

GERTRUDE JEKYLL AND THE LATE-VICTORIAN GARDEN BOOK: REPRESENTING NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONS

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THE VICTORIAN GARDEN BOOK ATTAINED its peak popularity and status with the publications of Gertrude Jekyll, who, beginning in 1899, brought forth a total of fourteen books. Like those of her Victorian predecessors, Jekyll's garden books raise a series of questions about what it means to represent nature, for they expose a conflict: that between the human desire to forge a respectful connection with nature as an equal and the desire to exercise control over it. On the one hand, Victorian garden books, including Jekyll's, sought to encourage human knowledge of and interaction with the natural world. They built on the popularity of eighteenth-century botanical studies by disseminating detailed information about plants and their ecological habitats, frequently expressing wonder at nature's manifold and seemingly limitless creativity (Gates 36; Shteir 64–68). These admiring representations of nature cumulatively suggest a complex understanding of matter as dynamic and even purposeful, and the accompanying Victorian promotion of gardening as a hands-on, salutary activity for all classes at least tacitly positioned human development as inherently physical (Longstaffe-Gowan 151). On the other hand, gardening books not only attempted to aestheticize and manage nature, exerting rhetorical and visual control over physically powerful forces, but they also helped to consolidate nature's status as a commodity in Western culture as a site designed to regenerate, sooth, instruct, or sustain humans. From a twenty-first century point of view, the garden book constitutes an acute nature-culture problem because it so obviously relates to the issue of authority, specifically that of the individual writer whose public voice derives from her demonstrated ability to tend and to interpret the physical world. As ecocritics and postcolonial scholars justly charge, nature too often gets reduced to passive matter that is both available for and amenable to human cultivation and advancement. The garden book seemingly promotes such assumptions through its emphasis on the pleasures attendant on careful management of nature and through its idealized presentation of the gardener as an exemplar of self-disciplined creativity.

This paper explores the divided impulses informing the Victorian garden book and the physical sites on which it is based, particularly as manifest in Gertrude Jekyll's first two monographs, *Wood and Garden* (1899) and *Home and Garden* (1900). These impulses

include Jekyll's deliberate fashioning of a disciplined, culturally astute self, sometimes at the expense of the nonhuman, and Jekyll's more generous attempts to envision nature's processes as different from, but not inferior to, human productions. Such contradictions typically informed women's nature writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for if nature writing supplied a sanctioned domain for women with established associations of the "wholesome" (Jekyll, *Home* 57),¹ it simultaneously rendered women vulnerable to widespread, essentialist assumptions about their own constitutions. As recent criticism widely acknowledges, the Victorian era crystalized understandings of gender as biological and polarized, figuring women as determined by their (reproductive) physicality, the literal and figurative ground of men's more impressive culture.² To write about nature, then, meant that women had to contend with prejudiced assumptions regarding their closeness to and status as instinctive nature (Gates 3). How they fared is a matter of some ambivalence. If white, relatively privileged women of earlier centuries occupied the subordinated position in the culture-nature hierarchy, some, given the opportunity, readily distanced themselves from nature and secured their own cultural elevation precisely by adopting the tactics of a patriarchal and imperialistic society: they achieved a measure of cultural authority by asserting their superiority to other races or to the earth (Mies 64–65; Haggis 48–49; Plumwood 61). Yet to classify privileged Western women as either victims or exploiters neglects both the subtleties and unevenness of their engagement with nature.³ Many period women, Jekyll among them, seriously addressed the vexed relationship between human and nature that has, after all, troubled the West for centuries but produced highly mixed results.

Focusing on Jekyll, this paper considers the problem of arriving at ethical forms of intimacy between human and natural worlds. The garden is always to some extent a visible sign of the competing agendas of culture and nature, human creation necessarily imposing on and distancing itself from nature's rhythms. The garden book, with its aesthetic theories and social pedagogies, places itself at yet another remove from nature, rhetorically transforming the embodied self into a cultural authority. Yet as Barbara T. Gates's groundbreaking study *Kindred Nature* affirms, Jekyll's gardens and "unique kind of aestheticized nature writing" not only mark the disjunctions between cultivated and uncultivated nature; they also serve as "meditations" on the productive work of the aesthetic (188–89). Building on Gates's insights, my project inquires into the ethical and environmental potential of Jekyll's aesthetic, a potential that ineluctably and uneasily coexists with human exploitation of the natural. Jekyll harnesses nature to minister to her pleasures but, remaining attentive to the limits that proscribe culture from achieving compatibility with nature, she simultaneously composes garden books that begin to grapple with an ecocritical approach to matter as an inexhaustibly vital force independent of human narratives of property and progress. The philosophical and practical conflicts inherent in her labour serve as a useful reminder to us in the twenty-first century of the twin difficulties that continue to shadow relations between humans and nature: notably, that ecological stresses stem from human failures to make nuanced distinctions between their agendas and those of the environment as well as from careless behavior that reveals human assumptions of superiority to and difference from the material world. The goal, then, as recent ecocritics exhort, entails working with and through paradox. Jekyll's cultural labor, one such model of paradox, bespeaks the need to get beyond fantasies of pure relations with nature so that we may come to assume responsibility for the instances in which culture harms nature, while continuing to reshape culture as a potentially ethical force with an infinite, (re)generative capacity.

