Appendix 5.12: from James Plumptre, *The Lakers* (1798)

The play *The Lakers* makes fun of amateur botanists and picturesque travelers. It follows a standard comic structure in which "Miss Beccabunga Veronica, of Diandria Hall" (p. 2) is the aunt of the female love-interest and the obstacle to her union with the hero. Veronica is thus the object of the play's many identity deceptions. She is depicted as a somewhat foolish and bossy figure, "blinded by vanity, folly, and botanic nuptials" (p. 23), and always on the lookout for material for her sketching and writing. Though she reveals herself not to know Latin, her dialogue is full of botanical jargon which makes for many puns as other characters misunderstand her. She herself is named after the botanical term for European speedwell, also called brooklime. She often applies botanical terminology to human situations: for example, "Sir Charles, could you be contented to be a *monogynia* all your life?" (p. 11), and she calls the secret romance between her niece and the hero a "cryptogamy" (p. 57). The play quotes lines from Mathias's *The Pursuits of Literature* (p. 24: Dialogue the First lines 79–82; see Appendix 5.7) and from *LOTP* itself (p. 31: the passage on Collinsonia, I:51–6).

James Plumptre (1771–1832), a Church of England clergyman, wrote several plays as part of the literary and theatrical circles in Norwich in the 1790s. He also wrote a discourse on drama, edited a collection of expurgated plays, and published some religious writing; selections of his travel writing from the 1790s were published in 1992. He was the brother of authors and translators Anne Plumptre (1760–1818) and Annabella (Bell) Plumptre (1769–1838).

Selections copied from James Plumptre, *The Lakers: A Comic Opera, in Three Acts*. London: W. Clarke, 1798.

from Preface

[p. xi]

It only remains to say a few words upon the objects of the ridicule. The Author assures him-

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self he is not singular in thinking the study of Botany not altogether a proper amusement for the more polished sex; and the false taste of a licentious age, which is gaining ground, and corrupting the soft and elegant manners of the otherwise loveliest part of the creation, requires every discouragement which can be given.

from Act II Scene I

[p. 28]

Ver[onica]. […] I have sat once to Mr. Daubly for my picture, which is to be finished against the next exhibition. I am depicted as the modern goddess of botany: I am sitting upon the stump of a tree, which has been grafted with innumerable different kinds of shrubs—the various *Syringas: foliis ovato-cordatis, foliis lanceolatis*;[1] the *Cytisas*, the *Cestras*, the *Lycias, Loniceras*;—which branch round and form a bower over my head. Every flower springs up around me, and a water-fall dashes by my side: I have a full-blown moss-rose upon my head instead of a cap, and moss-rose buds hanging about my neck and shoulders, instead of hair. Two wreaths of honeysuckle twine round my neck and my waist, and under my garment, which is slightly drawn up, instead of a stocking, appears the bark of a tree.

Sir Charles. (*Aside*.) The goddess of botany with a wooden leg!

Ver. My feet are covered with the *conferva rivularis*, with a large rose upon each of them. In my hand I hold my poem, in twenty cantos, "The Triumph of Botany," while the Arts and Sciences are all paying homage to me. The *coup d'œil*[2] is exceedingly fine; and I do not recollect to have seen any thing like it before.

Sir Charles. Not exactly, Madam——except the owl in the ivy-bush.[3] (*Aside*.)

Ver. I mentioned my poem: the subject is, I think, extremely interesting, and purely classical. You know, Sir, that the botanist and the florist have long been at variance; the florist only esteems a few, and those chiefly the double flowers, which the botanist considers as monsters. Now I suppose, that, after repeated hostilities, which are the subject of the former part of the poem, *Lonicera sempervirens*, or trumpet honeysuckle, is sent, as a herald, to call a parley, and the parties meet on the plain of *Enna*, so much celebrated by the poets for its flowers and the rape of Proserpina.[4] *Flora* enters in a wheel-barrow, the garden carriage, driving *Hyacinthus, Carnatia, Auricula, Tulippa, Anemonia, Jonquilla, Ranunculus,* and *Polyanthus*, eight in hand, and is attended

