd woman vaunts the imperious mien;
Where girls, affecting to dismiss the heart,
Invoke the Proteus[9] of petrific art;
With equal ease, in body or in mind,
To Gallic freaks or Gallic faith resign'd,
The crane-like neck, as Fashion bids, lay bare,
Or frizzle, bold in front, their borrow'd hair;
Scarce by a gossamery film carest,
Sport,* in full view, the meretricious breast;†
Loose the chaste cincture, where the graces shone,
And languish'd all the Loves, the ambrosial zone;

* To "sport a face," is a cant phrase in one of our Universities, by which is meant an impudent obtrusion of a man's person in company. It is not inapplicable, perhaps, to the open bosom—a fashion which we have never invited or sanctioned.

† The fashions of France, which have been always imitated by the English, were, heretofore, unexceptionable in a moral point of view; since, however ridiculous or absurd, they were innocent. But they have now their source among prostitutes—among women of the most

[p. 8]

As lordly domes inspire dramatic rage,
Court prurient Fancy to the private stage;
With bliss botanic* as their bosoms heave,
Still pluck forbidden fruit, with mother Eve,
For puberty in sighing florets pant,
Or point the prostitution of a plant;

abandoned character. "See Madam Tallien come into the theatre, and other beautiful women, laying aside all modesty, and presenting themselves to the public view, with bared limbs, a la sauvage, as the alluring objects of desire."

Robison's Proofs of a Conspiracy, &c. &c. Edit. 2. p. 252.[10]

* Botany has lately become a fashionable amusement with the ladies. But how the study of the sexual system of plants can accord with female modesty, I am not able to comprehend. See note from Darwin's Botanic Garden, at p.[11]

I had, at first, written:

More eager for illicit knowledge pant,
With lustful boys anatomize a plant;
The virtues of its dust prolific speak,
Or point its pistill with unblushing cheek.

I have, several times, seen boys and girls botanizing together.

[p. 9]

Dissect* its organ of unhallow'd lust,
And fondly gaze the titillating† dust;‡
With liberty's sublimer views expand,§
And o'er the wreck of kingdoms ‖ sternly stand;

* Miss Wollstonecraft[12] does not blush to say, in an introduction to a book designed for the use of young ladies,[13] that, "in order to lay the axe at the root of corruption, it would be proper to familiarize the sexes to an unreserved discussion of those topics, which are generally avoided in conversation from a principle of false delicacy; and that it would be right to speak of the organs of generation as freely as we mention our eyes or our hands." To such language our botanizing girls are doubtless familiarized: and, they are in a fair way of becoming worthy disciples of Miss W. If they do not take heed to their ways, they will soon exchange the blush of modesty for the bronze of impudence.

† "Each pungent grain of titillating dust." Pope.[14]

‡ "The prolific dust"—of the botanist.

§ Non vultus, non color unus,
Non comptæ mansere comæ: sed pectus anhelum,
Et rabie fera corda tument; majorque videri, &c.[15]
Except the non color unus, Virgil's Sibyll seems to be an exact portrait of a female fashionist, both in dress and philosophism.

‖ The female advocates of Democracy in this country, though they have had no opportunity of imitating the French ladies, in their atro-

[p. 10]

And, frantic, midst the democratic storm,
Pursue, Philosophy! thy phantom-form.*

[…]

cious acts of cruelty; have yet assumed a stern serenity in the contemplation of those savage excesses. "To express their abhorrence of royalty, they (the French ladies) threw away the character of their sex, and bit the amputated limbs of their murdered countrymen.—I say this on the authority of a young gentleman who saw it.—I am sorry to add, that the relation, accompanied with looks of horror and disgust, only provoked a contemptuous smile from an illuminated British fair-one." See Robison[16]—p. 251.

