Representations of the Garden in Medieval Literature

The garden occupies an important place in much of medieval literature, no matter the genre. Of course, we do need to keep in mind what is meant by a medieval garden, since gardens could have several divisions – the herb garden, the pleasure garden, or a small orchard, for example. The medieval garden, as you have no doubt learned by now, was not unlike the inner sanctum of a church in that it was a place of repose, removed from the world in a sense. In medieval literature, i.e. literature produced in the climate of western Latin Christianity [500-1500 A.D.], the garden has this same sense of being a separate area. I cannot underscore enough how important it is to keep this notion of "a separate space" in mind.

Unlike the inner sanctum of a church, however, the garden was often the site of clandestine encounters between the sexes, ones that were not always devoid of corporal pleasure. Indeed, the garden is frequently referred to as a locus amenus, a place of pleasure; hence the idea of a pleasure garden. To be sure, the various aromas from flowers or herbs provided a similar sense of "pleasure garden;" these pleasing scents may have, in turn, encouraged the aforementioned liaisons. If the people needed no encouragement, then the aromas may have simply improved the quality of the meeting, bringing together the senses of smell and touch. In short, it would have been the location par excellence for a romantic encounter.

Although the garden could function as a rendez-vous point for lovers, it also fulfilled the role of general meeting place. Since it was a separate space, people could find and enter it somewhat freely. Then again, it may be a location that parallels an inn – a place where people stop to rest and gather their wits.

Perhaps more evident than any other functional aspect, the garden was clearly a repository for things natural (flowers, trees, shrubs, herbs), and as such served to keep a person focused on the natural world. This world was given to man by God for his use. After all, wasn’t Eden a garden? It was intended to be a garden of pleasure, but ended up functioning as a garden of sorrow. God then expelled man from the garden, shut the gate, and placed a cherubim with a fiery sword at the front door. The garden of heavenly pleasure, then, was born. It was something to which man should aspire; the idea was that the Christian would attain the Garden of Eden upon death, i.e. the heavenly garden.

It is clear, then, that people associated many things with the medieval garden. Medieval literature, as a product of society, reflects those perceptions that I have already mentioned, and often surprises the modern reader with other connotations. However, the reader needs to be in touch with the associations with gardens that people in the Middle Ages made. This need is not easily fulfilled in today’s world where television does much of the thinking for the public, arguably stifling the role of the imagination. The medieval person who heard stories told in which a garden figured prominently would have
immediately constructed any number of associations with that garden. When an audience heard the word "garden," there was a conscious subtext already in place – one in which love most likely figured (or, of course, one of the other areas mentioned earlier). This rhetorical device is, of course, allegory – a concrete representation of an abstract idea. The garden might represent love, man’s relationship to God, or even a place where illicit sexual encounters take place.

For our first foray into the world of the garden in medieval literature, I would like to focus on a very well-known garden scene. You will find out why later. I will provide you with a synopsis of the story, then ask you to identify the role of the garden based on the types I have given you. Yes, this is an interactive presentation! Studies have shown that audiences tend to lose interest in speakers after twenty minutes; this is my way of keeping your attention focused!

The story is this: there is a man who is struggling with the place of faith in his life. He is most troubled. His study of the Bible has not led him to any conclusion. He is so bothered by his search for understanding that he needs to get away:

Attached to our lodging there was a little garden; we had the use of it, as of the whole house, for our host, the owner of the house, did not live in it. The tumult within my breast hurried me out into it, where no one would stop the raging combat that I had entered into against myself, until it would come to such an end as you knew of, but as I knew not. […] I rushed, then, into the garden.

So, he is now in the garden, which, he tells us, is not far from the house. In speaking of his failure to enter into a covenant with God, he says, "we need not go even so far as I had gone from the house to the place where we were sitting." And what exactly did he do in this garden?

I made many bodily movements, such as men sometimes will to make but cannot, whether because they lack certain members, or because those members are bound with chains, weakened by illness, or hindered in one way or another. If I tore my hair, and beat my forehead, if I locked my fingers together and clasped my knees, I did so because I willed it.

He spends much time submerged in thought on the role of man’s will, and even becomes ill over it. He does not want to return to his former life. It is while he is stuck in this pit of misery and despair that something most fortunate happens to him. A great storm arises and, in turn, brings forth tears from this man’s eyes, as his emotions are clearly affected by this great act of nature. He had been sitting with a friend, discussing his thoughts, but the outpour of emotion causes him to rise and move to a different part of the garden: "I flung myself down, how I do not know, under a certain fig tree [...]" He is so upset by his former life that he cries out to the Lord, imploring Him to forget any past iniquities. He begs for an end to what he calls his uncleanness. Suddenly, he hears the voice of a child from a nearby house; the voice was chanting and repeating over and over, "Take up and read. Take up and read." The man began to think what kind of game the child could be playing that would require such a task, but nothing came to mind. He then undergoes a change. "I checked the flow of my tears and got up, for I interpreted this solely as a command given to me by God to open the book [the Bible] and read the first chapter I should come upon." He hurries back to his friend, opens the Bible, and reads the first thing that he sees; and he reads Romans 13:13-14:
Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

He then states, "No further wished I to read, nor was there need to do so. Instantly, in truth, at the end of this sentence, as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away."