Already in the nineteenth century, ecologically sensitive narratives clashed explicitly with anthropocentric ones, while also faced with the immense difficulty of implementing relations equally conducive to cultural and biotic health. Jekyll's conflicts, clearly, mirror those of her period. Raised in an age of technological advancement and capitalist individualism, Jekyll was also shaped by the arts and the sciences that fostered environmentalist agendas. Romanticism and the Arts and Craft Movement both protested industrial devastation of rural areas, drawing direct correlations between the vitiation of the land and the health of the people, while evolutionary science as conceived by Darwin dwelt on the physical and mental resemblances between humans and nonhumans. Most boldly, in *The Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin dismantled longstanding, cherished notions of humanity's supremacy on the earth, and his dual narratives of intelligence in animals and of animality as an unmistakable human trait attracted significant attention.⁴ Nonetheless, as Gates observes, Darwin's well-known, compelling narrative of the continuity of human and nonhuman did not necessarily soften the nature-culture divide, since Darwinian theory gave rise to a nineteenth-century competition to tell the correct story of nature, nature still figuring as a powerful enigma in need of elucidation and surveillance (11). Complicating this situation further, nature – both before and after Darwin – frequently emerged in British discourses exploring the topic of land rights: nature, in such discussions, intersected with the issue of property as prime determiner of one's position and identity in an always stratified society.

Following John Locke's late seventeenth-century publication of *Two Treatises of Government*, the status of land as property and the function of property as a guarantor of legal selfhood become "almost indistinguishable in the rhetoric of liberal democracy" (Pugh 13). First and foremost, property ownership in the nineteenth century was tied to legal rights to vote, an association that revealed complicated and biased assumptions about responsible subjects: notably, the correlation of desirable subjectivity with a hierarchical status over something or someone. Irene Tucker sums up this key assumption, writing that land guarantees subjectivity through its inherently inferior classification as an object, as "a thing to be possessed in itself" (19). In addition, land converted into property "operates as a space within which other activities take place, a backdrop that guarantees, at least formally, the autonomy and efficacy of the Lockean agent" (Tucker 19). This configuration of agency presumes that, at some point, ownership entailed the transformation of the inchoate into the cultivated. Property maintenance and judicious improvements might signal later forms of an owner's disciplined conduct, but, in any case, property increasingly came into the service of reflecting the owners' desires and self-conceptions. By the mid-nineteenth century, Jeff Nunokawa asserts, ownership concerns about obligations to the land and to future heirs were firmly subordinated to normative conceptions of ownership as a form of freedom and power (81). Ideally, the estate revealed itself as "an unconditionally complying object" and property became enlisted "as the instrument and model for the construction of freedom in general" (Nunokawa 77). Regardless of the frequency with which such expectations ended in disappointment, nineteenth-century property owners not only attempted to subsume the external world into the self, but they also required that this newly constructed self represent an ideal of coherence and beauty.⁵

The rhetoric of Jekyll's late-Victorian garden books draws on idealist notions of property as a site on which to develop and display a perfected image of the self, fusing the regulation attributed to the Lockean property owner with the freedom craved by the nineteenth-century

proprietor. The owner of a fifteen-acre property called Munstead Wood, Jekyll designed and tended her most famous garden there, using it as the basis for many of her gardening manuals. These manuals typically (and energetically) promote the virtues of disciplinary individualism, “that paradoxical configuration of agency whereby freedom is constituted as ‘voluntary’ compliance with a rationalized order” (Poovey, *Making* 99). *Wood and Garden* and *Home and Garden* especially supply lengthy accounts of and repeated exhortations to unceasing industry, including vigilant monitoring of all parts of the garden. *Wood and Garden* recurrently calls attention to the actions of the “good gardener” whose care for individual plants and the entire cultivated plot ideally anticipates rather than reacts to developments in the garden (36). The “chief beauties” of the later season, Jekyll warns, depend on “timely” interventions, such as the early pruning, untangling, and supporting of plants (25). Neglected even for a short period, the garden deteriorates rapidly into a “miserable sight” or “deplorable” state which necessitates unsightly remedies such as visible, artificial supports for plants that have fallen over (127, 140). The antithesis of such idleness and insouciance, Jekyll, an “obsessive controller of her environment” (Festing 196), performed an astonishing range of manual, practical activities related to horticulture and closely inspected the many tasks assigned to her hired laborers.⁶ In one of her clearest pronouncements of her work ethic, Jekyll concludes *Home and Garden* with the following assertions:

Seeing something that one’s hand may do, one cannot resist doing or attempting it, even though time be already overcrowded, and strength much reduced, and sight steadily failing. . . . [T]o my own mind and conscience pure idleness seems to me to be akin to folly, or even worse, and that in some form or other I must obey the Divine command: ‘work while ye have the light. (367–68)

If Jekyll established herself as a professional and moral authority figure through her disciplined activity and equally tendentious prose, her prestige nonetheless derived in part from her lifelong access to real property and the liberties she enjoyed there. Born to a middle-class family who entertained relatively progressive notions of women’s deportment, Jekyll, from her childhood, enjoyed significant physical and intellectual freedom on her family’s estate, Bramley House in Surrey.⁷ She disliked formal schooling and, apart from one brief, unsuccessful stint at the Cheltenham Ladies’ College, she remained at home – with her family’s approval – and concentrated on occupations largely of her choosing (Festing 13–18, 22–25; Jekyll, *Home* 157–62). In addition to the artisanal and technical abilities she honed throughout her life, Jekyll, in young adulthood, formally trained as a painter.⁸ When her plans for a career in the visual arts were cut short by her failing vision and the physical strain that accompanied it, her father subsequently gave her free rein to work on the family estate in Wargrave that came into his possession in 1865 (Edwards 51). After his death ten years later, the remaining Jekylls returned to Surrey, the part of England they prized, and built Munstead House. Here Jekyll began to refine her horticultural skills as a practical gardener, specimen grower, and gardening columnist, a regular contributor to William Robinson’s journal *The Garden*.⁹ In 1883 she purchased Munstead Wood, the property adjoining Munstead House, where she created her famous private garden and where, along with the architect Edwin Lutyens, she designed a house entirely to her specifications. Together, the garden that served as the basis for her horticultural and written aesthetics and the house that reflected her Arts and Crafts philosophy all but merged human subjectivity and material context, apposing her autonomy with the land’s adaptability to her architectonics. Munstead Wood, the one

property that belonged solely to Gertrude Jekyll (and not her family), consummated her role in the familiar British narrative trajectory of the property owner whose discipline and freedom depend on the possession and management of land.

