

# Colonialism, Early Modern Herbals, and Female Identity in Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posye*

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the link between colonialism and the female body as a “colonizable” space. Using both John Parkinson’s and William Turner’s herbals as examples of male-dominate knowledge, this paper argues that colonial methods of compiling, documenting, and publishing information maintain control and ownership of women’s bodies through imposed limits around women’s ability to utilize the medical knowledge compiled in herbals. These ideas are contextualized by the poetry of Isabella Whitney, which resists these male-dominated spaces by engaging with herbal knowledge in a way that highlights a system of female oppression.

In her book *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*, Londa Schiebinger addresses the colonial implications of herbal compilations produced by naturalists like John Parkinson in the British empire during the early modern period. She refers to British naturalists as “the agents of empire” whose “inventories, classifications, and transplantations were the vanguard and in some cases the ‘instruments’ of European order,” exemplifying how “technologies of collection—both material and intellectual—extended the imperial power of European nations” (Schiebinger 11). Thus, the powerful potential harboured in the acquisition of plant knowledge transforms the herbal from a passive form of technical knowledge to an instrument of “conquest and colonization” (Schiebinger 6). In domestic settings, herbals in the early modern period were used for both gardening and medicinal purposes, and their descrip-

tions were thoroughly detailed, usually citing variations in name, place, and time the plant was found, along with the purported “virtues” of each plant (Parkinson). Herbals like John Parkinson’s, titled *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris*, are cited as having been “common reading matter for early modern women” (Leong 561), though any acquired medicinal knowledge was not widely utilized in daily life but was merely a means of satisfying women’s interests (564). This lack of utility is exemplified in Parkinson’s dedication to Queen Henrietta Maria in which he says:

Knowing your Maiestie so much delighted with all  
the faire flowers of a Garden ... accept, I beseech  
your Maiestie, this speaking Garden, that may in-  
forme you in all the particulars of your store, as  
well as wants, when you cannot see any of them  
fresh upon the ground. (Parkinson 2)

Here, Parkinson fails to acknowledge the medical applicability of his compilation and instead alludes to the ornamental uses of these “faire flowers.” It should be noted that Parkinson’s dedication lies in contrast to other herbals like William Turner’s in which he positions the herbal as “profitable for all the bodies of the Princis hole Realme both to perserue men from sickens / sorowe and payne that cometh thereby” (Turner), adequately outlining its medical applications. In opposition to these misconceptions of female uses of herbal knowledge, Isabella Whitney references the limitations around acceptable levels of herbal knowledge and the healing abilities available to women in the early modern period in her poem *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posye*. As Whitney shows in this poem, herbal knowledge that expanded beyond the ornamental usage of plants could be exceedingly dangerous for women to have for fear of being seen as a “Sorceresse” (Whitney 165). Using Parkinson’s hybrid herbal and gardening manual as an example of male-owned knowledge, this paper argues that colonial methods of compiling, documenting, and publishing information to maintain control and ownership over garden spaces can be reproduced or paralleled in efforts to maintain ownership of women’s bodies. This feminization of nature consequent-

ly results in the objectification of the female body that can subsequently be documented, compiled, and colonized. I further argue that the frustration Whitney expresses in her poems through the appropriation of Plat's garden space stands in opposition to the colonial implications of both the garden space and the early modern herbal.

Control and ownership of the female body is clearly seen through the conflation of religious and colonial references in the early modern herbal. Parkinson's herbal features a frontispiece in which Adam and Eve are tending to the various plants and animals given by God in the Garden of Eden (see fig. 1). The garden is orderly, bounded by a large wall guarded by angels and full of plants, like the pineapple, that are not native to England. Parkinson's herbal also features descriptions of plants such as the pomegranate tree, which he cites as growing "plentifully in Spaine, Portugall, and Italy, and in other warme and hot countries ... brought from parts beyond the Seas" (Parkinson 431). The frontispiece's depiction of Eden being full of foreign plants and the inclusion of many "outlandish" plants in the herbal itself alludes to what scholar Amy L. Tigner refers to as "a loaded metaphor, of course, summoning nostalgia for the idyllic nature of the classical Golden Age; evoking a desire to return to the perfection and innocence of the Garden of Eden" (21). Allusions to the Garden of Eden therefore "[regenerates] paradise in the English landscape" (Tigner 191). This invocation of Eden greatly complicates the nature of the English herbal as it transcends its medicinal value into an object that

Reproduce[s] the paradise from which all seeds purportedly originated ... [constructing] a rigorous system of organization in which all plants were placed according to their species, genus, and place of geographic origin. (Tigner 163)