As promised, I come to you now with a question: what role does the garden play in this literary selection? [place of spiritual conversion – theme of rebirth; place where he connects with God; separate location where one can think in tranquility.] Another question: can you think of why a fig tree might be important? See Mark 11:12. What can the presence of a fig tree tell us? Can anyone identify this work? [The famous tole lege scene from Augustine’s Confessions, Book Eight, ca. 390 A.D.]

For our second story, we meet a young man who is a knight. We are told that he is very handsome, but that, sadly, nature did not endow him with the desire for love. He goes off to Flanders to engage in various combats, and eventually returns to his homeland to see his family. One day he and a party of men set off for the forest to go hunting, as this act brought him great pleasure. While in pursuit of a large stag, this young man sees a hind (a female stag) that is quite remarkable: it is completely white, but moreover it has antlers like a stag (it is with its fawn). Our young man shoots an arrow at the hind, hitting it in the forehead and dropping it to the ground; however, the arrow bounces back and wounds him in the thigh. In his pain, he falls to the ground beside the hind. The latter, grievously wounded, speaks to him, saying:

Alas! I am mortally wounded. Vassal, you have wounded me, let this be your fate. May you never find a cure, nor may any herb, root, doctor or potion ever heal the wound you have in your thigh until you are cured by a woman who will suffer for your love more pain and anguish than any other woman has known, and you will suffer likewise for her, so much so that all those who are in love, who have known love or are yet to experience it, will marvel at it. Be gone from here and leave me in peace.

The young man arises, tends to his wound, and begins to make his way back to the castle. Along the way he notices a harbor with an intriguing ship; he boards the ship, but when he moves to leave it, discovers that he is already on the high sea. His wound has made him so exhausted that he lies down in a magnificent bed and falls asleep, only to wake up in a strange city that was ruled by a very old man whose wife "was a lady of high birth." In fact, she was absolutely stunning – noble, beautiful, and wise. Her husband was afraid of being cuckolded, and so he always made sure that she was guarded no matter where she was. The narrator tells us where he liked to keep her:

In a garden at the foot of the keep was an enclosure, with a thick, high wall made of green marble. There was only a single point of entry, guarded day and night. The sea enclosed it on the other side, so it was impossible to get in or out, except by boat, should the need arise in the castle. As a secure place for his wife, the lord had constructed within the enclosure a chamber of incomparable beauty, at the entrance of which stood a chapel. The walls of the chamber were covered in paintings in
which Venus, the goddess of love, was skillfully depicted together with the nature and obligations of love; how it should be observed with loyalty and good service. [...] In this room the lady was imprisoned. [...] No one, man or woman, could have gained access to this spot, or escaped from this walled enclosure.

On the same day as our young man arrived there, the narrator tells us that the lady made her way into this place. She had a lady-in-waiting with whom she spent much time strolling around the garden. They looked out onto the water and saw the ship approaching. They ran to the ship and the lady boarded the vessel. She found no one except the knight, who was so pale that she believed him to be dead, which was a shame since she found him quite handsome. When she touches his chest, however, she feels his heart; he awakens and tells her what happened to him while hunting, and asks her for guidance. She tells him that the city and the surrounding country belong to her husband, but that he is a jealous man. She also tells him how she is imprisoned in the enclosure, and that there is one faithful guard at the entrance. She offers him to stay in the enclosure, as she will tend to his wound. Curiously, the knight no longer feels the pain, but in his chest is bothered by another – that of love, a feeling shared by the noble lady. The narrator informs us that love is an invisible wound within the body, and, since it has its source in nature, it is a long-lasting ill. For many it is the butt of jokes, as for those ignoble courtiers who philander around the world and then boast of their deeds. That is not love, but rather foolishness, wickedness and debauchery. A loyal partner, once discovered, should be served, loved and obeyed.

They discover their mutual love, and soon consummate their relationship. "They lay together and talked, kissing and embracing. May the final act, which others are accustomed to enjoy, give them pleasure." [Later, the knight is discovered and must leave. The lady, one day, discovers that her locked door is not bolted, and she leaves her land in search of her lover. She eventually finds him and they go off together.]

Again I return to you. What can you tell me about this garden? How is it different from the garden in Augustine’s *Confessions*? How is it similar? Does anyone know this story? The garden houses an adulterous relationship, but it does not seem to be frowned upon by the narrator. Why? ["Le lai de Guigemar," one of the lays by Marie de France, ca. 1170]

Our third tale introduces us to a king who has a beautiful wife. However, he is told that she is engaging in liaisons with his nephew, a bold, young knight who is very handsome. The king, together with his informant – a dwarf, decides to spy on his nephew. The dwarf has told him that the lady and the young knight plan to meet by a brook in an orchard, which is part of a larger garden on the king’s grounds. The king and the dwarf arrive just after dark and climb into an olive tree that stands beside the running brook. We are told that it has low foliage, but that it is ample and spreading.