As in settler, imperialist, or nationalist narratives, in Jekyll's books thorough knowledge of the land and continual study of its variable biotic conditions bear witness to an ideal self equally capable of quiet control and sustained activity. Her aesthetics, too, consistently endorse restraint, correlating it with evidence of the artist's incisive perceptual, creative, and reasoning abilities. In a characteristic passage, she asserts, "The eye and brain can only take in and enjoy two or three things at a time in any one garden picture. The lessons taught by nature all point to this; indeed one thing at a time is best of all; but as all natural or wild gardening is a compromise, the nature-lessons must be taken mainly as the setting forth of principles" (*Home* 136).¹⁰ This rhetoric of self-governance celebrates the Victorian liberal subject of whom scholars like Mary Poovey and Lauren Goodlad have written: typically middle-class and financially privileged, the Victorian liberal subject who "freely," habitually engages in purposeful activity minimizes the need for externally imposed regulation or surveillance and garners cultural authority to instruct others, converting material labor into immaterial value.¹¹

Presumably, the garden book's spectacular enactment of dematerialization, whereby the embodied self rhetorically transforms into a cultural authority, would have presented attractive possibilities for the educated, middle-class woman of the nineteenth century. Numerous women authors prior to Jekyll chose the horticultural genre and, in their cases, the garden book might serve as a substitute for the property which they did not possess. In contrast with Jekyll's inheritance that enabled her to purchase land, most women's access to property tended to be limited by entrenched gender inequities. Even if primogeniture did not prove a factor, a woman heiress forfeited her material possessions as well as her status as an individual under the law when she married, her rights and identity subsumed in that of her husband until the Married Women's Property Act of 1882.¹² The law did not interdict women's writing, however, and many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women published on nature both out of economic necessity and as an attempt to acquire public, if not legal, audibility (Shteir 62, 68). Neither law nor society needed to proscribe nature writing for women, since it automatically entangled them in cultural contradictions. As Gates demonstrates, "Victorian women . . . found it difficult to speak in the name of Nature," let alone science (34), given their own reputation as closer to material, embodied nature than refined, reasoning culture; their alleged proximity to instinctive nature disqualified them as expert interpreters, capable of objective, dispassionate observation.¹³

Jekyll constitutes an exception to the Victorian generality positioning women as mere property rather than as self-possessed subjects, for, remaining single, she never forfeited her legal individuality. Significantly, though, her books suggest that a middle-class woman who adopts a public, instructional voice while laying claim to feminine respectability must undertake meticulous negotiation of the rhetorics of authority and nature-culture relations. As Shteir and Gates point out in their separate studies, Victorian women writing on the natural sciences more often worked as popularizers of accepted theories, rather than as model builders, their work typically espousing a moral as well as a scientific perspective and coming replete with disclaimers that positioned their work as amateur, not as professional, definitive accounts (Gates 36, 64–67; Shteir 61). The women who experienced the greatest success usually (though not inevitably) demonstrated remarkable dexterity in employing

paradox. To call attention to but two of the most significant and well-known paradoxes, women trivialized or bracketed the implications of their work while repeatedly exhibiting mastery of difficult concepts or practices; secondly, many embraced the clichéd view of the proper woman as more emotionally and spiritually refined than their male counterparts, a gendered perception that suggested that the most domestic of women actually possessed the expertise to make public pronouncements about the moral. This “discursive instability” provided at least a measure of opportunity for women to work actively for “social change” as they used the socially marginal to manoeuvre their way into the public domain (Langland, *Nobody’s Angels* 5–8). Most importantly for my purposes, such familiar tactics contributed to a third paradox, whereby women writers on the garden played on the ambiguities of their identity (private-public, amateur-professional) in order to announce their proximity to nature and to assert their distinctions from it. Maintaining this extremely tenuous position, they intervened in cultural debates about the relationship between land management and self-possession.

Women garden writers indicate the delicacy of their position through standard representational strategies, such as their espousal of “natural theology” which calls attention to a divine artificer, moral values, and the innate sentiment women purportedly experienced in nature (Gates 43). Jekyll’s theological slant aligns her with much earlier and more conservative writers like Jane Loudon, whose 1840s books promoted and justified gardening for middle-class ladies. Introducing *The Ladies’ Flower-Garden of Ornamental Annuals* (1842), Loudon speaks of the “love of flowers” as “a holy feeling, inseparable from our very nature.” She adds, “The love of flowers is calculated to improve our best feelings, and subdue our bad ones; and we can hardly contemplate the beauty and richness of a flower-garden without feeling our hearts dilate with gratitude to that Almighty Being who has made all these lovely blossoms, and given them to us for our use” (I). In a similar vein, Jekyll writes of the woods bordering her property as “the best pictures of all, for they are those of the great Artist, revealed by Him direct to the seeing eye and the receiving heart” (*Home* 43).¹⁴ This rhetoric is familiar enough to us from period writers of other genres, such as the conduct manual, and it has been scrutinized by Poovey, Langland, and Armstrong (among others), who astutely note that if power exercised by women “always had to look like something other than what it was,” that something else – influence, moral and emotional refinement, innate attraction to the physical world – in turn subtly reorganized the boundaries of culture and legitimacy (Poovey, *Proper Lady* 29; Langland, *Nobody’s* 8). For garden writers like Loudon and Jekyll, passionate confirmations of their attachment to the natural world provided justification for their access to and work with property. Their books provide long narratives on the endless labor and watchful management required to create and maintain a garden, and the properly managed, aesthetically pleasing garden advertises their ideal self-regulation. Resembling the domestic middle-class woman whose physical, economic, and managerial work guaranteed her morality (Langland, *Nobody’s* 49–52; Armstrong 75), and, even more closely, the writer of conduct manuals who turned such morally structured labor into representational authority and successful cultural products, the garden writer actively participates in the construction of subjectivity.