The equation of the English garden to the Garden of Eden contextualizes how imperial exploitation was justified in the early modern period. According to Parkinson, "God made the whole world, and all the Creatures therein for Man, so hee may vse all things as well of pleasure as of necessitie, to bee helpes vnto him to serue his God" (4), positioning

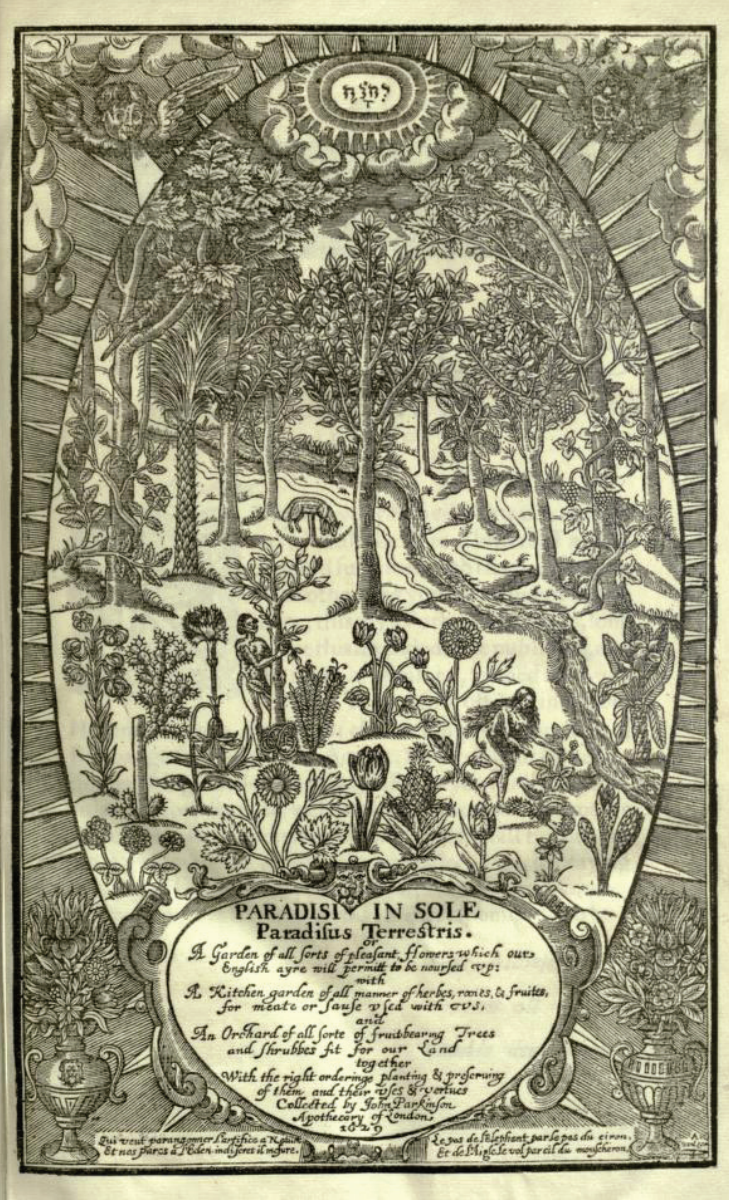


Figure 1: Frontispiece. *Paradisus in Sole Paradisus Terrestris*. 1629. London: Methuen, 1904.

man (“man” here refers specifically to men and is not used as a catch-all term for humanity) as the executor of God’s will. However, it is imperative to note that any invocation of the Garden of Eden as justification for colonial enterprises brings a problematic conception of the female body in the form of Eve into our purview. As Parkinson refers to Eden in his prefatory material, he claims that men must “remember their service to God, and not (like our Grand-mother Eve) set their affections so strongly on the pleasure in them, as to deserve the loss of them in this Paradise” (4), indicating—as is common in texts in the early modern period—that Eve, in purportedly forgetting her service to God, is responsible for humankind’s fall from grace. The use of Eve as a synecdoche for all women in the apparent fall from grace demonizes women and renders them inferior to men, consequently framing them as vulnerable beings who require close care and monitoring, not unlike the garden space itself. Evidence of this framing is seen directly in Parkinson’s herbal in his description of grapes, stating that they “stay (as it is held for true) women’s longings, if they be either taken inwardly or applied outwardly” (565), implying women need to be “stayed” or controlled. In this context, like the methodology employed to “[reconstruct], own and naturalize the larger world within a plot of English land” (Tigner 159) as a means of possession and control, the female body “needs” to be reduced to something comprehensible and controllable whose apparently imminent misdemeanors can be managed.