When night was drawing on, the young knight set out for the orchard. He always placed notes in the stream and let them float downstream to the queen, who would then know that her lover was nearby. After having released his messages, he crossed the brook. While standing in a pre-determined place, he noticed the shadow cast in moonlight by the great olive tree and was able to discern two shadows of men. He realized that a trap had been set for him. He prays to God to watch over their meeting, that the queen would somehow recognize the trap that had been set for them. The narrator then tells us that "his lady the Queen and their friend [the queen’s servant] went out unaccompanied to their garden of sorrows, where they always used to go to commiserate with each other when there was no danger in
their doing so [...] the servant located the messages in the brook, and so the queen "stole through the flowers and grass toward the tree by the brook." Upon arriving, the knight remained where he was standing, which was unusual since he usually moved toward her when she arrived for these meetings. As she approached him, though, she caught sight of the shadows of these other men. She recognized at once that it was a trap, but she also recognized the cause of her lover’s odd behavior in not approaching her. Keeping her distance, she begins a conversation with him in which she states that a secret parley is not becoming of such a knight; it would be better to guard his reputation toward his uncle rather than risk being discovered. Indeed, she says, she is most afraid that they will be discovered and she in a very unfavorable light.

I would rather lose a finger than that anyone should learn I had met you here. People have spread such tales about us; they would all take their oaths on it that we are embroiled in an illicit love-affair! [...] But God Himself knows how my feelings stand towards you. And I will go a little farther. May God be my witness when I say it – may I never be rid of my sins by any other test than the measure of my affection for you! For I declare before God that I never conceived a liking for any man but him who had my maidenhead, and that all others are barred from my heart [...].

Of course, we as readers know that she actually lost her virginity to the young knight before having intercourse with her husband, the king. But, their discussion continues to take the guise of devotion to the king, thereby throwing the king off the track. Their discourse was so well-disguised that the king, "sitting in the tree [...] was moved to sadness by it, and was deeply distressed for having suspected his wife and nephew of infamy."

What role does this garden play? Is it similar to or different from the previous gardens we encountered? Does anything else strike you as being significant here? Does anyone recognize this work? [Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan. ca. 1200]

The fourth work is one that is deeply allegorical in nature, as you will notice from the language used in my citations. As far as gardens are concerned, the entire story takes place in a garden. I will use several selections from the story as a means of giving you a sense for the piece, for it is very long.

The narrator, a twenty-year old man, tells us about a dream that he had one night. This dream deals with love, as embodied in one particular flower, a Rose, and it takes place during the month of May. He sets out one morning and comes to a river in which he washes his face. He looks up, only to notice "a large and roomy garden, entirely enclosed by a high crenelated wall, sculptured outside and laid out with many fine inscriptions." He goes on to describe the images and painting on the wall of the garden.

In the middle I saw Hatred, who certainly seemed to be the one who incites anger and strife. In appearance the image was choleric, quarrelsome, and full of malice; it was not pleasing, but looked like a woman crazy with rage. Her face was sullen and wrinkled, with a pug nose; she was hideous and covered with filth and repulsively wrapped up in a towel. Beside her, to the left, was another image of the same size. I read her name, Felony, beneath her head. I looked back to the right and saw another image named Villany, who was of the same nature and workmanship as the other two. [...] He who could produce an image of
such a truly contemptible creature knew how to paint and portray; she seemed full of all sorts of defamation, a woman who knew little of how to honor what she could." He goes on to tell us of the other paintings: Covetousness, Avarice, Envy, Sorrow, Old Age, a hypocrite called Pope Holiness, and Poverty.

Departing from his description of the paintings, he tells us more about the garden itself:

The wall itself was high and formed a perfect square; it took the place of a hedge in enclosing and shutting off a garden where no shepherd had ever entered. This garden stood in a very beautiful place, and I would have been very grateful to anyone who had been willing to lead me inside, either by ladder or over steps; for, to my belief, no man ever saw such joy or diversion as there was in that garden. […] No place was ever so rich with trees or songbirds […]

However, the young man cannot figure out how to enter the garden – there is no opening, path, or gate. He states, "at last I remembered that it had never in any way happened that such a beautiful garden had no door or ladder or opening of some sort." He walks around the entire garden and eventually finds a little door that is very narrow and tight, but is unable to open it. He decides to knock. "Finally a very sweet and lovely girl opened the wicket […]." He is awed by her beauty, but manages to ask her name. Her reply:

I am called Idleness […] by people who know me. I am a rich and powerful lady, and I have a very good time, for I have no other purpose than to enjoy myself and make myself comfortable. […] I am the intimate acquaintance of Diversion, the elegant charmer who owns this garden and who had the trees imported from Saracen land and planted throughout the garden. When the trees were grown, Diversion had the wall, that you have seen, built all around them, and on the outside he arranged to have portrayed the images that are painted there. They are neither elegant nor delightful, but, as you saw just now, sad and mournful. Many times Diversion and those who follow him, and who live in joy and comfort, come to this place to have a good time in the cool shade. […] There, with his followers, he enjoys and comforts himself, for he could find no better place or spot to indulge in pleasure.