* Philosophism, the false image of philosophy. See the pseudo Eneas of the Eneid, 10.b. imitated from the Iliad, 15.b.[17]
. . . .Nube cava tenuem sine viribus umbram. . . .
. . . . . .Dat inania verba,
Dat sine mente sonum. . . .[18]
A true description of Philosophism; a phantom which heretofore appeared not in open day, though it now attempts the loftiest flights in the face of the sun. I trust, however, to English eyes, it is almost lost in the "black cloud" to which it owed its birth.
——Lævis haud ultra latebras jam quærit imago,
Sed, sublime volans, nubi se immiscuit atræ.[19]

On Angelica Kauffman and Emma Crewe

[p. 20]

[…] classic KAUFFMAN† her Priapus drew,
And linger'd a sweet blush with EMMA CREWE.‡

[p. 21]

† Angelica Kauffman's print,[20] should accompany Miss Wollstonecraft's Instructions in Priapism, already noticed, by way of illustration. This, and a little plant-adultery, would go great lengths, in producing among girls, the consummation so devoutly wished.[21]

‡ There is a charming delicacy in most of the pictures of Miss Emma Crewe; though I think, in her "Flora at play with Cupid," (the frontispiece to the Second Part of the Botanic Garden) she has rather overstepped the modesty of nature, by giving the portrait an air of voluptuousness too luxuriously melting.

On Mary Wollstonecraft and Collinsonia

[p. 25]

-----But hark! lascivious murmurs melt around;
And pleasure trembles in each dying sound.
A myrtle bower, in fairest bloom array'd,
To laughing Venus streams the silver shade:
Thrill'd with fine ardors *Collinsonias* glow,‡
And, bending, breathe their loose desires below.

* "However gross, indeed, the food might be,
". . . . . .to taste
"Think not, she would be nice.". . . . . .
". . . . . .for what redounds, transpires
"Thro' spirits with ease!" Paradise Lost, b.5.l.462.[22]

† "Miss Wollstonecraft used often to meet Mr. Fuseli at the house of a common friend, where she was so charmed with his talents, and the tout ensemble, that she suffered herself to fall in love with him, though a married man." See Godwin's Memoirs.[23]

‡ "The vegetable passion of love is agreeably seen in the flower of the Parnassia, in which the males alternately approach and recede

[p. 26]

Each gentle air a swelling anther heaves,
Wafts its full sweets, and shivers thro' the leaves.
Bath'd in new bliss, the Fair-one greets the bower,
And ravishes a flame from every flower;
Low at her feet inhales the master's sighs,
And darts voluptuous poison from her eyes.
Yet, while each heart-pulse, in the Paphian[24] grove,

Beats quick to IMLAY[25] and licentious love,*

from the female, and in the flower of Nigella, or Devil in the Bush, in which the tall females bend down to their dwarf husbands. But I was, this morning, surprised to observe, among Sir Brooke Boothby's valuable collection of plants at Asbourn, the manifest adultery of several females of the plant Collinsonia, who had bent themselves into contact with the males of other flowers of the same plant, in their vicinity, neglectful of their own."

Botanic Garden, Part the First, p. 197---3d. Edit.[26]

* To smother in dissipation her passion for Fuseli, Miss W. had fled to France. There she met with a paramour responsive to her sighs, a Mr. Imlay: with him she formed a connexion, though not a matrimonial one; being always of opinion, with Eloisa, that

[p. 27]

A sudden gloom the gathering tempest spreads;
The floral arch-work withers o'er their heads;
Whirlwinds the paramours asunder tear;
And wisdom falls, the victim of despair.*

[…]

"Love, free as air, at sight of human ties,
"Spreads his light wings, and in a moment flies!"[27]

* Imlay soon left his lady to her "own imaginations."[28] Thus abandoned, she returned to London; and driven to desperation, attempted to put an end to her life, but was recovered. She soon, however, made a second effort to plunge into eternity. In a dark and tempestuous night, she repaired to Putney-bridge; where, determined to throw herself into the river, she walked up and down, for half an hour, through the rain, that her clothes, being thoroughly drenched and heavy, might facilitate her descent into the water. She then leaped from the top of the bridge; but finding still a difficulty in sinking, tried to press her clothes closely around her, and at last became insensible; but at this moment she was discovered, and brought back to life. See Godwin's Memoirs.