The reduction of the female body to these controllable terms is achieved in both the feminization of nature and the use of nature to describe constituent parts of the female body in early modern texts. There is a distinguished difference between these two concepts: a woman can be like a flower or a flower can be referred to by the female pronoun “she,” but in both situations the woman and the plant are conflated into essentially the same thing. A quick reference to Ben Jonson’s poem “To Penshurst” shows how the equation of the female to nature functions as he employs similes and metaphors that liken the female body to various aspects

of nature: the poem states “by their ripe daughters, whom they would commend / This way to husbands, and whose baskets bear / An emblem of themselves in plum or pear” (54–56). In these lines, Jonson not only equates female bodies to pieces of fruit, likening their fertility to “ripeness,” but also positions women in terms of usefulness to their “husbands,” thereby obliterating the female as an individual figure and situating her as a subservient object. The reciprocal likening of the female body to nature and the feminizing of natural spaces like the garden make women and nature interchangeable. This interchangeability renders the female body colonizable (or already colonized) as the garden acts as an emblem of England’s colonial reach. Thus, women are reduced to objects that can be catalogued, named, and “gardened” by men “as if each were Adam himself,” eradicating women as autonomous figures (Schiebinger 19).

The equation of women to natural spaces that have historically been appropriated and colonized by masculine bodies is opposed by Whitney in her sequence of poems *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posye*. Whitney is cited as one of the first female writers of the early modern period, publishing the poem sequence in the late sixteenth century. With the invention of the Gutenberg press still relatively new, writers were “nervous that printing would make it possible for anyone with ready cash to become privy to the writings that previously proved social status” (Wall 70). The dominant male social groups were desperate to maintain control over the exclusivity of writing, “point[ing] to the frailty of Eve, whose disobedience proved that the pursuit of knowledge and theological matters were best left to men” (Wall 67). In consequence, women writers of this period were urged to be silent; in turn, “female piety became a strong justification for women’s writing, since religious texts could pre-empt a charge of moral jeopardy and cement the female author’s claim to speak” (Wall 67), making the circumstances of Whitney’s authorship a risky endeavour should she be seen as irreligious. The opening lines of “Auctor to the Reader” allude to Whitney’s inability to reap the potential gains of authorship: “this haruesttyme, I haruestlesse” (1). These

lines reveal that Whitney made little money from her writings and suffered greatly from the stigma of female authorship at the time. Any remuneration for Whitney was unlikely as “literary reputation did not depend on a writer’s appearance in print as much as his or her access to the right circles of readership,” which Whitney did not have (Wall 70). Scholars like Laurie Ellinghausen go so far as to propose that if “writing for an audience defied codes of modesty ... the idea of paying a lady for her services suggested the trade of sex,” heightening the existing stigma of female authorship (3). Ellinghausen further asserts that “because women’s capacity to earn independently was sharply regulated by the ideology of the household, and because prostitution conflated sexuality and profit, chastity and earning tended to cancel one another out” (4). Ellinghausen’s ideas imply that Whitney chose to publish her poems at the known risk of becoming a pariah in early modern society. This detail is especially interesting in the context of her poetry as the decision to go forth with her distinctly secular writing, regardless of these associations, marks a significant reclamation of the female body in opposition to the aforementioned masculine colonization.

The first stanza in Whitney’s “The Auctor to the Reader” actively opposes the dominant authority over male-owned knowledge:

To reade such Bookes, wherby I thought myselfe to  
edfyfe.  
Somtime the Scriptures I perusd;  
by wantyng a Deuine:  
For to resolute mee in such doubts;  
as past this head of mine. (7–12)

In these lines, Whitney acknowledges the common conception of the period that “emphasized literacy and endowed the book with an almost mystical power,” making access to scripture “central to a person’s salvation” (Wall 66). She describes what seems like an honest effort to subscribe to these common conceptions that suggest reading as a means of moral cleansing. However, she quickly denounces them in the lines that follow:

To vnderstand: I layd them by  
and Histories gan read:  
Wherin I found that follyes earst,  
in people did excede  
The which I see doth not decrease,  
in this our present time  
More pittie it is we folow them,  
in euery wicked crime. (Whitney 13–20)