The young man begs to be let in, to join Diversion and his company. Upon entering he says, "Believe me, I thought that I was truly in the earthly paradise." He eventually meets other people in the garden, companions of Diversion: Joy and Courtesy. There was also the God of Love and a young man named Sweet Looks. The God of Love had a bow, and one of his arrows was named Beauty; the name of the one that wounds the most, however, is Simplicity; another was called Openness, another Company, and the fifth was called Fair Seeming. There were five other arrows named Pride, Villainy, Shame, Despair, and New Thought.

There was also a woman present in the garden, one named like the arrow, Beauty. She was accompanied by another great lady called Wealth. There were many other allegorical characters in the garden, and the young man takes the time to name each one and discuss the nature of each. He goes on, though, to tell us more about the garden:
The garden was a completely straight, regular square, as long as it was wide. Except for some trees which would have been too ugly, there was no tree which might bear fruit of which there were not one or two, or perhaps more, in the garden. There were apple trees, I well remember, that bore pomegranates, an excellent food for the sick. There was an abundance of nut trees that in their season bore such fruit as nutmegs, which are neither bitter nor insipid. There were almond trees, and many fig and date trees were planted in the garden. He who needed to could find many a good spice there, cloves, licorice, fresh grains of paradise, anise, cinnamon, and many a delightful spice good to eat after meals. There were the domestic garden fruit trees, bearing quinces, peaches, nuts, chestnuts, apples and pears, medlars, white and black plums, fresh red cherries, […] and hazelnuts. In addition, the whole garden was thronged with large laurels and tall pines, with olive trees and cypresses […]. These trees were spaced out as they should be; one was placed at a distance of more than five or six fathoms from another. The branches were long and high and, to keep the place from heat, were so thick above that the sun could not shine on the earth or harm the tender grass for even one hour.

These are the kinds of detailed descriptions that this work is known for. There are many more concerning fountains, animals, grass, flowers, and so on.

However, the other piece that I would like you to take away from this story is the focus on the Rose, as I know that part of your work at this institute has been to focus on specific plants. Our narrator looks into a fountain and sees crystals, which function as a mirror. While looking into this "mirror," he notices numerous rosebushes in the garden, some with fully-grown roses, and some with buds that were approaching their season and were ready to open. He states, "among these buds I singled out one that was so very beautiful that […] I thought that none of the others was worth anything beside it." As he admires the bud, the God of Love shoots him with the various aforementioned arrows, and instills in him love for this rose bud. The God of Love then instructs him on how to love this rose bud. Soon, though, he is approached by Reason, a woman who lives in a castle named Jealousy. Reason tries to dissuade him from pursuing the Rose. Friend, another person the garden, encourages him to keep trying to seek out the Rose. Various traps and such are purposefully laid by characters in the garden, meant to keep him from attaining the Rose. The character of Nature then tells our young man that it is God’s intention that he find the Rose. The character of Venus ends up throwing a flaming brand into the courtyard of the Castle of Jealousy, forcing everyone out, and opening the way for the young man to reach the rose. Just listen to the metaphor for intercourse:

I set out like a good pilgrim, impatient, fervent, and wholehearted, like a pure lover, on the voyage toward the aperture, to goal of my pilgrimage. And I carried with me, by great effort, the sack and the staff so stiff and strong that it didn’t need to be shod with iron for traveling and wandering. The sack was well-made, of a supple skin without seam. You should know that it was not empty: Nature, who gave it to me, had cleverly forged two hammers with great care at the same time that she first designed it. […] And I believe that she made them because she planned that I would shoe my horses when I went wandering, as indeed I shall do if I may have the possibility, for, thank God, I know how to
forge. I tell you truly that I count my two hammers and my sack dearer than my harp.

The remaining lines are full of similar metaphors. Suffice it to say that he conquers the Rose in the end. All this was done in the garden. Once he attains the Rose, the dream vanishes. It should be noted that the Rose has an ambivalent nature in this story. On the one hand, it is clearly associated with carnality (the plucking of the rose), but on the other hand it is associated with religious symbols that I have not had the time to mention in this presentation: it appears in the head of the bishop’s crozier, the lady of the sanctuary wears a rose-chaplet; the Rose herself is present behind a tree, which is often linked with the tree of Jesse (the source/root of Jesus – *radix Iesse*). There is a wealth of literature on this theme, should you feel compelled to research it.

This work is clearly different from those we encountered earlier. Would anyone like to comment on just how it differs from them? Also, if it is similar, how so? Does anyone know the work? I have probably given you far too many hints, if you have ever read it before! [*Romance of the Rose*, ca. 1230-1275]

Our fifth work develops the imagery of the rose. Pay specific attention to what kind of garden we are discussing here. Again, we have a narrator. Let us listen to his description.