Symbolically and to some extent practically, the garden writer exceeds even the accomplishments of woman writers on etiquette or science, for she begins to construct herself as a liberal as much as a gendered subject. The garden writer gives evidence of her work on and improvement of real property, with all of its cognates of “self-determination, progress,

[and public] identity” (Pugh 3). Of course, too much evidence of physical exertion could endanger women’s status as easily as improve it, since the necessity of strenuous exertion could seem to identify women as laborers, rather than establishing their self-possession and equality with male managers of land (Armstrong 76; Langland, *Nobody’s* 41). Consequently, garden writers attempted to prevent such loss of caste by tempering the implications of property management with self-effacing period rhetoric of proper femininity. Loudon, in her early publications, feels compelled to justify the entire enterprise of female gardening, meticulously delimiting appropriate forms of physical labor for women and bracketing the implications of gardening by equating it with women’s capacity to beautify the home space:

Of all kinds of flowers, the ornamental garden annuals are perhaps the most generally interesting; and the easiness of their culture renders it peculiarly suitable for a feminine pursuit. The pruning and training of trees, and the culture of culinary vegetables, require too much strength and manual labour; but a lady, with the assistance of a common labourer to level and prepare the ground, may turn a barren waste into a flower-garden with her own hands. (I)

By the end of the century, the propriety of gardening and women’s tactile, physical work on the land no longer needs rigorous defense; still Jekyll carefully produces a self that is at once properly feminine in its modesty and self-possessed in its aesthetic authority, most visibly in her first book *Wood and Garden* (1899). It begins with the well-established convention in women’s writing of the disclaimer – “I lay no claim either to literary ability, or to botanical knowledge, or even to knowing the best practical methods of cultivation” (1) – but primarily develops as a confident and incisive aesthetic treatise that combines theory and practice. Her gardener, in clear distinction from Loudon’s, qualifies as an expert practitioner of the fine arts. Emphasizing the gardener’s close resemblance to the painter, Jekyll underscores her proficiency with color, texture, spatial organization, and design, with her skills in the “pictorial” arrangement of living things (*Wood* 2, 64; 162; *Home* 136, 145, 251). Her tendency to pronouncement suggests an authority that brooks no resistance, at least to some recent critics (Kincaid 81–82; Festing 196). What such readings miss is the ambivalence in her rhetoric. Even her claims to authority are occasionally half-effaced by modesty, as in the sentence that follows her initial disclaimer in *Wood and Garden*: “but I have lived among outdoor flowers for many years, and have not spared myself in the way of actual labor, and have come to be on closely intimate and friendly terms with a great many growing things, and have acquired certain instincts which, though not clearly defined, are of the nature of useful knowledge” (1). In *Wood and Garden* and increasingly in her later publications, this conduct-book rhetoric of work generated by affectionate feeling – work rendered worthwhile because of its capacity for moral elevation – functions paradoxically and strategically to legitimate her culturally authoritative rhetoric that actually revises the standards for what counts as useful knowledge. *Wood and Garden*, for instance, audaciously undercuts the prestige of the male scientist precisely by using the mixed rhetoric of self-effacement and self-promotion to elevate the hands-on (female) gardener: “We practical gardeners have no absolute knowledge of the constitution of the plant, still less of the chemistry of the soil,” Jekyll begins; “but,” she amends, “by the constant exercise of watchful care and helpful sympathy we acquire a certain degree of instinctive knowledge, which is as valuable in its way, and more applicable to individual local conditions, than the tabulated formulas of more orthodox science” (116).¹⁵ Starting from a claim of untutored simplicity, the gardener ends

by knowing her land (and, by extension, her embeddedness in culture and nature) more intimately than the formally educated scientist, a knowledge base that benefits her on several fronts: it enables her to work her land into an arrangement that meets her comforts and needs, thus raising the value of her property and demonstrating her commercial acumen.¹⁶ Of equal or greater significance to Jekyll is the fact that the gardener could “come to be on closely intimate and friendly terms with a great many growing things” (*Wood* 1), an intimacy that introduces a second, crucial type of ambivalence into her writing: authority tempered by the desire for intersubjective relationships with manifold nature.

Undoubtedly, the economic and social advantages that Jekyll accrued as a direct result of her knowledgeable manipulation of land eclipse the relational at times. Her self-illustrated books and thousands of articles, properly punctuated with token feminine morality and modesty, ultimately positioned her as an undisputed expert whose self-regulation as acted out on her property qualified her to discuss and organize other people’s land, including public gardens.¹⁷ By the time of her death in 1932, *The Times* identified her as one of the two most important horticulturalists in Britain, who, along with William Robinson, effected not only “the complete transformation of English horticultural method and design, but also that wide diffusion of knowledge and taste which has made us almost a nation of gardeners. Miss Jekyll was also a true artist with an exquisite sense of color” (“Gardens and Gertrude Jekyll” 11). Her later books and articles typically retain touches of the moralistic and sentimental approach to nature that characterizes her early work, but temper the deference to earthly authorities and period notions of women. Jekyll’s increasingly confident rhetoric denotes in part the substantial improvements in women’s legal status by the twentieth century, but the more authoritative rhetoric and Jekyll’s national status also derive from her enviable, life-long position as an artist whose primary canvas comprised her own property.

