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**Love Scenes and Garden Plots: Form and Femininity in Elizabeth von Arnim's  
*Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898)**

**RACHEL O'CONNELL**

## **Abstract**

This essay reads Elizabeth von Arnim's *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898) in relation to Alfred Austin's garden book, *The Garden that I Love* (1894). *The Garden that I Love* presents the garden as a retreat modelled on the Horatian ideal, in which a man retires from public life to enjoy a peaceful rural existence. Von Arnim shows how the garden, or rather the good of retreat that the garden represents, is well-nigh inaccessible to a female subject. At the same time, she wants to claim the garden's seclusion for the female subject. Ultimately von Arnim takes the idea of feminine retreat to an unexpected extreme, generating, in certain passages of her text, a perverse garden fantasia that celebrates feminine autoeroticism and sexual self-sufficiency. Notably, it is specific aspects of the form of the garden book that allow von Arnim to develop her ambivalently feminist, unabashedly utopian vision of feminine withdrawal and retreat.

## **Keywords**

Elizabeth Von Arnim, Alfred Austin, femininity, narcissism, autoeroticism, retreat, garden

## **Author Biographical Note**

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### **Love Scenes and Garden Plots: Form and Femininity in Elizabeth von Arnim's *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898)**

On January 21, 1897, Elizabeth von Arnim wrote in her diary, 'Walked with Caesar [her dog] in the garden a.m. and p.m. Bitter wind—babies and dog great comforts. Was so fascinated by "Garden that I Love" that wrote impulsive letter to author and locked it up' (De Charms 61). Von Arnim wrote this diary entry during her first winter at Nassenheide, the *schloss* (manor house) in Pomerania to which she insisted on moving her family, against the wishes of her German husband, after several unhappy years in Berlin. The garden in which she walks the dog in this entry is the one that is generally understood to have inspired her to write her first published book, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898). She went on to have a long and successful literary career, but *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, a witty, frothy, but ultimately rather edgy garden diary, was von Arnim's greatest commercial success.

Although *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* is rightly understood to be based on the garden at Nassenheide, it is striking, in this diary entry, to find mention of *another* garden: the garden that constitutes the subject matter of the then-Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin's garden book, *The Garden that I Love* (1894). Austin's garden, or rather his book about a garden, is, I propose, as significant an inspiration for *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* as is von Arnim's own garden at Nassenheide. In this essay I read von Arnim's ambivalent book as a version of the 'impulsive letter to the author' that she mentions in her diary entry, showing how she simultaneously critiques, pastiches, pays homage to, and ultimately rewrites Austin's ideal of the garden.

Overall, I present a picture of two writers locked in battle over a garden. For me, the crucial nexus between von Arnim and Austin is the rubric of retreat that both writers associate with the idea of the garden. Austin's *The Garden that I Love* is indebted to the implicitly masculine Horatian model, in which a man retires from public life to enjoy a peaceful rural existence. Von Arnim shows how the garden, or rather the good of retreat that the garden represents, is well-nigh inaccessible to a female subject. At the same time, she clings to Austin's vision of retreat, wanting to claim the garden's seclusion for the female subject. Ultimately von Arnim takes the idea of feminine retreat to an unexpected extreme, generating, in certain passages of her text, a perverse garden fantasia that celebrates feminine autoeroticism, withdrawal, and sexual self-sufficiency – and that embodies, though it doesn't resolve, von Arnim's ambivalent attitudes towards femininity and feminism. I close by showing how the *form* of the garden book allows von Arnim to develop her utopian vision of feminine withdrawal and retreat.

### **The Genre of the Garden Book and Alfred Austin's *The Garden that I Love* (1894)**

As Sarah Bilston has shown, the garden book emerged in the 1880s, developing from gardening advice texts for women dating from the 1840s onwards. Bilston describes mid-century women's gardening advice texts, which accompanied the emergence of the suburban family garden, as a set of practical, instructional texts that sought to claim the garden as a

new space of endeavour for women. Turn-of-the-century *garden books* (as opposed to gardening advice texts) offer less advice, sometimes dispensing with instruction altogether. Instead, they concentrate on evoking the space of the garden, the joy of gardening, and the subjectivity of the gardener. As Twigs Way puts it, in garden books ‘many [women writers] just sought to share the joys and triumphs of a garden they could, at last, often call their own’ (151). Hapgood’s discussion of the garden book (which she refers to as the ‘garden romance’) notes that, generically speaking, garden books are ‘variously composed as diaries, journals, letters and personal reflections, and often structured around the months of the year or the seasons’ (94).