Above, on high, there is a light that makes apparent the Creator to the creature whose only peace lies in his seeing Him. The shape which that light takes as it expands is circular, and its circumference would be too great a girdle for the sun. [...] And as a hill is mirrored in waters at its base [of a mountain], as if to see itself – when rich with grass and flowers – graced, so in a thousand tiers that towered above the light, encircling it, I saw, mirrored, all of us who have won return above. And if the lowest rank ingathers such vast light, then what must be the measure of this Rose where it has reached its highest leaves! Within that breadth and height I did not find my vision gone astray, for it took in that joy in all its quality and kind. [...] Into the yellow of the eternal Rose that slopes and stretches and diffuses fragrance of praise unto the Sun of endless spring, now this woman [Beatrice!] drew me as one who, though he would speak out, is silent. And she said: "See how great is this council of white robes!" [...] Now Canto 31] So, in the shape of that white Rose, the holy legion was shown to me – the host that Christ, with His own blood, had taken as His bride. When they [the legion] climbed down into that flowering Rose, from rank to rank, they shared that peace and ardor which they had gained, with wings that fanned their sides. [...] Now Canto 32] Though he had been absorbed in his delight, that contemplator [Bernard of Clairvaux] freely undertook the task of teaching; and his holy words began: "The wound that Mary closed and then anointed was the wound that Eve – so lovely at Mary’s feet – had opened and had pierced. Below her, in the seats of the third rank, Rachel and this woman [Beatrice], as you see, sit. Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, and the one who was the great-grandmother [Ruth, of David] of the singer who, as he sorrowed for his sinfulness, cried ‘Miserere mei’ [Psalm 50 in Vulgate]– these you can see from rank to rank as I, in moving through the Rose, from petal unto petal, give to each her name. And from the
seventh rank, just as they did with the ranks above, the Hebrew women
follow – ranging downward – dividing all the tresses of the Rose. They
are the wall by which the sacred stairs divide, depending on the view of
Christ with which their faith is aligned. Upon one side, there where the
Rose is ripe, with all its petals, are those whose faith was in the Christ to
come; and on the other side – that semicircle whose space is broken up
by vacant places – sit those whose sight was set upon the Christ who had
already come. And just as on this side, to serve as such a great partition,
there is the throne in glory of the Lady of Heaven […]

How does this author take what was in the *Romance of the Rose* and alter it to fit another mold? What
is the mold, based on the information presented to you here? What is this particular garden? Does
anyone know the work? [Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, ca. 1313-1320]

Our sixth story moves us back to more literal uses of gardens rather than more abstract ones. There are
five shorter stories within this work that I will relate to you. The first tale is about a young woman
named Lisabetta, whose brothers murder her lover when they found out about their nocturnal liaisons.
Naturally, they didn’t want to bring any discredit to the family. They went off on a pleasure-trip to the
country and invited the lover along. When they reached a very remote spot, they murdered him and
buried his corpse. Lisabetta wondered at his absence, and one night, while asleep, her lover appeared
to her in a dream and told her what had happened to him. He described the place where he was buried,
which then caused Lisbetta, when she awoke in the morning, to search for the body. She began an
excavation and found the corpse, but realized that she couldn’t take the whole body away; so, she
severed the head and returned home. She wrapped the head in a piece of cloth and placed it in a very
large pot, covered it with soil, and planted some of the finest basil in the pot. She never watered the
basil except with essence of roses or orange-blossom, or with her own teardrops. She sat beside the pot
constantly, and would frequently cry. The tale says that the basil grew very thick and exceedingly
fragrant on account of the decomposing head. Her brothers soon noticed her behavior and were quite
bothered by the attention lavished on the basil. One day, they removed the pot. She fell ill and did
nothing but call for her pot of basil. The brothers were amazed by this strong desire to see the pot,
which led them to further inquiry. They shook out the soil and found the decomposing head,
recognizing it as that of her lover’s. They were afraid that people would find out what they had done,
so they buried the head and left the city to conduct their affairs elsewhere. Lisabetta continued to weep
and call for her beloved pot of basil until she cried herself to death.

What kind of garden do we see here? It is not the garden in the sense of a large space removed from
the house, but yet it deals with herbs. Why should she choose to plant basil in the pot and not some
other herb? Feel free to speculate.

The second tale concerns a woman named Andreuola, who fell in love with a neighbor called
Gabriotto. However, they were of different estates – she was noble and he was not. We learn,
however, that "aided and abetted by her maidservant, the girl not only succeeded in apprising
Gabriotto of her love but had him conveyed regularly into a beautiful garden in the grounds of her
father’s house" where they would make love. This act was not so bad as it might seem, since they were
married secretly! One night, Andreuola has a dream in which she sees herself in the garden with
Gabriotto, making passionate love. In her dream, however, he is taken by some strange dark form, and
vanishes forever. She is quite disturbed by the dream, naturally. The following night she received him
in the garden as usual. The narrator tells us that "the roses were in flower, and she plucked a large
number, some red and others white, before going to join him at the edge of a magnificent, crystal-clear
fountain situated in the garden." To hasten the end of the story, I can tell you that Gabriotto died in the garden, but in a most peaceful way: he and she were kissing, and he simply passed away. She later informed her father of their secret marriage, and promptly entered a convent.