The examples I have given so far would seem to confirm the worst fears of ecocritics, who remark the long and damaging history of human-nature interactions: land has served as a site on which Westerners in particular act out their assumed superiority to nature, divvying it up into pieces in order to cultivate and aestheticize it. If traditionally this proprietor tended to be male and privileged, women also strove to position themselves as managers of nature, as distinct from nature, in order to escape stereotypes of femininity and to gain cultural authority in the Western world (Mies and Shiva 5–8; Alaimo 3–6). In their haste to disassociate themselves from the natural, women have at times left binarisms and hierarchies intact. In these instances, “the inferiority of the natural world is simply taken for granted” and one’s goal is to transcend it, a transcendence often signaled by intervention, domination, or control of nature (Plumwood 24). Such inequities may plague conduct predicated on self-consciously ethical or Christian principles as well, for, according to Carolyn Merchant, the Christian steward, that direct descendent of Adam and Eve, ostensibly advances a “care-taker ethic” but actually exercises domination through an anthropocentrism that brackets nature’s significance as contingent on “human use” and comfort: “Nature [under such energetic management] is not an actor, but is rendered docile” (25). Jekyll’s rhetoric appears at times to endorse such domination; *Wood and Garden* cautions against gardens that exceed the supervisory abilities of the gardener: “If the garden is larger than he can individually govern and plan and look after, then he is no longer its master but its slave” (176). Not only did Jekyll master her own land and glorify this activity as a form of enlightened, Christian behavior (*Home* 368), but she also undertook ecologically insensitive projects such as the collection of

rare, native plants in order to increase her botanical knowledge and to perform horticultural experiments in her garden and nursery. As Michael Tooley observes,

The collection of wild plants and their use in gardens had begun to alarm botanists and horticulturists to the extent that editorials in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* and *The Times* in 1885 were critical of this destructive activity. . . . Miss Jekyll must have been aware of these concerns and the solutions proposed in England and Switzerland but in the years up to 1885 both she and William Robinson were collecting plants from the wild in large numbers and assessing their value as garden plants. . . . [Her plant collecting spanned many geographical areas from the British Isles to] Switzerland, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as from islands in the Mediterranean – Rhodes, Malta, Sardinia and Capri. (114–15)

Such plunder to supply the Western gardener with exciting new specimens expressed a sense of class entitlement and imperialist arrogance that impoverished, irreparably altered, or obliterated native ecocultures (Kincaid 117–20). From an environmental perspective, Jekyll poses yet another threat when she writes of the aesthetics of her home garden, resolutely idealizing the garden's pleasures and excluding the physical history of the plants obtained by unethical means. In spite of the fact that Jekyll laments the loss of rural and natural countryside in her neighborhood – *Old West Surrey* of 1904 in particular gives vent to a lengthy jeremiad against industrial devastation and tawdry commercialism – her treatment of some lands and species mark them out for use rather than for protection.

And yet Jekyll need not be labelled a simple opportunist but may be interpreted more generously as a woman who inhabits the contradictions typical of privileged Westerners to the present, the contradictions of a privileged class that, having surpassed subsistence issues, expresses its powerful draw to the earth through actions that generally entail some type of interference with or at least disturbance of nature. Even a non-aggressive walk in a local, uncultivated area threatens small species of plants and animals, while preservation efforts such as the establishment of national parks and conservations typically involve the construction of paths, roads, and buildings on land ironically designated as wild (Mikulak np). The divisions between human and nature are complicated further by the fact of our physical and psychic reliance on land and diverse species that do not require us. For the woman whose livelihood comes from nature writing, this reliance compounds, her debts to nature encompassing the body itself and all its needs (Grosz 98) as well as her aesthetic that transforms the wild into culture.

An unabashed, late Victorian cultivator, Jekyll nonetheless engages in a productively tense relationship with nature, insofar as proximity and distance derive from the same sources: language, reason, and culture. We might even say, as ecocritic Susie O'Brien does of Jamaica Kincaid's garden book, that social structures at once "mediate our existence" in the physical world and prescribe "our alienation from it." "Gardening represents one way of articulating that alienation; writing represents another" (177). Consciously or not, nature writing, whether poetic, scientific, or horticultural, marks the impossibility of integration or full rapprochement between the human and the natural world. Language, governed by period-specific codes of intra-human communication, inevitably fails "to apprehend the 'real,' the physical, world" (O'Brien 179). On the other hand, language adequately fulfils the task of articulating our most ambivalent desires regarding the natural, desires to write ourselves into and out of nature. The garden book has functioned paradoxically as one site on which we

might compose a knowledgeable, ascetic self; it also recurrently gives voice to a human desire for an unmediated access to the forms of nature that always elude us. Language, one manifestation of our dislocation and displacement from the natural, simultaneously reveals connection between human and non-human as a process of striving driven by longing. Jekyll's garden books and their many heirs attest to the difficulty that neither self-conscious culture nor ecocriticism can resolve: that human endeavors to interact with or comprehend nature will inevitably confront the limits of this effort. Yet if the historical studies of nineteenth-century nature writing by figures such as Barbara Gates and Ann Shteir conjoined with the recent work of ecofeminist theorists have taught us anything, it is the urgency of surpassing nature-culture binaries. Such an endeavor means refusing (Cartesian) mind-body dualisms and the attribution of intentionality and activity to humans and mindlessness to nature (Plumwood 12, 154–60); but it also includes resistance to simplistic evaluations of what it means to be connected to nature. "We do not," Val Plumwood states, "have to assume that nature is a sphere of harmony and peace, with which we as humans will never be in conflict" (37). Rather, she proposes a model of relationship and process, whereby the interactions between humans and nonhumans both assume mutuality and allow for differences: even more, the model of relationship allows for moments of self-absorption, lapses in sympathy, fluctuations of feeling, and changing degrees of intimacy (Plumwood 154–55). In terms of this generous, flexible ecocritical agenda, Jekyll the gardener and horticultural writer in fact anticipates the inevitable contradictions and struggles we face today in terms of developing mutually beneficial relationships between human and nature.