Both Bilston and Hapgood emphasize the garden book’s feminist credentials. These derive in the first instance from the nineteenth century rise in women’s gardening, understood as an empowering development for women. Judith Page and Elise Smith, for example, argue that the garden was for Victorian women ‘a place to flex their physical and mental muscles, thus prompting greater freedom and experimentation in their lives’ (7). Garden books are understood as texts that bear witness to this liberating development. Thus Bilston points out that the garden is ‘typically celebrated in later Victorian texts as the author’s own space, a place the woman gardener can plot for herself’ (9). Similarly, Hapgood argues that garden books are ‘stories of female empowerment and progress’ (93) and that they ‘make a dream of women’s empowerment shareable with suburban women readers’ (111).

Given the garden book’s feminist associations, it is an interesting irony that one of the earliest texts of the genre was written by a man – and, moreover, lays out what Hapgood rightly calls a ‘deeply traditional vision’ (99). Austin’s *The Garden That I Love* is loosely based on the diary format, divided into a set of long entries that are dated at various times from Spring through to late Autumn. It is narrated in first person from the point of view of a male gardener and its primary purpose appears to be to evoke the speaker’s love of gardening. The text contains four characters: the speaker and his sister Veronica (residents of the house and garden), and their two guests, Lamia and the Poet. Intertwined love plots pair Veronica with the Poet and Lamia with the speaker by the end of the book. There are, however, barely any events in this largely un-plotted text, which is occupied primarily with observations of how the garden changes with the seasons.

*The Garden that I Love* celebrates the narrowness of an existence lived in retreat. The title of the book refers to a phrase from Tennyson’s poem ‘The Gardener’s Daughter’ (1842), in which Tennyson’s speaker describes the dwelling place of his beloved, the eponymous gardener’s daughter: ‘Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite / Beyond it, blooms the garden that I love’ (133). Austin’s speaker expressly states that he has gone a step further than the gardener’s daughter in terms of seeking out seclusion: ‘If, in order to love one’s garden, it were necessary that it should *not* be quite beyond the living world, I fear that mine would never have so completely absorbed my affections’ (19; my italics) – that is, he wishes to exist *entirely* beyond the living world. The garden is the space to which Austin’s speaker repaired ‘when I finally decided that with the busy world I had no more business,’ and he knew precisely what he wanted: ‘retirement, seclusion, and old-world charm’ (29).

The idea of the garden as retreat references the Horatian model of country retirement (Bending 45). This implicitly masculine tradition extols the values of simplicity, moderation, and seclusion, and presents retirement as an antidote for public and political life (Bending 45). This idea of retirement, presented through an Autumnal rubric of ageing, ending, and subsiding, informs the representation of the garden throughout Austin's text. The speaker declares of a garden that 'It is in middle life that the finishing touches should be put to it; and then, after that, it should remain more or less in the same condition, like oneself, growing more deep of shade, and more protected from the winds' (98). The speaker himself seems to have accepted, with relief, the arrival of his own 'middle life,' in which he can retire to the shade to remain ever the same, never stirred by winds from outside his protected space. The book evokes the fantasy of a state of perfect fulfilment, stasis, and security, in which the turbulence of desire is becalmed and replaced by the inertia of repletion.

This account of the garden is underpinned by a particular political and social ideology. The woods attached to the house are full of English oaks that a 'good old Tory' must have tended, and the house constitutes an anthology of glorious moments from English history: 'Shakespeare must have been alive when it was built, and Cecil, and Drake, and Sir Walter Raleigh, and many another famous Englishman whose name we love to hear because he glorified and exalted our race by what he said or did' (23). England and the past are represented as stable, cosy, and enveloping, offering shelter like the garden's 'patriarchal oak' (66). The patriarchal oak likewise presides over a realm where truisms about gender are comfortably relied upon, such old chestnuts as 'I have often observed that even the best of women are more anxious how a thing shall look than what it shall be' (72). Within this rarefied realm the battle of the sexes is amicably and routinely played out *ad infinitum* between the speaker and Veronica, via arch disagreements over the relative merits of gardening and antiquing.

The happy ending of the love plot arrives when Lamia—previously described as fascinatingly regal, mercurial, and contrary—becomes a dutiful helpmeet to the speaker: 'She was always sweet; now she is serviceable as well' (129). The narrative of Lamia's increasing docility connects her to the eponymous protagonist of Keats' poem 'Lamia' (1820). The term lamia refers to a female mythological creature that was sometimes said to have a woman's body and a serpent's tail. Keats' 'Lamia' tells of one such creature who, falling in love with a man, seeks to divest herself of her supernatural stature in order to gain his affection. Lamia's increasing gentleness and serviceability in *The Garden that I Love* can be understood as one version of throwing 'the goddess off,' as Keats' Lamia does (Keats 208).