What can you say about this garden? Does it resemble any other garden that we have seen? Two more quick stories before we move on to the next work.

Madonna Dianora, a noblewoman, was married to Gilberto. However, another nobleman named Ansaldo loved her from a distance; nevertheless, Dianora refused his advances. She came up with a scheme, a request for something she knew he couldn’t provide. She would tell him that if he could provide it, she would grant him pleasure; if he could not, he was to leave her alone. She tells a messenger to relay the following to Ansaldo: "In the month of January that is now approaching, I want a garden, somewhere near the town, that is full of green plants, flowers, and leafy trees, exactly as though it were the month of May." The nobleman, upon hearing her request, realizes how impossible it is. He eventually finds a magician who claims to be able to provide him with such a garden; Ansaldo agrees to pay him a large sum of money. We then learn that

The night preceding the calends of January, when the cold was very intense and everything was covered in snow and ice, the magician employed his skills to such good effect that in a beautiful meadow not far from the town, there appeared next morning, as all those who saw it bore witness, one of the fairest gardens that anyone had ever seen, with plants and trees and fruits of every conceivable kind.

Ansaldo then calls upon Dianora, reminding her of her promise. She despairs, not knowing what to do – or how to tell her husband! She finally tells Gilberto her story from beginning to end. At first, he was angry, but then realized the purity of his wife’s intentions. He then allows her to go to Ansaldo and endeavor in every way possible to have herself released from this promise without loss of honor; however, if such a request proves impossible, she may give her body to him just this once, but not her heart. Dianora was speechless, but soon protested. However, Gilberto would not hear otherwise, and she heads to Ansaldo’s the next day. Ansaldo is astounded to hear of her arrival, descends to greet her, then asks her why she has come so early that morning – and with so few people to accompany her. She tells him that her husband told her to visit him, and that she was ready to submit to his pleasure. Although he had been astonished by her mere arrival, he was now even more so! His ardor turned to compassion, and he treated her with utmost respect because of her husband’s treatment of her. Ansaldo, when submitting payment to the magician, was astonished yet again when the latter told Ansaldo to keep his money and put it to good use, since he clearly had a good heart.

How was the garden used in this episode? Does this story sound familiar to anyone?

The final tale in this work tells of Lydia, the wife of Nicostratos, who falls in love with Pyrrhus, a young man (and her husband’s servant) who gives her three tasks as proof of her sincerity. She performs all three, and the icing on the cake occurs in the garden. One day, when her husband came to visit her in her sick-bed after breakfast (she was sick with love), she asked whether he and Pyrrhus would help her down to the garden so as to relieve the tedium of her bed. They do this, placing her on the lawn at the foot of a pear tree. She then tells Pyrrhus that she is hungry for a pear, and asks him to climb the tree to pick some for her. He does this, but whilst in the tree (playing a trick that the two of them had devised earlier), he calls down to Nicostratos, saying, "What are you doing? And you, my lady, how can you be so brazen as to allow it in my presence? Do you think I am blind? […] If you wanted to indulge in that sort of thing, you have plenty of fine bedrooms in the house – what don’t you
go and do it in one of those?" Lydia then asks Nicostratos if Pyrrhus is mad, which begins an argument from Pyrrhus in the tree and the two of them under the tree. Pyrrhus goes so far as to say to Nicostratos that he is "wide awake, and so are you, it appears. In fact, you’re putting so much vigor into it that if this tree were to be given so hard a buffeting, there wouldn’t be a single pear left on it."

Lydia suggests that the tree must be causing hallucinations. Pyrrhus descends and continues to make so many forceful remarks about what he saw that Nicostratos decides to climb and have a look for himself. "So he climbed up, and no sooner had he done so than Pyrrhus and Lydia began to make love together, whereupon Nicostratos, seeing what they were about, shouted." When he descended, Pyrrhus and Lydia had separated and taken their former places. Nicostratos fell for the entire ruse.

What function does the garden have in this story? Has anyone guessed the work of literature? [Giovanni Boccaccio, Il decamerone. ca. 1350-60] Are there any connections with earlier gardens? What is similar or different?

From our seventh work I have selected two stories which have analogues in two stories from the previous work. The first tells the story of a lovely woman named May who was married to January, an older man who took his pleasure of her whenever he wanted. One day, one of the servants, named Damian, fell mysteriously ill. January told May to visit Damian in his room. Damian gave her some money and told her his desire – to have the pleasure of her body. May, however, was a very gracious person, and desired out of the goodness of her heart to help Damian. She wrote him a letter in which she stated that she would grant the satisfaction he desired, and slipped it under his pillow. He arose the next morning, read the letter, and was instantly happy.

Our narrator then turns back to January, who "had a garden, walled about with stone; so fair a garden never was there known. For out of doubt I honestly suppose that he who wrote the Romance of the Rose could not have pictured such magnificence." He continues, 

This January, so noble and so old, found walking in it such felicity that no one was allowed to have the key except himself, and for its little wicket he head a silver latch-key to unclick it or lock it up, and when his thought was set upon the need to pay his wife her debt in summer season, thither would he go with May his wife when there was none to know, and anything they had not done in bed there in the garden was performed instead.