Practically and rhetorically, Jekyll's aesthetics evince the paradox of the modern subject who benefits from a robust commercial and industrial economy, an economy fundamentally inimical to earth health, but who continues to experiment with and imagine respectful forms of exchange between human and nonhuman. Like many of the intelligentsia of the nineteenth century, Jekyll understood her lifelong immersion in the arts as an alternative to – not simply a replica of – the dominant commercial economy (Williams xviii). As Raymond Williams has shown in *Culture and Society*, culture emerged as a multiply defined concept and set of practices through which Romantics and Victorians addressed their concerns with the state of society or the environment. From the socialism of Cobbett early in the century through to the aesthetic theories of Coleridge and Arnold and to the syncretic work of Morris (whose Arts and Crafts movement attempted to fuse the material and the ideal, the everyday and the aesthetic), nineteenth-century thinkers turned to art and beauty as a way of intervening in social practices.¹⁸ This aesthetic turn at times has incited speculation about art as a compensatory retreat from the compounded problems of the industrial and social realms, for even the socialist theories of Morris and his work with material culture raise as many problems as they solve in terms of implementing improved relationships among people or between people and their environments. But the value of the aesthetic also derives precisely from its inherently difficult relationship with the "world" with its social and biotic diversity. For Jekyll, as for her artistic forbears such as Arnold and Morris, the creation of meaningful culture refers not only to art but also to one's relationship with others (Williams xviii, 125, 148). Jekyll's preoccupation with the aesthetics of the garden led her to an ongoing negotiation with place, and in her accounts of Surrey generally and of Munstead Wood specifically, the land and nature accrue qualities as complex as those of humans (*Home* 345–46). This complex figuring of the natural renders it an agent in its own right and suggests an aesthetic that attempts (at least intermittently) to orient itself to other forms of life that

the human is connected to but not consonant with, for the good garden and the good house in Jekyll's estimation testify to the architect's sympathy with the particulars of place (*Wood* 172, 175; *Home* 30–32). This delicate balance of connection and differentiation remains key to ecocriticism today, and now, as in Jekyll's time, successes vie with failures.¹⁹ The garden book as composed by Jekyll in no way resolves the environmental and ecological tensions her managerial and acquisitive conduct raise, but her books – replete with anecdotes, advice, careful observation of nature, expressions of wonderment – ultimately do not lend themselves to a single categorization or homogeneous project, but rather to a heterogeneous study of natural abundance and of the intimacies and estrangements that obtain among species.

One of the most important representations of nature as a force and actor differentiated from the human comes from Jekyll's repeated and emphatic assertion that the garden, living matter arranged by human artifice, differs significantly from uncultivated Nature – capital “N.” Jekyll, during her long career, never tired of impressing on her readers that the garden comprises “a work of fine art” produced by an educated and creative mind (*Wood* 171): “the artist-gardener finds that hardly the place of a single plant can be deputed to any other hand than his own; for though, when it is done, it looks quite simple and easy, he must paint his own picture himself – no one else can paint it for him” (*Wood* 210). As Gates opines, “[g]arden writing sets out to further reenvision this nature-as-garden linguistically,” for when “Jekyll recast the site of the garden into the symbolic structure of garden writing, she was performing a double translation” (189). The distance Jekyll consciously highlights between Nature and the garden on the one hand and the garden and the advice book on the other does not necessarily serve the master-slave binary she evokes elsewhere in *Wood and Garden* (176). More than an aestheticization of human power over nonhumans, aesthetic distance and dislocations paradoxically create an ethical space in which Nature's incommensurability with culture may become visible (O'Brien 179). If Jekyll appropriates living matter for aesthetic use in the garden, she still conceives of Nature as a force distinct from and resistant to human control. In her vision, Nature acts according to its own compulsions and agendas, which may or may not be intelligible to the human, but that possess an impressive, untameable physicality and that manifest Nature's independent status and even evolutionary purpose or mindfulness. *Wood and Garden* testifies to Nature's unpredictable destructions, such as the winter storm of December 1886 that “wrecked” the Scotch fir and turned her “great wild Junipers,” the “pride of [her] stretch of heathy waste just beyond the garden,” into a “scene of desolation” (28); her retrospective mourning readily converts into awe, though, as Jekyll notes Nature's quick, reparative resilience that wants no human intervention (29). Lest we think of Nature as a purely instinctive force, however, *Home and Garden* depicts it as mindful, attributing to it a kind of moral evolution whereby plants as well as humans show self-sacrificing tendencies, working for the good of a community.²⁰ Looking at a Darwinian drama of the struggle for survival, Jekyll initially muses that one Chestnut is a “crafty little tree,” intent on self-preservation, that has passed off a vigorous, suffocating honeysuckle vine to an already physically compromised Oak tree (86). Subsequently, she inquires whether or not an “ethical standard may prevail among vegetation” and she proceeds to imagine a “heroic” speech by the Oak: “Neighbour, throw out a little branch and send me the enemy. I am doomed already; a little more can only bring the end somewhat sooner” (87). Such prosopopoeia and anthropomorphism, rather than absorbing nature into culture, actually work to defamiliarize Nature by undermining any pretensions culture has to superiority over nonhumans: when the natural acquires ethical, psychological, and biotic complexity equal

to that of the human, Nature no longer functions as a fully knowable, manageable inferior.²¹ Jekyll evinces a fascination and familiarity with Nature, but her insights come only through the long honing of her perceptual skills. Moreover, her garden books enact the limitations of epistemological or empirical approaches to the nonhuman, as Jekyll turns from authoritative rhetoric to engage in guesswork and imaginative relational thinking.²²

In Jekyll's careful attendance on the natural, possibilities for affirmative relationships that span various life forms emerge, beginning with her assumption that the particulars of the natural world are worth knowing, worth admiring, worth applying to human conduct and aesthetics. Recollecting her childhood, Jekyll credits Nature's very otherness and diversity with the awakening of the passions, which in turn prompts her to acquire knowledge, to become a student of Nature's intentional, unsurpassed compositions. Let me illustrate this claim with a fairly lengthy example from *Wood and Garden*:

Near my home is a little wild valley, whose planting, wholly done by Nature, I have all my life regarded with the most reverent admiration. . . . Throughout the walk, pacing slowly but steadily for nearly an hour, only [a] few kinds of trees have been seen, Juniper, Holly, Thorn, Scotch Fir, and Birch . . . , and yet there has not been once the least feeling of monotony, nor, returning downward by the same path could one wish anything to be altered or suppressed or differently grouped. And I have always had the same feeling about any quite wild stretch of forest land. Such a bit of wild forest as this small valley and the hilly land beyond are precious lessons in the best way of tree and shrub planting. No artificial planting can ever equal that of Nature, but one may learn from it the great lesson of the importance of moderation and reserve, of simplicity of intention, and directness of purpose, and the inestimable value of the quality called 'breadth' in painting. For planting ground is painting a landscape with living things; and as I hold that good gardening takes rank within the bounds of the fine arts, so I hold that to plant well needs an artist of no mean capacity. (154, 156–57)