The garden in Austin's text, then, represents a realm not only of withdrawn, inert middle age, but also of the sentimental, patriotic, patriarchal conservatism to which the tropes of enclosure and stasis, so closely associated with gardens, easily lend themselves. This strikingly untroubled account of both natural and social worlds seems to arise from the centrality of speaker's place in society, his evident sense of ease, inclusion, and entitlement; as Hapgood declares, for this speaker, 'the garden is a synthesis of nature, of his identity and of the human community' (98). Hapgood's comment begs the question: what would a garden

book look like if it was written by somebody for whom such a synthesis of nature, identity, and community was impossible?

### **Elizabeth von Arnim and Alfred Austin: ‘An Impulsive Letter to the Author’**

Von Arnim critics have already noted the importance of Austin’s text to *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*. Hapgood has discussed *The Garden That I Love* as one of the earliest garden books while Römhild explores Austin’s influence on von Arnim’s ‘middlebrow notion of spirituality’ (*Femininity and Authorship* 95). I locate the inception of von Arnim’s book in relation to Austin’s problematic representation of Lamia. *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* considers the clash between, on the one hand, the utopian vision of self-sufficiency, repletion, and inertia that Austin’s makes the garden represent, and on the other hand, and the demands of relationship, sexuality, and family; and considers this clash, crucially, from the point of view of a female speaker rather than a male speaker – the point of view of Elizabeth, von Arnim’s protagonist.

Elizabeth is, as Römhild also has noted, ‘clearly modelled on Lamia, Austin’s capricious protagonist of mercurial temper’ (*Femininity and Authorship* 96). This association between Elizabeth and Lamia places the desire for a garden front and centre. Lamia, before she becomes betrothed to the speaker of *The Garden that I Love*, repeatedly describes a fantasy in which she gets to have the garden without having to marry the speaker. She declares, ‘I want that garden, the one I told you of—without the owner of it’ (114). This conflict is resolved by the de-clawing of Lamia, her transformation into a ‘serviceable’ woman. Von Arnim, however, refuses to countenance this easy relinquishment of Lamia’s desire for a garden of her own, insisting, in her own book, on telling the story of a woman who emphatically lays claim to a garden for herself. In this sense, we can read *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* as a project written out of identification with the character of Lamia, in which von Arnim seeks to give Lamia the garden for which she longs. At the same time, von Arnim’s book can be understood as an unofficial sequel to *The Garden that I Love*, a study of the marriage between the speaker and Lamia that is projected at the end of Austin’s book – but a study presented from the point of view of Lamia.

The central locus and subject matter of von Arnim’s book is the titular garden, which belongs to the rural German estate of Elizabeth’s unpleasant husband, a character known throughout the text as ‘the Man of Wrath.’ Like Austin, von Arnim uses a loose version of diary form, from Spring to Spring. The book’s content includes rhapsodic flower descriptions; accounts of Elizabeth’s (often failed) attempts at gardening and dealings with gardeners; and her expressions of love for the garden. It contains a limited cast of lightly sketched characters including The Man of Wrath, Elizabeth’s friend Irais, and Minora, a New Woman who comes to visit. The interactions among these characters are presented in a register of satirical social comedy; importantly, these interactions often hinge on debates about gender. Significantly, the book does not present a romance plot; the protagonist has already been married for several years and borne three children before the book opens.

Von Arnim follows Austin's presentation of the garden as a space of retreat. Like Austin, she organizes Elizabeth's discovery of the *schloss* and its garden as a narrative of retirement in which she escapes from the hurly-burly of city life to the peace and quiet of the country. But in von Arnim's book the garden as a delightful retreat is a delicate space, easily intruded upon and compromised. Elizabeth's children interrupt her while she is sitting in her garden writing. The servants and daily rituals of the household demand attention. She is constantly 'afflicted' by visitors (56); with the partial exception of Irais, these guests are objects of intense resentment. Most of all, Elizabeth's husband, the Man of Wrath, looms ominously over her idyll. The Man of Wrath is the sworn enemy of the garden. He seeks to drag Elizabeth away from her gardening pursuits and condemns her for wanting a garden at all. It is, he declares, 'the purest selfishness to enjoy [herself] when neither he nor the offspring were with [her]' (15). If Elizabeth constitutes a recapitulation of Austin's Lamia, then the Man of Wrath appears to be the mouthpiece of the smug commentary on women's nature that Austin's speaker constantly spouts. In effect, the Man of Wrath stands in for a set of discourses that would disallow women not only literal gardens but also the range of goods for which the garden stands: solitude, leisure, pleasure, self-determination, and creativity.