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by Cupids, as gardeners, bearing silver cream-pots and all the prizes given at florists' feasts. *Botania* is borne in a tin box,[5] the botanists' conveyance, by eight of her favourites; and, after debating the matter, as we do at Coach-makers' Hall, which introduces an episode upon that elegant amusement, it is agreed that they shall henceforth unite their powers, and live promiscuously in fields or gardens: a pageant takes place, in which all their adherents appear two and two, attended by Gnomes and Sylphs:[6] Botania and Flora change their cars, and a triumphal song is chanted to their joint honour.

Sir Charles. How new and how truly poetic is the idea!

from Act III, Scene I

[p. 43]

Anna.

I DESIRES, Sir, you won't follow me about so: I thought ye had been a gentleman; but, as ye be only a gentleman's gentleman, ye be not for my money, I can assure ye: besides, ye don't understand botamy.

Sample. No, how should I?

Anna. Oh, such an enlightened study! such hard names! Why, do you know I was a whole day larning a single word, and forgot it again the next morning. Another word, to be sure, I larnt in an hour; but then I forgot it the next minute. But my mistress [Veronica] recollects every thing; she is a great schollard. Such curious truths too contained in it—why, plants are all men and women.

Sample. Aye, there are sweet-williams; I'm a sweet-william.[7] And coxcombs, and painted ladies, and lords and ladies, and naked ladies, like your modern fine ladies, and—

Anna. No, no, I mean that they drink and sleep, and are like man and wife.

Sample. What, sleep in the same bed?

Anna. Yes, and in different beds, and live sometimes in different houses.

Sample. Have a separate *maintainance!* They must be your fashionable plants then. What, and some have their misses, I reckon, as well as their wives?

Anna. O yes! a great many: and some ladies have their gallants too.

Sample. Upon my word, Miss, a very pretty study this seems to be that you've learnt: I can't say I should much like my wife to know any thing about it.

[p. 44]

Anna. That you'll find a difficult matter to get one who's ignorant of it; for all ladies that know any thing study botany now: and, if I hadn't despised ye before, I do now for your ignorance.

Sample. And yet, I don't know, I like her very well; and if she'll make a good wife in other respects, I'll take care she doesn't get to her gallants, and to living in a different house. (*Aside*.) Now, if I was to love you, and give you a proof of my love?

Anna. I can't like nobody that isn't larned.

from Act III, Scene III

[page 52]

Speed[well]. I have counterfeited love till I have almost persuaded myself into a real passion for this woman [Veronica], and I now dread the discovery, lest it should separate me from her for ever. But, suppose she should like me, and even consent to marry me, would I have her? She is rich, she is good tempered: two qualities that will certainly promote happiness in the married state. She does not want sense; but then she misapplies it. But it is perhaps for want of having it better directed, and the cares of a family may divert her attention another way. Then she is a botanist, and deeply versed in the mysteries of the loves of the plants; and she who is bawd to a blossom, may not be very nice in the intercourse of her own species.[8] I must have done with reflection, for the more I think the more I am bewildered.

[1] Linnaean descriptors for the shapes of leaves (foliis), translated by Darwin in *A System of Vegetables* (1783) as egg-hearted and lanced, respectively.
[2] The way a scene strikes the eye at a glance.
[3] To look like an owl in an ivy bush means to look a fright, or untidy, or vacant.
[4] Persephone, daughter of Demeter the agricultural goddess, was collecting flowers in the meadows of Enna (in Sicily) when she was abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld. Because she had eaten some pomegranate seeds while there, she could not be completely released from the underworld but had to stay for several months every year.
[5] Used to hold botanical specimens.
[6] Gnomes are elemental spirits of earth, and Sylphs spirits of air, according to the system of the alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1541). See editor's note to *LOTP* I:1.
[7] Sample's first name is Billy.
[8] In the British Library copy reproduced in *the Eighteenth Century Collections Online* database, these words (from "and she" to "own species") are thickly crossed out.