However, January eventually loses his sight, and May welcomes the opportunity to finally meet with Damian. She took some warm wax and made an impression of the garden key, from which Damian made a copy. One day, January woke up with the desire to seek pleasure with his wife in the garden and asked her to accompany him there. Damian ran ahead, unlocked the gate, and darted into the garden; January and May followed after. January reminds her of the deeds of love, and how proper love is linked with a good life. Meanwhile, May signals to Damian to climb into a heavily-charged pear tree. May says that she has a craving for a pear, and asks January to climb up and fetch her one. As he is blind, he feels uncomfortable doing so; May suggests that he let her climb up his back and thereby into the tree, to which he agrees. Once in the branches, she and Damian engage in intercourse. Suddenly, January’s sight returns, and he shouts at her, seeing them in the act. She plays it down, saying that the long blindness has made his eyesight questionable: "Until your sight has settled down a bit you may be frequently deceived by it."
I will move directly to the second story from this work in the interest of time. This one takes place in Brittany, the province in northwest France. The narrator tells us that there was a woman named Dorigen who was married to a knight called Arveragus. The latter went away to Britain [sic] to seek high deeds of arms and reputation. His absence devastated Dorigen. Her friends begged her to spend time with them in an effort to relieve her pain.

And so one sunny morning, as they’d planned, they went into a garden near at hand where they had staged a picnic and supplied victuals enough and other things beside, and there they lingered out the happy day. It was the morning of the sixth of May and May had painted with her softest showers a gardenful of leafiness and flowers; the hand of man with such a cunning craft had decked this garden out in pleach and graft. There never was a garden of such price unless indeed it were in Paradise. The scent of flowers and the freshening sight would surely have made any heart feel light […]

At the end of the day the friends held a dance in the garden. A handsome squire danced before her – a very lusty squire, it should be added, but one held in high esteem. Before he left, the squire – named Aurelius – told her of his fascination and admiration. She refused his advances, telling him that unless he could clear the coastline of rocks, she would refuse him forever. He languished for two years, during which time Dorigen’s husband remained away. Meanwhile, Aurelius’s brother thought of a way to ease his pain. One December, he led Aurelius to a magician in central France, one who could alter things from their natural state. The brother’s idea was to make the rocks disappear from the coastline of Brittany. A deal was struck and the brothers departed for home, learning upon their arrival that the rocks had vanished. Aurelius seeks out Dorigen and reminds her of her promise to him in the garden. She does not know what she should do; she does not want to endure shame upon her body. Her husband returns, she confesses her story to him, and he implores her to visit Aurelius just this once. When she arrives and tells Aurelius of her husband’s graciousness, he thought better of his intentions and releases her from the agreement. When he goes to pay the magician, he relates the story to the latter and he cancels Aurelius’s debt to him since their was honor in his treatment of Dorigen.

What role does the garden play in each of these episodes? How do these gardens differ from the ones in the analogues? Has anyone guessed this work? [Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1392].

I have decided to alter the plan somewhat and give you an analytical exercise for our penultimate work of literature. I have chosen a medieval work that is comprised of 112 separate stories, each accompanied by a woodcut. I have made a handout with two woodcuts from this work, to which I direct your attention at this time. My plan is this: I will read you each story, then ask to hear your thoughts on why the writer might have chosen a particular woodcut to accompany his story. After we finish the second story and woodcut, I will ask if anyone can guess the work. [51: Keeping Secrets. Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*. Trans. Edwin H. Zeydel. New York: Dover Books, 1944. 180-81.] [36: Of Complacency. Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*.]

For our final work, I would like to address a piece of literature that was not written during the Middle Ages, but rather during the twentieth century. It was composed by a medievalist from Oxford University, and it contains a number of places that are garden-like. It is a massive work, and was quite recently produced as a film, although the last installment will not arrive in theaters until December 2003. You may have guessed: it is J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. There is a reason for including
this particular work in my presentation. Given its recent Hollywood appeal, you might succeed in pulling students into the world of medieval literature through the lens of Tolkien’s Middle Earth. To keep things simple – and in the interest of time, I will proceed through the *Lord of the Rings* by highlighting some areas that might tie in well with what we have been discussing today.

1. **Rivendell or Imladris.** Can we think of Rivendell as a garden? What characteristics of the medieval garden lend themselves well to a description of Rivendell? Permit me to give you a selection from Book Two of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

   Sam led him [Frodo] along several passages and down many steps and out into a high garden above the steep bank of the river. He found his friends sitting in a porch on the side of the house looking east. Shadows had fallen in the valley below, but there was still a light on the faces of the mountains far above. The air was warm. The sound of running and falling water was loud, and the evening was filled with a faint scent of trees and flowers, as if summer still lingered in Elrond’s gardens.

   This is but one excerpt that speaks to the garden-like nature of Rivendell. Can you relate it to anything you have heard here today?