The difference between von Arnim's and Austin's texts can be summed up as a question of the relationship between the house and the garden. In Austin's text, the house and the garden are mutually dependent and complementary. But for Austin's male speaker the house does not carry any responsibilities with it; indeed, he explicitly states that his sister Veronica takes care of domestic matters. Moreover, the house does not represent a set of fantasies and values (family, domesticity, and so on) that undermine his very right to enjoy spending time in the garden. In von Arnim's text, the difference between the house and the garden is thrown into relief. The house constitutes a space of hated and stifling obligation; meanwhile, the garden is a longed-for realm of freedom. Elizabeth must fight to keep her grasp on this fragile, compromised, and much-interrupted idyll, and this struggle constitutes much of the content of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*.

### **If a Woman Could Have a Garden of Her Very Own, What Would It Be Like?**

While von Arnim's book presents a protest against the inaccessibility of retreat for women, von Arnim remains attached to Austin's ideal of retreat. However, in a striking act of creative thievery, von Arnim transposes retreat into a feminine idiom. For instance, she presents Elizabeth as a nun-like figure that has taken the veil through her allegiance to the garden, and also presents the garden as a space in which Elizabeth can revert to the unsexed body of childhood. However, I am most interested in the ways in which Elizabeth's retreat is enacted through the strategies of evasion and withholding that characterize Elizabeth's particular type of femininity: her 'hyperfemininity' (Römhild, *Femininity and Authorship* 29). Through the ethos of hyperfemininity, von Arnim presents a defiantly autoerotic feminine subject that turns away from the demands of heterosexuality, childbearing, and even relationality in general, as she withdraws into herself and her garden.

Römhild notes that Elizabeth ‘regularly deals with the world by hiding behind a facade of good manners’ (*Femininity and Authorship* 25) and that ‘her response of choice’ in difficult situations is ‘silence and withdrawal’ (27). Römhild proposes that such tactics of concealment and withholding are characteristic of Elizabeth’s ‘hyperfemininity,’ a version of femininity that involves ‘a combination of flirtation, capriciousness, apparent submissiveness, and the exertion of power through manipulation rather than direct confrontation’ (29). Römhild connects hyperfemininity to Margaret Lawrence’s concept of the ‘Sophisticated Lady’ (a category associated with von Arnim in Lawrence’s 1936 *The School of Femininity*, a curious text that doubles as a review of women writers and a taxonomy of types of femininity). The Sophisticated Lady is, Lawrence states, ‘feminine, but with reservations’ (281). She is brilliant, erudite, and elegant; charming and compelling; but she is *aloof*. She uses the ‘technique of the trained courtesan’ to conceal her emotions (281) so that ‘man never knows her mind though he may know her body’ (288). Through her reserve, ‘self-containment’ (287), and ‘self-sufficiency’ (287), she achieves ‘a position of feminine invulnerability in the relations of the sexes’ (303).

As Lawrence’s comments show, the hyperfeminine woman is a figure in search of retreat. For all her charm, she is fundamentally secretive and withdrawn, untrusting and socially strategic, perhaps even misanthropic. Indeed, Römhild suggests that von Arnim’s commitment to withdrawal and withholding was so tenacious that it led to a kind of anorexic sensibility oriented around questions of ‘power and the potential loss of control’ (39). This is epitomized, Römhild suggests, by an observation from von Arnim’s friend and relative, Katherine Mansfield, who commented that von Arnim’s “‘very life, her very being, her gift” were dependent on “her *not surrendering*” to a lover’ (Römhild, *Femininity and Authorship* 39). The Sophisticated Lady, then, despite her association with the courtesan, longs, in her own way, to remain untouched. She seeks to create ‘a space of inner freedom,’ as Römhild suggests; in *Elizabeth and her German Garden* the garden becomes a ‘physical manifestation’ of that space (33). As such, the garden is akin, perhaps, to the medieval *hortus conclusus* or enclosed/walled garden, which, tellingly, was associated with the Virgin Mary and with the description of the beloved in the ‘Song of Solomon’: ‘A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse / A spring shut up, a fountain sealed’ (Bennett 12).

