Walled Gardens and Womb Envy: A Transfeminist Reading of the Susanna Archetype

Such a pretty house and
Such a pretty garden[1]

Thom Yorke's dream of a "pretty garden", like Lennie Small's garden dream of rabbits and alfalfa, is promptly rewarded with a sudden and quiet death. In both cases we have a terrifically streamlined version of the man who retires at sixty to last his days out gardening. Dying men (according to urban legends sadly evading peer review) are thought to call for their mother, whereas dying farmhands and britpop singers would evidently rather have a nice garden. But in the words of Sigmund Freud, any mother who has not become identical with an abstract concept by the age of thirty can consider herself a failure in life (Academic Standard dictates that I clarify the fictitiousness of the previous quotation; as even in the renegadiest of renegade academia, it is considered bad form to libel the dead). But for the purposes of this essay about gardens, the mother is herself a garden, and also possibly God, who might well also be a garden. Unfortunately though, it's no longer the eighteenth century, and saying things nicely no longer constitutes proof. In order to get anywhere near the general conjectures of this introduction, we need to deal with material evidence. The problem we face is that leveling the question "what is a garden" to a garden, would only yield the response: "I am a garden". That is to say, modern and material analysis begets modern and material results; If we want to evidence a claim as blatantly immaterial as "the mother is the garden", it can follow only from an immaterial or field of evidence, one which makes no distinction between object and meaning. There are many unscientific fields which depend on the erasure of this distinction, from Economics to Bigotry, but it is more productively characteristic of Literature, and most profoundly of Medieval literature. Texts which predate a kind of enlightened dualism whereby objects and concepts stay politely separate, are the perfect playground for systems of symbolic meaning and psychic abstractions which are flattened by modern materialism. Looking at any medieval study of nature, defining a bat, or a fever, or a mandrake, it is clear that these symbols and abstractions inform how the real properties of an object are understood; a garden's symbolic function and subconscious associations are part of its nature. Only in a literary world which deals with nature in this way can we read abstracts of the maternal and eternal in the physical properties of the garden. In deliberately playful terms: the world which burns witches is best for hunting ghosts.

So, who you gonna call? In this case the answer seems to be Huchoun of Awle Ryle, 14th century poet best known for his verse adaptation of Daniel 13. His poem known as *The Pistel of Swete Susan* takes the garden setting of Daniel and foregrounds it in long descriptions of its diverse flora, listing each species alongside its natural virtue. The obvious reason for this elaboration is to prepare the climax of the original story, in which the elders are proved libellous by their inability to distinguish a *σχῖνον*, or mastic tree from a *πρῖνον*, or holm oak. What we see in the poem is a garden whose beauty is ordered and irreducible, inhabited by Susan, who is herself described as "Of alle fason of foode frelich and feire"[2]. Translating with the secondard meaning of "foode", the description means, "In every feature of a young woman free and beautiful", but both adjectives used are equally common to describe "foode" in its primary sense,

in fact, both are attested with meanings specific to fresh food in the Middle English Dictionary[3,4]. It is almost inevitable to read the line simultaneously as “In all types of food, abundant and appetising”. Whether or not this is, in fact, the primary meaning of the line (F.J Amours advocates for “food for the mind” in his glossary[5]), the analogy between Susanna’s beauty and the garden’s is obvious. Incidentally we might recall here the herber which grows out of the site of female interment in *Pearl*[6]; abundance and floridity appear as properties of the female virgin body more generally. In Susanna’s case, the elders are discovered in their lie because their stories do not align with the flawless *order* of the garden; it is impossible for a mastic tree to be planted in the same spot as a holm-oak, just as it is impossible for adultery to grow within the ordered garden of Susanna’s virtue.

It is important at this point to clarify what *type* of garden is involved with this sort of analogy. Joachim’s garden in the *Pistel* is named as an “Orchard” (Huchoun, l.28), but while Orchards are generally more open than the smaller “herber”, Joachim’s Orchard is placed in the urban setting of Babylon (Huchoun, l.1), famous for its labyrinthine walled gardens. In fact, the narrative depends upon the elders being able to see Susanna when she believes she is alone, which would be complicated by an open garden space. The traditional understanding of Joachim’s garden is one of “high stone walls”: a space as beautiful as it is isolating[6], designed as a free space for Susanna which is ultimately still under her father’s control. This is the garden topos which is most useful to us, and its significance extends far beyond Joachim’s orchard. Susanna’s enclosure is a manifestation of the Hortus Conclusus, an imaginary female space derived from the vulgate Song of Songs; while it initially described the allegorical bride of Christ, by the fifteenth century it had become primarily associated with Marian iconography.[7] Here we see the walled garden move out of the context of Susanna’s orchard, whose walls are externally imposed by Joachim, into an allegorical space whereby walls are not *imposed upon* the garden of feminine virtue, but are instead seen as a constituent part.