Whitney's bold declaration of the "follyes" of religious texts rejects the social constraints imposed on women of the period, who were expected to fill their time reading harmless scripture. These lines also recall the complex ways in which women can be colonized by male subjectivity. As the general authorship of texts lay in the hands of men, it is safe to conjecture that the minds of female readers were actively infiltrated by these masculine structures that controlled the distribution of knowledge. Evidence of male control is seen in comparisons between Parkinson's and Turner's herbals, both of which display questionable references to women. As mentioned in the introduction, Parkinson's herbal focuses less on the medicinal applicability of plants and instead features a surplus of ornamental and cosmetic plant uses. The herbal is evidently marketed to a female readership and thus includes statements claiming that "without bruising, on the cheek of any tender skind woman, it will raise an orient red colour, as if some *fucus* had been laid thereon" (Parkinson 9). The use of the word "orient" (which alludes to the superiority of English dominion) aside, such statements portray problematic perceptions of the female gender. Although Turner's herbal focuses more thoroughly on the medicinal uses of plants, he still refers to menstruation as "womans sicknes" on multiple occasions (43). Granted, this misnomer could be attributed to the common vernacular of the time, but this reference to menstruation as a "sicknes" perpetuates the stigma still associated with menstruation today and negatively affect female subjectivity. Thus, Whitney's condemnation of these structures in her poem depicts a significant stance against these forms of knowledge. She does however acknowledge the vulnerability of the female

body in reference to these herbals in the following lines:

My Nosegay wyll increase no payne,  
though sicknes none it cure,  
Wherfore, if thou it hap to weare  
and feele thy selfe much worse:  
Promote mée for no Sorceresse,  
nor doo mée ban or curse. (Whitney 160–65)

Her evident fear of being named “Sorceresse” reveals the precarious relationship that early modern women had with herbal knowledge. These possible misconceptions are exceedingly harmful for women in whose hands power is almost always seen as ruinous (such as in the commonly invoked female characters like Circe), making Whitney’s appropriation of herbal knowledge in the garden space extremely significant.

Furthermore, the tension resulting from “female education [being] designed to promote private virtue” (Wall 73) is seen in Whitney’s poem as she attempts to dissociate the relationship between herbal knowledge and male authorship in various ways. First, she invokes Plat’s garden as a curative space in which “the smell wherof preuents ech harms, / if yet your selfe be sound” (Whitney 53–54), simultaneously praising the garden space for its “fragrant Flowers” and denouncing the medical efficacy of flowers to heal if one is not already sound in health (52). By invoking Plat’s garden, Whitney also subverts the dominance of male authorship, bringing the garden into the realm of a poem whose construction is entirely in her control. The garden space in the context of Whitney’s poem also functions both literally and figuratively. As a literal garden space, Whitney draws the reader’s attention to its unnatural elements such as its “Bankes and Borders” (Whitney 57). The unnaturalness of the garden space is alluded to in Whitney’s use of unnatural punctuation throughout the poem: nearly every line is abnormally punctuated, disrupting the poem’s continuity and depicting the fragmented and bounded space of the garden. Her allusion to the garden’s unnaturalness leads us to speculate whether this could be read as criticism of the colonial implications of the English garden, regardless

of her acknowledgements of value in the space. Figuratively, the garden symbolizes a philosophical or intellectual space in which Whitney can construct a preventative nosegay to combat “stynking stréetes, or lothsome Lanes” (Whitney 67) that threaten to infect her. Whitney’s poem also dissociates the relationship between herbal knowledge and male authorship by using the poem sequence to construct her own herbal.

In *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posye*, Whitney features one hundred and ten unnamed flowers that form a nosegay, each followed by a short piece of advice meant to protect the mind as “[her] selfe dyd safety finde, / by smelling to the same” (“smelling” here means reading, or heeding her advice) (Whitney 96–97). The flowers that constitute the nosegay can loosely read as Whitney’s own herbal combination or “medical recipe” (Wall 74). When read in this context, Whitney’s herbal stands in opposition to herbals, such as Parkinson’s and Turner’s, that feature extensive descriptions of each plant including the multiple variations in plant name. Her omission of both the flower names and any distinguishing properties becomes a statement against the masculine forms of knowledge seen in Parkinson’s and Turner’s herbals as she brings these forms of knowledge into the realm of her own authorship.

In essence, it is the historical relationship between the female body and aspects of nature that allows these male-dominant structures to persist:

Botanical gardens that Europeans had founded worldwide by the end of the eighteenth century were not merely idyllic bits of green intended to delight city dwellers, but experimental stations for agriculture and way states for plant acclimatization for domestic and global trade, rare medicaments, and cash crops. (Schiebinger 11)

The garden no longer represents a space of healing or a return to a natural landscape; rather, it acts as a microcosm of English colonialism in which their greatest conquests are flaunted. Any associations between the female body and nature can be construed as an effort to reduce women to objects that can be colonized and appropriated. Even Whitney, with her instances of stark opposition, felt inclined to

“repayre, / to Master *Plat* his ground” (132–33), which represents her relinquishment of authority over *Plat*’s garden space. These lines are somewhat demoralizing when we consider that Whitney’s firm stance against male authority was to no avail and the negative repercussions of centuries of male dominance are still seen in views of the female body today.

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