Römhild reminds us that this kind of cool and withholding femininity constitutes a form of self-defence in the context of demanding and perhaps even abusive marriages (both Elizabeth’s and von Arnim’s; *Femininity and Authorship* 33). At the same time, however, in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* von Arnim also bears witness to an aspect of this model of femininity that Römhild does not emphasize: its unrepentant narcissism. Lawrence declares that the Sophisticated Lady ‘is engaged always with the picture she presents of herself’ (281). This comment helps explain the flirtatious, edgy relationship between Elizabeth and her friend Irais. Irais and Elizabeth constitute a formidable pair, profoundly hostile to the only other woman that they spend time with, a visiting New Woman character named Minora; and yet deeply collusive with one another. They are entwined in a not-uncompetitive relationship of mutual evaluation and admiration that is simultaneously detached, intimate, and erotically charged. Both Sophisticated Ladies, Elizabeth and Irais act

as mirrors for one another; Römhild describes Irais as Elizabeth's 'alter-ego' ('Beauty's Price' 127). This mirroring relationship exemplifies the narcissistic formation that Lawrence identifies: the Sophisticated Lady's interest in her own reflection or mirror-image, her engagement with 'the picture she presents of herself' (Lawrence 281).

Importantly, this narcissism can function to create a space of retreat. As Kathy Psomiades has noted, a woman contemplating her own likeness can produce a feedback loop that seems to exclude all else. In her reading of Swinburne's poem 'Before the Mirror,' Psomiades explores how Swinburne's representation of a girl looking at her own reflection produces a 'self-enclosed narcissism,' a 'femininity that constitutes itself as outside heterosexual exchange' and 'outside heterosexual desire' (112). The girl absorbed in her own reflection, Psomiades suggests, is 'for no man ... Enviably self-sufficient, girl for girl's sake' (112). Likewise, while she may treat heterosexual relations and intimacy with scepticism, the Sophisticated Lady, I suggest, is not necessarily devoid of sexuality. Rather, she has withdrawn into a kind of sexual self-sufficiency that aids and abets her general reserve, her refusal to surrender herself.

*Elizabeth and Her German Garden* pays ample witness to this autoerotically inclined aspect of hyperfemininity, not only in its exploration of feminine mirroring but also in its presentation of the flowers of the garden. Von Arnim draws on the garden book convention of including rapturous flower descriptions in order to present the idea of retreat as a form of feminine autoeroticism. Perhaps the most explicitly autoerotic moment in the text is Elizabeth's description of her delight when her lilacs bloom:

Oh those lilac bushes! They are all out to-day, and the garden is drenched with the scent. I have brought in armfuls, the picking is such a delight, and every pot and bowl and tub in the house is filled with purple glory, and the servants think there is going to be a party and are extra nimble, and I go from room to room gazing at the sweetness, and the windows are all flung open so as to join the scent within to the scent without; and the servants gradually discover that there is no party, and wonder why the house should be filled with flowers for one woman by herself. (42)

In attempting to join scent with scent, Elizabeth tries to make two sides, two ends, two surfaces of the same thing meet, producing an account of something that exists for its own sake: a scent that revels in its own scent. This being-for-itself of the scent of the lilacs produces not driven narratives of desire, but, rather, heavy, saturated intimations of already-fullness that evoke a 'tension free' zone (Moine, 8). This fantasy of complete equivalency between provision and need constitutes an alternative, less conservative version of Austin's ideal of retreat (his fantasy about a world that would provide an assurance of total fulfilment and refuse to countenance lack or loss). In this environment of total compensation, the lilac scent represents the unexpected, even scandalous, possibility of the pleasure of 'one woman by herself.' Thus von Arnim responds to Austin's patriarchal narrative with the unsolicited, excessive, and perhaps obscene gift of her own efflorescent, orchidaceous garden utopia.

While flower passages like these are a generic convention in garden books, von Arnim's book recontextualizes them in relation to Elizabeth's discourse of withdrawal,

antisociality, and autoeroticism. In this context, the flower passages can be read as constituting a space of autoerotic retreat on the level of the text itself, as the following example reveals:

Two of the eleven [flowerbeds] are filled with Marie van Houtte roses, two with Viscountess Folkestone, two with Laurette Messimy, one with Souvenir de la Malmaison, one with Adam and Devoniensis, two with Persian Yellow and Bicolor, and one big bed behind the sundial with three sorts of red roses (seventy-two in all), Duke of Teck, Cheshunt Scarlet, and Prefet de Limburg. This bed is, I am sure, a mistake, and several of the others are, I think, but of course I must wait and see, being such an ignorant person. Then I have had two long beds made in the grass on either side of the semicircle, each sown with mignonette, and one filled with Marie van Houtte, and the other with Jules Finger and the Bride; and in a warm corner under the drawing-room windows is a bed of Madame Lombard, Madame de Watteville, and Comtesse Riza du Parc; while farther down the garden, sheltered on the north and west by a group of beeches and lilacs, is another large bed, containing Rubens, Madame Joseph Schwartz, and the Hon. Edith Gifford. (19-20)