As this passage unequivocally demonstrates, Nature intrinsically possesses order and beauty; the wild wood neither requires nor passively exposes itself to human intervention. Rather its continuous labor of creating announces Nature as tantamount to a senior artist whose discipline and skill exist prior to and apart from human cultivation; indeed this artist Nature might contribute to the emotional and intellectual development of the human artist. Significantly, though, the Nature-human dynamic as conceived by Jekyll stresses continuity of purpose and even resemblance in style, but refuses what she elsewhere terms "slavish imitation" (*Home* 136). Nature might not only inform but even transform one's vision, sustained contemplation of it alerting the observer to subtleties of color, form, and arrangement invisible to the self-absorbed or distracted eye. Yet the genius of Nature's intentional compositions precludes cultural attempts at reproduction, even as the aesthetic of the garden book and the fine art of planting well distinguishes human from natural mindfulness. Simple replication – were it even possible – signals the very antithesis of creativity, a mechanistic arrangement indicative of a lack of perceptual and intellectual acuity.²³ By contrast, creation denotes a mental and practical process of placing the self in the world and of envisioning new possibilities for beauty. The trained eye should detect the manifold continuities of the world as well as the smallest of differences: for instance, the curious structure and unique coloring of a single leaf of an *Alchemilla alpina* plant, to which *Home and Garden* devotes a two-page, minute description (152–53). Vision and description, in such instances, do not function primarily as classificatory, regulatory, or authoritative

acts, but as openings to the world that profoundly destabilize conventional hierarchies and epistemological systems. For Jekyll, the smallest leaf as much as an entire tract of wild wood embodies the complexity of the world and compels attention, generates writing, and activates intersubjective connections. Of equal importance, her proliferating observations attest to the multifariousness of the biotic world that eludes human comprehension and, precisely because of its inexhaustible variety, precedes and informs her artistry, the artistry of gardening and writing, both of which derive from multiplied moments of observation and underscore the temporal, unfinished activity of creation.²⁴

Jekyll's clear articulations of inevitable divides between culture and nature and of the divergences among nonhuman entities permit a complex vision of what relationship entails: affinity that resists assimilation, inquiry that puts epistemes into question, coexistence that includes conflict. At its best, the garden book heuristically disrupts fantasies of human hegemony over the environment, underscoring the vitality of the earth that makes human, cultural life possible in the first place (Grosz 104), and refuses as well uncomplicated promotions of a return to edenic unity. Jekyll's land frequently proves intractable to her wishes and designs, and even flourishing plantings surprise her with their aesthetic co-productions that she failed to anticipate.²⁵ Attentive to gardening successes and failures, Jekyll composes texts which freely oscillate between frustration and wonder as they document the labor-intensive act of creating culture out of nature that is never passive, never inert. Such writing anticipates twentieth- and twenty-first-century eco-literary concerns, for, as O'Brien proposes, literature shows its openness to the world not by moving laterally "closer to nature but [peripatetically] back through culture in order to examine the tensions and contradictions that structure our engagement with the physical world" (181). Jekyll's garden books initiate such ecocritical conversations about natural-cultural tensions. They quite self-consciously note human embeddedness in nature; yet Jekyll never assumes that language or any other human construct sums up or encompasses the physical world (see Carroll xvii; Beer 67). Nature informs but exceeds the artifice of her gardens and her books. Less self-consciously but equally instructively (from our contemporary vantage point), Jekyll illustrates that delight in the manifold differences in the world does not exempt one from exploitive activity. Her collection of wild plants and her unrelenting imposition of order onto her garden unequivocally turn select aspects of nature into economic and cultural resources and herself into a disciplined authority on the beautification of land. In fact, Jekyll at times takes for granted systemic cultural disruptions of the natural. The human analogue to nature's vitalism, culture must uproot, transplant, rearrange, and hybridize in order to produce its own innovations and pleasurable living space. The urgent question, then, raised by Jekyll's cultural activity is whether or not it predominantly aestheticizes power relations and an anthropocentric view of the world.

At least as constructed in her writing, Jekyll's dual allegiances to art and nature refuse to cohere into a singular agenda or unambiguous hierarchy. Moreover, from our contemporary perspective, Jekyll serves as a reminder that humanity's concerted efforts to respond to or connect with nature are always shot through with conceptual and practical difficulties: appreciation of nature and sympathetic feelings for plants and place lead Jekyll to a sensate form of culture that engages with and disturbs the earth. Whether planting a garden that pays homage to Nature or building Munstead Wood from local materials that attempt to harmonize with the landscape, Jekyll inhabits the paradox of human culture that can neither escape its indebtedness to nor merge with the nonhuman material realm. Jekyll's instructive

garden books, caught in and illustrative of paradox, say more than they consciously know; and, ideally, contemporary gardeners reading her work will heed more than her aesthetic advice, benefiting from the inherent contradictions that call attention to the necessarily uneasy position of culture in nature.²⁶

NOTES

This article is dedicated to the graduate students in my summer courses of 2006; their thoughtful and enthusiastic engagement with Victorian literature made work a pleasure. I also want to offer heartfelt thanks to Kristen Guest and Susie O'Brien who provided excellent advice for and critiques of drafts of this article.