---

[1] William Hayley (1745–1820), best known for his poetry (most successfully, *The Triumphs of Temper* (1781)), his biographies of Milton (1796) and Cowper (1803), and his patronage of William Blake (1757–1827). ED met Hayley when he visited Derby in 1781. ED mentions Hayley in the first Interlude of *LOTP* (p. 51), and Hayley wrote commendatory verses for *The Botanic Garden*, printed in Volume 1, *The Economy of Vegetation*, 1795, 1799 (see Appendix 1.5).

[2] Cf. *LOTP*, Advertisement.

[3] *LOTP*, Proem.

[4] William Hayley, *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter* (1778), lines 278–79: "Soft as CATULLUS, sweet CORREGIO play'd / With all the magic charms of light and shade."

[5] That is, either *The Economy of Vegetation* or *LOTP*, the two volumes of ED's *Botanic Garden*.

[6] Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) was a painter, writer, translator, and an ordained Zwinglian minister. Born in Zürich, he moved to England in 1764 and, apart from spending much of the 1770s in Rome, lived in London for the rest of his life. Among his best-known works are his illustrations of Shakespeare and *The Nightmare* (1782). *The Nightmare* features in *LOTP* III:51–78. ED met Fuseli on a trip to London in 1781 (*Life* 173). Fuseli was part of the Joseph Johnson circle and put ED in touch with Johnson in 1784 to discuss publishing *The Botanic Garden* (see King-Hele, ed., *Letters* 84-10). Fuseli designed several illustrations for ED's books: *The Fertilization of Egypt*, engraved by William Blake (1757–1827); and the frontispiece *Flora Attired by the Elements*, for *The Economy of Vegetation*;

Tornado, also engraved by Blake, for the 1795 edition of *The Economy of Vegetation*; and the frontispiece and three other illustrations for *The Temple of Nature* (1803).

[7] 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, and designed the frontispiece for *LOTP*.

[8] Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788).

[9] In Greco-Roman mythology, Proteus is a shapeshifting, all-knowing sea-god, also known as the Old Man of the Sea. In the *Odyssey* (4:349–570), Menelaus narrates how, on his return from Troy, he met Proteus. Proteus changed forms to try to escape and avoid questioning, but Menelaus held him fast until he returned to his true shape. Proteus is similarly questioned, on how to save a colony of bees, in Virgil's *Georgics* ((36–29 BCE; 4:315–530).

[10] John Robison (1739–1805), natural philosopher and inventor, wrote *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*, first published 1797, which argued that secret societies planned the French Revolution. Polwhele's reference is found in Chapter 2.

[11] Page number omitted in original.

[12] Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), author, philosopher, and feminist. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) she defended the French Revolution against Burke's attacks in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she applied revolutionary ideas to feminist concerns such as marriage, motherhood, and education. She also published novels, educational works, travel writing, translations, and reviews, with Joseph Johnson, ED's publisher.

[13] The reference is to the "Introductory Address to Parents" in *Elements of Morality, for the Use of Children* (1790), by C. G. Salzmann, translated by Wollstonecraft: "I would willingly have said something of chastity and impurity; for impurity is now spread so far that even children are infected, and by it the seeds of every virtue, as well as the germe of their posterity, which the Creator has implanted in them for wise purposes, are weakened or destroyed. I am thoroughly persuaded that the most efficacious method to root out this dreadful evil, which poisons the source of human happiness, would be to speak to children of the organs of generation as freely as we speak of the other parts of the body, and explain to them the noble use which they were designed for, and how they may be injured" (2nd ed., 1791, xiv–xv). In the Advertisement, Wollstonecraft states that her opinions on moral education coincide with Salzmann's.