Schaffer, commenting on ‘the prettiness of von Arnim’s prose,’ declares that, ‘if critics wanted to dig deeply into women’s [literary] work, writers like von Arnim discouraged such activity by providing them with a deceptively flat, perfectly flowery field’ (69). Here Schaffer proposes that, formally, von Arnim’s text discourages closer scrutiny and refuses penetration (to ‘dig deeply’). In such passages as the one quoted above we encounter, I suggest, repetitive, inaccessible, even somewhat boring textual material that re-enacts, in textual terms, Elizabeth’s antisocial tendencies. These passages fail to welcome their visitor, that is to say, their reader (just as Elizabeth finds her visitors unwelcome). Instead, they turn in upon themselves, contemplating the excessiveness and idiosyncrasy of the flower names – they take their own language as sufficient. They constitute an anti-referential poetry of withholding that drops its inexpressive words lightly and elegantly around the edges of meaning, embodying the kind of barrier, affective, social, and sexual, that Elizabeth, likewise, builds around herself.

### **Rage, Truancy, and the Question of Genre: von Arnim’s Equivocal Feminism**

We can, then, read von Arnim’s rewriting of Austin’s text as a feminist critique and appropriation of Austin’s masculine ideal of retirement. At the same time, though, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* also contains one of von Arnim’s most pointed critiques of an organized women’s movement, for it contains a New Woman character, Minora, that von Arnim lampoons relentlessly. The ambivalence that underlies von Arnim’s literary explorations of gender makes it impossible to present any straightforward account of the gender politics of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*. I suggest in this final section that if there is a feminist politics at work in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, it is located within a very specific practice of subjective truancy: a politics, if we can call it that, of refusal and retreat. This politics is, for von Arnim, aided and abetted by the *form* of the garden book.

Römhild usefully explores von Arnim's ambivalence when she suggests that the garden diaries embody a particular dilemma: Elizabeth's 'uneasy choice between aestheticism and feminism' ('Beauty's Price' 126). New Woman feminism is, for the aesthetically-attuned Elizabeth, 'grace- and joyless' (127). It also, I note, goes against the hyperfeminine woman's *dependence* on charm and poise; for the Sophisticated Lady, 'grace' constitutes her sole survival strategy. Seen in this light, feminism constitutes an endangering assault on what Römhild calls Elizabeth's 'aesthetic femininity' (126). The Man of Wrath, in his own way, acknowledges this when he asks, 'against the belief in her own fascinations, against the very part of herself that gives all the colour to her life, who shall expect a woman to take up arms?' (141-42). Here he seems to be diagnosing a kind of 'cruel optimism,' to use Lauren Berlant's term: a dynamic in which the subject invests hope (optimism) in an object that actually prevents the subject's thriving – and that prevents her from thriving *specifically in relation to the very aspiration that caused the subject to invest in the object in the first place* (see Berlant, 23-50). A cruelly optimistic investment in aesthetic femininity certainly seems to drive Elizabeth in the sense that she invests in her femininity as her strategy for survival in a misogynistic world and thus relies on binarized gender to defend herself against the problems of binarized gender. (Indeed, we could read von Arnim's entire oeuvre as driven by cruel optimism; as Römhild has noted, von Arnim's investment in aesthetic femininity frequently leads her to write her heroines into impossible and unrewarding double binds from which she is unable to extricate them ['Beauty's Price' 138].)

Not surprisingly, given these problems of identification with feminism, in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* Elizabeth enacts what we have to admit is a 'largely individualist rebellion' (Römhild, *Femininity and Authorship* 33). This individualism is important: Elizabeth is the epitome of an *unclubbable* woman. She is fundamentally antisocial – self-reliant and suspicious of others, she is 'feline,' to use a word that Maddison has helpfully introduced into the discussion (5). Such a temperamental orientation obviously militates against the possibility of participating in collective world-making projects. Elizabeth's recourse, rather, is strategy and guile. She is a resister whose key tactic is to appear not to resist, a rebel that survives by establishing uneasy compromises with the status quo. Given all this, Elizabeth can be seen as a rather conservative voice; thus Jennifer Shepherd argues that in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* von Arnim 'peddle[d] a conservative cultural feminism to a group of readers alienated from radical feminist polemics' ('Marketing Middlebrow Feminism' 107). And yet this reading is somehow unsatisfactory; there remains something excessive and edgy about Elizabeth and about von Arnim's text.