Positioning these Horti Conclusi particularly at the annunciation, medieval iconographers divorced the walled-garden image from its patriarchal inclinations, creating a space for the absolute femininity of gestation without a father. Earlier adaptations filled Joachim’s garden with a bathshebaesque bathing scene, and attributed its revenge to Daniel over Susanna (McAvoy, 268), in a contra-exegetic attempt to frame the garden as a site primarily of male jealousy: a defense constructed by Joachim to prevent the theft of his property. But this is opposite to the actual value of the Hortus Conclusus. The immaculate conception is a figurative ideal of male jealousy, since the husband is jealous that his wife has conceived without him, and there is no man to receive the contrapositive pride of having conceived with her. The Hortus Conclusus uses this extremity to move beyond the phallic gaze altogether, creating a space of female unity with god outside of interpretation by men. Earlier iterations of the Hortus Conclusus, depicted the androgynous, anthropomorphic Angel Gabriel alongside Mary, often childlike and lowering himself to avoid any suggestion of virility or surrogate fatherhood.[8] The later tradition often omitted the male presence entirely[9], sometimes substituting the dove or flame depictions of the Holy Spirit. This is not, as Joachim’s garden seems to be, a male, matrimonial entrapment which is breached by a competing man, it is a fully closed and fully female space, understood to represent the closed womb of the virgin mother.

A useful concept in understanding this symbolism more fully, is Bracha Ettinger's formulation of the Matrixial Gaze. The Matrixial Gaze is a proposed alternative to Lacan's phallogocentric model of desire, which is informed by the properties of the Matrix or womb, rather than the phallus.[10] These two modes of looking aren't strictly associated with male and female-authored art, but they formulated as consequences of the male and female response to severance from the mother. While the phallic gaze, which we can associate with our initial reading of the Susanna garden as a patriarchal entrapment, yearns to reappropriate the lost *objet a*, the underlying essence of desire, the Matrixial gaze, which we can associate with the Hortus Conclusus, instead yearns for reunification. This becomes an immediately useful distinction when we appreciate the significance of the garden not just as a cultural symbol of the female body, but as a psychological symbol of motherhood itself. It is uncontroversial to say that biblical gardens, in Songs, Daniel or in the gospels, are considered in answer to the Garden of Eden, which is associated in post-Jungian analysis with the womb, and with maternal care after birth. If we can understand the fall of man as analogous to severance from the mother which begets both the phallic and the matrixial gaze, we can understand gender difference in terms of a developed relationship to gardens. The unfulfillable, appropriating phallic gaze can only approach the garden as a potential object of mastery, while the matrixial gaze seeks reunification with the lost Other, the mantle of which is transferred from the mother to the garden, and through the association of Eden, to God.

Looking at the Mechelen gardens, we see the ultimate transformation of the Hortus Conclusus as a matrixial fantasy. Alongside depictions of the crucifixion, and the punishment of Daniel, the all-female sisterhood of Mechelen created triptychs like the one below, which show virginal female saints enclosed in flowers. Abundance, here, is not a property of female *desirability*; the analogy of woman and garden is warped by the phallic gaze such that the elders see Susanna amongst fruit trees and associate the desires to consume both, but in a matrixial space, fertility is synergic with virginity. The Hortus Conclusus embodies the matrixial ideal of unity with the fertile mother, Eden, which must be enclosed to hide from the phallic gaze which necessarily corrupts its fertility. This is the fantasy of the immaculate conception: femininity par excellence which depends on no masculine counterpart. Unity with God, then, is a state achieved by the feminine, through exorcism of the masculine, that is to say, a transfeminine state. And this relationship isn't a historically narrow one; Herrad of Landsberg titled her 12th century gesamtkunstwerk the *Hortus Deliciarum* in pursuit of this same kind of devotion. If the groundwork laid by Freud, Lacan and Ettinger constitutes a useful way of gendering desire, then it is possible to understand not only medieval gardens, but all Christian devotional spaces, and indeed Christian devotion itself as necessarily transfeminine phenomena.

1. Radiohead, “No Surprises”, in *OK Computer* (London: Parlophone, 1997)
2. Huchoun, *The Pistil of Swete Susan*, in *Heroic Women from the Old Testament in Middle English Verse*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), n.p., l.17
3. “Freli, adj., 2c.” in *Middle English Dictionary* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2025)
4. “Fair, adj., 1a.d.” in *Middle English Dictionary* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2025)
5. *Scottish Alliterative Poems in Riming Stanzas*, ed. F. J. Amours (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1897) p.365
6. Liz McAvoy, “‘Straitened on Every Side’: Susanna’s Garden Dilemma”, in *The Enclosed Garden and the Medieval Religious Imaginary: Nature and Environment in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022), pp.261-332, p.261
7. Symes, Michael, "hortus conclusus.", in *The Oxford Companion to the Garden* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006)
8. José Maria Salvador-González, “Hortus Conclusus—A Mariological Metaphor in Some Renaissance Paintings of the Annunciation in the Light of Medieval Liturgical Hymns”, in *Religions*, XIV, no.1
9. Anonymous, *Madonna on a crescent moon in hortus conclusus*, *c*. 1456, oil on panel, 95 × 62 cm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin
10. Bracha Ettinger, “Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze: From Phantasm to Trauma, from Phallic Structure to Matrixial Sphere”, Parallax 7, no. 4 (2001), 89–114