1. Shteir explores the eighteenth-century notion that the study of nature contributed to women's moral and physical health (2, 35).
2. Recent authors who analyze the long-standing Western tendency to equate women with the nature include the following: Gates (12–29); Roach (27–50; 75–101); Merchant (117–43); Plumwood (19–40); and Alaimo (2–13).
3. In their respective books, Shteir, Gates, and Alaimo present richly historical accounts of the diverse and sometimes conflicted approaches nineteenth-century women adopted towards nature.
4. See in particular the second and third chapters of *The Descent of Man*.
5. Lustig points out that the middle classes who could afford real property but not aristocratic estates advertised their rising status by recreating the parks and gardens of the aristocracy in miniature form (156).
6. Francis, a nephew of Jekyll, noted that Albert Zumbach retained the post of Head Gardener, since he “succeeded in giving her, for over thirty years, what she appreciated as the rarest of all services – intelligent obedience untainted by ideas at variance with her own” (qtd. in Wood 112).
7. Freyberg characterizes Jekyll's parents – Edward and Julia – as “lively” and “cultured” individuals who granted “extraordinary” freedoms to their daughters and sons (42).
8. Edwards (44–56) and Festing (28–84) provide biographical accounts of Jekyll's development as an artist.
9. Jekyll's activities at Munstead House are recounted by Freyberg (32–33), Tooley (119), and Festing (90–92).
10. Related exhortations to aesthetic restraint occur throughout *Home and Garden*. See, for examples, pages 191, 213, 251, and 345.
11. In Poovey's estimation, liberal subjectivity by definition involves coercive paradoxes and stratifications (*Making* 109). Goodlad, by contrast, suggests that the rhetoric of liberal self-governance also operated beneficially, often privileging “the personal and moral over the bureaucratic and legal” and fostering philanthropic activities (34, 38–45).
12. Holcombe's *Wives and Property* (18–47) and Poovey's *Uneven Developments* (70–79) discuss the legal restrictions placed on married women in the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Langland's article “Enclosure Acts” and Chase and Levenson's *Spectacle of Intimacy* (163–66) both explore the gendering of space and the typical enclosure of the middle-class woman.
13. More particularly, Gates states: “If Victorian women often found it difficult to speak in the name of Nature, they found it even more difficult to speak in the name of Science – ‘high’ science, that is, the science of the laboratory or museum or scientific journal. As scientific discoveries continued to unfold in the nineteenth century, science was increasingly masculinized and professionalized – to such an extent that by the end of the century men of science may seem to have appropriated the sole right to gaze on nature” (34).

14. I am not suggesting that Jekyll (or Loudon, for that matter) was insincere in her articulation of a natural theology; Festing, in fact, narrates an early “mystical experience” which affected Jekyll for life (11). My concern is to highlight the implications of moral and spiritual rhetoric when it becomes a recognizable strategy in women’s writing.
15. Women writers of etiquette or conduct manuals also combined self-effacement and self-promotion to strategic ends, as Chase and Levenson demonstrate in their discussion of Sarah Stickney Ellis (77).
16. Though Jekyll typically emphasizes her knowledge of place, soil, and plants, she also relishes physical knowledge of her body (*Wood and Garden* 189–90).
17. Jekyll published extensively in *The Guardian*, *The Garden*, and *Gardening Illustrated*.
18. Lustig argues that many horticultural writers promoted socially progressive agendas (161). Jekyll fits this category insofar as she too perceived “gardening as the path to a better world,” a world which boasted a more sensitive and educated population (Lustig 161); however, she tended to perceive her role in social improvement as that of a superior educator (Festing 47, 57; Gates 195).
19. This difficult negotiation of connection with and differentiation from nature concerns many ecocritics. Merchant, for example, warns against edenic “recovery” narratives that envision a unity between nature and culture (36–37). O’Brien similarly emphasizes that nature and culture never become “commensurate” (179). See also Plumwood (134–136) and Alaimo (43).
20. According to Gates, the Darwinian popularizer Arabella Buckley also assigns altruistic characteristics to nature (60).
21. Jekyll’s garden books repeatedly marvel at nature’s intricate designs and interactions and she promotes human friendships with plants and locations (*Wood* 116; *Home* 65, 68, 114).
22. Incited by what Jekyll herself terms “the moral spur that urges me against complete idleness” (*Home* 152), she directs her attention to the external world, studying everything from the smallest detail to the general patterns of the natural world. See *Wood and Garden*, in which she allots six full pages (accompanied by three illustrations) to itemizing the many nuanced beauties of the juniper (26–31), a native evergreen which, she worries, is under-appreciated because people do not pay sufficient attention to the species that thrive unaided in their locale; consequently, people generally lack the criteria by which to establish the merit of a plant and understand its beauty (26).
23. Christopher Dresser, one of Jekyll’s instructors at the South Kensington School of Art where she trained as a painter, stressed that “excessive naturalism” constituted “Bad Art” (qtd. in Edwards 46).
24. As Gillian Beer writes of *Origin of the Species*, Darwin signals the “labyrinth of connection” among biotic forms through “interpretation, counter-interpretation, expansion, fracture, and renewals of meaning. His is not a sealed or neutralised text. . . . He sought to move out beyond the false security of authority or even the assumption that full knowledge may be reached” (49). If less experimental than Darwin, Jekyll also predicates her naturalist descriptions on the premise that the “world is *always capable of further description*” (Beer 49; original emphasis). See also Jekyll’s very lively writing about her cats, which gives ample evidence of her exuberant relationship with other species. Chapter 21 of *Home and Garden* is devoted to “The Home Pussies.”
25. See Pollan’s recent book *The Botany of Desire*, which traces the ways in which plants cultivate us, at least as much as we cultivate them.
26. Richard Bisgrove’s popular book on *The Gardens of Gertrude Jekyll* (1992, rpt 2000) correlates renewed interest in Jekyll’s books and gardening philosophies with contemporary “environmentalism, anti-modernism, a cry for humanity and spirituality in daily life as a release from our materialistic age” (19). By contrast with this sanitized vision of gardening, Jamaica Kincaid’s 1999 book explores the many tensions that inform the act of gardening. See also O’Brien’s article on Kincaid.

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