This excess, I would suggest, following Römhild and Brown, is suppressed rage. As Römhild notes, Elizabeth's circumspection and insincerity are not only amusing but also in some way 'alarming' (*Femininity and Authorship* 25). Elizabeth is a character that secretly satirizes those around her in her diary, whilst politely remaining mute in public. Her sharp, satirical gaze constitutes a kind of silent, self-elected tribunal, noting and weighing other people's vanity, stupidity, and prejudice. It is the privacy of this tribunal that is unnerving. Elizabeth encourages others to dig themselves deeper, murmuring, 'Pray go on' (116). By withholding her dissent, she cozens her rage and allows others to hang themselves with their

own rope, thus covertly indulging her impulse to punish and humiliate them. It is a practice that we might today label as ‘passive aggression.’ Thus Römhild points out that while von Arnim has a reputation for being ‘charming and delightful,’ yet, as Erica Brown has argued, there is a ‘concealed aggression lurking in von Arnim’s writing’ that is ‘comparable to the ‘regulated hatred’ that D. W. Harding famously detected in Austen’ (Römhild, *Femininity and Authorship* 30; see also Brown 13-15, Harding 350).

Elizabeth’s rebellion, if we can call it such, constitutes not a frontal assault on the barricades, but rather a set of private practices of refusal and defiance, a kind of subjective truancy, rooted in dissension and rage that will not be, or cannot be, directly expressed. Again, von Arnim is exploring practices of retreat – here, a retreat from self-assertion and conflict, but also from contexts that displease, disempower, and humiliate the subject. Elizabeth’s text is in a sense a celebration of such acts of truancy. The critic that best describes what I see von Arnim as doing here is Wayne Koestenbaum, in his discussion of Gertrude Stein. The avant-garde and notoriously inaccessible writings of Stein constitute unlikely material for a comparison with von Arnim, whose work is identified with the nascent middlebrow and regularly praised for its charm and accessibility. However, Schaffer has suggested that ‘von Arnim’s flowery language is an important strategy in the history of women’s experimental writing’ (70) and, thinking in this vein, we can perhaps see some continuities with Stein, or at least with Stein as Koestenbaum describes her.

Koestenbaum declares that Stein’s works constitute a form of ‘self-pleased’ writing: although Stein’s works are often seen as difficult, for an attuned reader they bear soothing witness to the ways in which Stein pleased herself, the experiences of ‘complacency, freedom, prosodic waywardness’ (321) to which Stein uncompromisingly laid claim. Extemporizing on a sentence from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* – ‘I am so sorry, answered Gertrude Stein, but Miss Toklas has a bad tooth and beside we are busy picking wild flowers’ – Koestenbaum remarks that, ‘when any task (such as communication or obedience) interfered with sentence-making, Stein seems to have said *I am busy picking wild flowers*’ (326). Here we encounter an ethos of refusal that is also, perhaps, intuited by Schaffer when she remarks that women Aesthete writers such as von Arnim ‘fled from both the personal and the political’ (70). This refusal of *both* the personal and political, like Stein’s refusal even of *communication*, captures a certain kind of abdication or withdrawal in which the subject refuses, essentially, the generally accepted standards of sociality and of being a person.

We might say that something akin to this occurs in those passages in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* where Elizabeth refuses her assumed household and maternal obligations in order to withdraw to her garden and to the activity that seems to merge with the garden, her writing. The connection becomes even more striking when we consider how von Arnim’s more elaborate flower passages also withdraw from *their* assumed responsibilities, this time to the reader (to communicate, interest, delight). Thus I would suggest that both von Arnim and Stein propose an ethos of truancy that defiantly recommends a certain kind of ‘irresponsibility’ and that values a particular, blurrily overlapping, collection of items: solitude, autoerotic self-sufficiency, writing, ‘picking wild flowers.’ Read in this way,

*Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, like Stein's work, offers 'an elaborate brochure for a journey away from insult, away from punishment' (Koestenbaum 324) – a journey that Elizabeth, beleaguered by familial demands and by the assumption that she has no right to privacy or bodily integrity – most urgently needs.