[14] Alexander Pope (1688–1744), *The Rape of the Lock* (1717), Canto 5, line 84: "The pungent grains of titillating dust." In that context, the dust is snuff, not pollen.

[15] Virgil, *Aeneid* 6:47–9. The passage describes the intoxicated oracular speech of the Sibyl of Cumae: "suddenly nor countenance nor colour was the same, nor stayed her tresses braided; but her bosom heaves, her heart swells with wild frenzy, and she is taller to behold" (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library). ED references this passage in *LOTP* III:40n.

[16] This reference is found in Chapter 2 of John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*, first published 1797.

[17] In Homer's *Iliad* 5:449–50, Apollo creates a phantom of Aeneas and his armor.

[18] Virgil, *Aeneid* 10:636–40. The passage describes the phantom of Aeneas created by the goddess Juno: she "from hollow mist fashions a thin, strengthless phantom […] gives it unreal words, gives a voice without thought" (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library).

[19] Virgil, *Aeneid* 10:663–64. "Then the airy phantom seeks shelter no longer, but soaring aloft blends with a dark cloud" (trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library).

[20] Painter Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807) was born in Switzerland, and spent many years in Italy before and after living in England from 1766 to 1782. She was one of the founders of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768. As well as portrait and history painting, she painted subjects from mythology and literature, often choosing sentimental themes. Her designs were used, and her style widely imitated, in the decorative arts. She collaborated with printmakers to reproduce and market her work. ED owned "4 or 5 prints of graces" by Kauffman (see King-Hele, ed., *Letters* 77-5), and mentions her in the first Interlude of *LOTP* (p. 53). Kauffman's Priapus was engraved by William Wynne Ryland in 1776 and titled "Nymphs Adorning the Statue of Pan."

[21] A paraphrase of Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.1.71–2.

[22] "However gross, indeed, the food might be" is not from *Paradise Lost*, but the other lines quoted are (5.432–33, 438–39).

[23] William Godwin (1756–1836), radical philosopher and novelist, is best known for *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). He and Wollstonecraft became lovers in August 1796 and married in March 1797 when Wollstonecraft was pregnant with the child who would become Mary Shelley. Wollstonecraft died after giving birth. In the same year, Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a sympathetic biography of Wollstonecraft that unfortunately, in its frankness, gave ammunition to her detractors. The quotation Polwhele gives does not appear in the *Memoirs*, though Godwin does write of Wollstonecraft meeting Fuseli through Joseph Johnson, and states that "Mary was not of a temper to live upon terms of so much intimacy with a man of merit and genius, without loving him. […] She conceived a personal and ardent affection for him. Mr. Fuseli was a married man" (Chapter 6).

[24] Paphos in Cyprus was believed to be the birthplace of Aphrodite/Venus; Paphian thus means relating to (the goddess of) love and sexual desire.

[25] Gilbert Imlay (1754–1828), an American who had served in the revolutionary war, met Wollstonecraft through the circle of British radicals he was associated with in Paris in 1793. They never married, but Imlay registered her as his wife at the American embassy (giving her the benefit of American citizenship, as France declared war on Britain on 1 February 1793). He was the father of Wollstonecraft's first daughter, Fanny, born in 1794, but did not want to live as a family. In 1795, Imlay asked Wollstonecraft to go to Scandinavia on business on his behalf; she went, taking Fanny with her, and recorded her experiences, observations, and emotions in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). When she returned to London she found Imlay was with another woman. It was at this time that she tried to drown herself. Godwin writes about her attempted suicide in his *Memoirs* (Chapter 8).

[26] *The Economy of Vegetation* IV:456n.

[27] Alexander Pope, "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717), lines 75–6.

[28] This is not a quotation from Godwin. Godwin does, however, describe Wollstonecraft's mental agony in the difficulties of her relationship with Imlay, and uses the phrase, "A thousand images […] were present to her burning imagination" (Chapter 8).