2. **Lothlorien.** There is a cool stream, the Nimrodel, that crosses the path into the Golden Wood. The trees are magnificent to see, but also serve as houses for the elves of Lothlorien. That the elves build *flets* in the trees speaks to the strong symbiotic relationship between the elves and nature. The *mellyrn* trees (in particular) bear a yellow blossom in springtime, a blossom that is clearly aesthetically pleasing to the elves, as Legolas points out: "I am at home among trees. [...] Mellyrn they are called, and are those that bear the yellow blossom, but I have never climbed in one. I will see now what is their shape and way of growth." Later, they are led blindfolded into the very heart of Lothlorien. With their sense of sight taken from them, they focus on their surroundings by other means. "They felt the ground beneath their feet smooth and soft. [...] Being deprived of sight, Frodo found his hearing and other senses sharpened. He could smell the trees and the trodden grass. He could hear many different notes in the rustle of the leaves overhead, the river murmuring away on his right, and the thin clear voices of birds in the sky." However, it is the description that we are given when their eyes are uncovered that truly speaks to the role of a garden.

   When his eyes were in turn uncovered, Frodo looked up and caught his breath. They were standing in an open space. To the left stood a great mound, covered with a sward of grass as green as Springtime in the Elder Days. Upon it, as a double crown, grew two circles of trees: the outer had bark of snowy white, and were leafless but beautiful in their shapely nakedness; the inner were mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold. High amid the branches of a towering tree that stood in the center of all there gleamed a white flet. At the feet of the trees, and all about the green hillsides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green: they glimmered as a mist amid the rich hue of the grass. Over all the
sky was blue, and the sun of afternoon glowed upon the hill and cast long green shadows beneath the trees.

Of course, here in Cerin Amroth, the heart of the Ancient Realm, the small golden flowers were called elanor, the name that Sam and Rosie give to their first child, a girl, at the end of the story. Haldir tells us that "Here ever bloom the winter flowers in the unfading grass: the yellow elanor and the pale niphredil." Lothlorien had fixed an image of pleasure in Sam’s mind, and he returned to it often. Do you see the relationship to the medieval garden that Lothlorien exhibits? Is there anything else that comes to mind for those of you who know the work?

1. The Field of Cormallen. The last scene from the Lord of the Rings that conjures up notions of a medieval garden happens toward the end of the story, following the defeat of Sauron.

When they were washed and clad, and had eaten a light meal, the Hobbits followed Gandalf. They stepped out of the beech-grove in which they had lain, and passed on to a long green lawn, glowing in sunshine, bordered by stately dark-leaved trees laden with scarlet blossom. Behind them they could hear the sound of falling water, and a stream ran down before them between flowering banks, until it came to a greenwood at the lawn’s foot and passed then on under an archway of trees, through which they saw the shimmer of water far away.

Tolkien also mentions a fragrance associated with the new kingdom, that of Ithilien.

How does the Field of Cormallen fit with the notion of a medieval garden? It may be a tenuous association, as it may fit the notion of landscape moreso than that of a garden, but nevertheless there are elements of the garden present.

One final note on the Lord of the Rings: you may want to think of the Shire as a garden. Do not forget the scouring and replanting of the Shire at the very end of the Return of the King! When renting the DVD or video tape, examine the scenes for opportunities to show your students the role that a garden can play in a literary work. Given the mass appeal of Peter Jackson’s film trilogy, it may be a way that we can encourage students to enter the realm of medieval literature; this in spite of lack of allegiance to Tolkien’s text on a number of occasions!

I hope that my broad survey of gardens in medieval literature – and in one twentieth-century text – has given you some fresh insights into pieces of literature that you already knew, or – even better – has introduced you to some new works of literature that you might consider using in your classroom. The medieval garden provides a wonderful backdrop for many stories, and in most cases it provides a working subtext as well, given the variety of associations with the word "garden." Then again, the garden may not be the working subtext of a story; it may be the story, as in the Romance of the Rose.

I also trust that you have come to understand the importance of performing a medieval text, as medieval literature was mostly communicated in this way. It is vital that your students read at least a portion of any medieval text out loud in order to get a feel for it. They will learn the importance of
stressing one particular word in order to extract even more meaning from a particular passage. Likewise, the use of visual stimuli can aid their comprehension – just look at the *Ship of Fools*. Those woodcuts drive the point home!

Whether a general meeting place, a meeting place for lovers, a place where thinkers can seek solitude, a place where religious individuals can be alone with nature – and therefore God, a place for medicinal herbs, or a place for nourishment, the garden occupies a prominent spot in medieval literature. I challenge you to use your new-found knowledge of the garden in a positive way: do something creative in your classroom. What you have just learned is not known by many people in today’s world; you now have the opportunity to impart a meaningful piece of social and cultural history to young people in the hope that they too may pass it on. Being a teacher is like being a medieval storyteller – you are the person who passes on ideas and traditions. Don’t just sit in your garden, help the trees to bear fruit!

*Author Currently Unknown*