This ethos of truancy, in a rather surprising twist, brings us back to questions of genre – to the knotty problem of the garden book. The garden book, I suggest, becomes for von Arnim the unlikely vehicle for her acts of *literary* truancy. This happens because the garden book, unlike the novel, does not place upon von Arnim certain demands of narrative form. When von Arnim wrote her first novel, *The Benefactress*, in 1901, she had difficulty with the move to fiction. In particular, she struggled with the ending of the novel. Many reviewers found the ending to be perfunctory, but 'the writing of even these few pages, dedicated to a neat conclusion, had given the author infinite trouble' (De Charms 89). The final scene was a romantic one, which von Arnim edited and re-edited up until the last minute, writing exasperatedly in her diary, 'Dislike and loathe love scenes' (De Charms 89). It is striking that von Arnim experienced the transition to writing novels as a punishment in which she was forced to capitulate to 'love scenes.' We could say that 'love scenes' are precisely the danger from which von Arnim's character Elizabeth flees to her garden. That is to say, the garden is for Elizabeth the space that allows her to protect her wounded subjectivity and over-burdened body from the demands of marriage and childbearing, which all constitute, in various ways, love scenes. 'Take me away from scenes of love,' Elizabeth seems to say: 'I don't like lovemaking and I don't want to love anybody but myself.'

We might analogise Elizabeth's sentiments here with those of von Arnim. Several of von Arnim's novels seem to conceive of the novel as a form of marital discipline, in that they enact – albeit ambivalently – narratives of marital reconciliation, and thus recuperate the institution of marriage. *The Pastor's Wife* (1914), *The Enchanted April* (1922), *Love* (1925), and *Mr Skeffington* (1940), for example, all present narratives in which struggling marriages are patched up in various ways. An implicit analogy emerges here whereby making endings for novels comes to coincide or invite analogy with the task of maintaining heterosexuality and the institution of marriage. This may explain why, as Römhild observes, 'throughout her career von Arnim struggled with finding the obligatory happy endings for her comedies of manners' (*Femininity and Authorship*, 39). Römhild also describes von Arnim's happy endings as 'labored,' implying that there is a kind of work being done here that von Arnim finds difficult and unrewarding ('Beauty's Price,' 138). This is in striking contrast to the very open ending, if ending we can call it, of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, in which the marital questions raised by the book remain unresolved. Elizabeth delightedly declares, 'I don't believe a garden ever is finished' (57). In this comment made by the fictional character, we perhaps encounter an echo of the author's pleasure in a form – the garden book – that is in its own way 'never finished,' in that its piecemeal, episodic structure allowed von Arnim to write without feeling any narrative demand for a conclusion.

In a speculative vein, we might consider works of narrative theory that have suggested that narrative form mirrors affective and sexual processes. Thus, for instance, Peter Brooks has explored how narratives may follow patterns of physical and psychic process, such as

Freud's model of sexual activity, which progresses from an initial excitation, through a suspenseful middle, to a climactic ending (see Brooks, particularly 37-61 and 90-112). The garden book's non-linearity, in von Arnim's hands, may be a refusal, in a sense, to 'put out' – to provide a narrative that culminates in the longed for climax (instead creating, narratively-speaking, a 'tension-free' zone, to use Moine's phrase again). To put it another way, von Arnim's struggle with endings may be connected with her desire to withhold from the lover (the 'not surrendering' that Mansfield talks about).

Schaffer usefully explores a scene in *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* in which the Man of Wrath makes one of his most egregious announcements, essentially condoning domestic violence. While the Man of Wrath expounds his views, Elizabeth's commentary switches to focus on the woods that they are riding through, discussing at some length the beauty of the Hirschwald. Schaffer asks, 'Has von Arnim plunged into nature writing simply to escape an unpleasant scene?' (69). When it comes to escaping from writing *love* scenes (understood in the broadest sense, to include all projects of maintaining marriage, procreativity, and heterosexuality), I would suggest that the answer to this question is yes. Nature writing, in the shape of the garden book, does, for von Arnim, seem to offer the possibility of a certain kind of truancy, a 'journey away' from the conventions of the novel, and at the same time a 'journey away' from the demands of heterosexuality, marriage, and procreation and ultimately from 'insult' and 'punishment' (Koestenbaum 324). I am not proposing that the garden book offers these same possibilities for all writers; my claim here, rather, is that von Arnim presents a unique treatment of the genre – one that, in some ways, allows her to produce a 'queer' text. For von Arnim, the garden book constituted for her a form in which she did not have to produce the happy endings (sexual, marital, and procreative) that 'love scenes' demand, and in which she could instead explore ways of throwing off the labour of maintaining heterosexuality. Through her appropriation of the genre of the garden book von Arnim was able to rewrite Austin's patriarchal ethos of retreat by producing an excessive and orchidaceous narrative of feminine autoeroticism and by imagining the puzzling, peculiarly private, peculiarly defiant trauancies of Elizabeth.

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