

Article 2

2. BOTANY AND GARDENS

HORTUS CONCLUSUS

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The enthusiasm for re-creating Medieval gardens, spawned either by the spirit of rebirth or, more likely, a disillusionment with contemporary society, is a curious side effect of the new millennium. Perceived advantages are that the gardens are wholly organic and their plants are more aromatic than modern hybrids bred for colour rather than scent.

Because their beneficial genes haven't been bred out in favour of other more commercial characteristics, old fashioned species are recognised as being friendlier to wild life. However, the aspect most appealing to the stressed-out modern commuter is the sense of tranquillity and security offered by the Medieval enclosed garden. Images of walled gardens are familiar everywhere from Christmas cards to the glossy gift catalogues inserted into Sunday papers. Amorous men and serene women are depicted sitting in flowery meads surrounded by tame rabbits, which have miraculously been taught not to eat the flowers.

Yet for a supposedly spiritual society, the Medieval community was remarkably materialistic where its possessions were concerned. It was also deeply insecure not surprisingly, given that after the collapse of Rome, Christendom as a whole found itself fending off heathen invaders from the North and East and individuals found themselves at the mercy of anti-social elements resulting from the break down in law and order. Erecting barriers was fundamental to its psyche with the result that virtually all gardens were protected not just against invading armies but more realistically against thieves and marauding livestock. Cambornac and Landsberg both illustrate characteristic fences of the period, and Harvey details payments made for the purchase of hedging plants and sums paid to contractors. Thus, although all Medieval gardens were to some extent "Clus", in this sudden wave of present popularity, the term "Hortus Conclusus" is increasingly applied to any enclosed garden with little regard to what the term might actually mean.

Modern writers tend to describe any protected medieval garden, from a serf's colewort patch surrounded by dead or living brushwood to the sacrist's walled paradise, from Magical gardens (eg Klingsors in "Tristan" and that in "Eric and Enyd") to the notorious Provencal "gardens of Love", as a "Hortus conclusus". To avoid confusion, a narrower definition of what this means seems called for but a perfectly adequate solution has already been provided by the Christian church, deriving its interpretation from the Song of Songs :

"Garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse;
a spring shut up, a fountain sealed". (IV:12)

This is totally unequivocal, it is "sealed", "shut up" and "inclosed"; the definition that this is an garden both devoid of material life and with no way in or out, could not have been made more explicitly.

Moreover, the metaphor would have had even more impact on dwellers in

the arid desert regions of the Middle East where without water, there can be no life. This garden, like the Blessed Virgin Mary prior to the Annunciation, is truly "Clus" and antiseptically sterile within .

Even so, it may seem somewhat tendentious at first sight to link the old Testament passage to the Virgin and the Medieval Hortus, particularly in the light of the garden's erotically charged opening in the first five verses of Song of Songs Chapter 5. ,when it explodes in to intensely aromatic activity after penetration and fertilization by the male visitor. The Church however had no objection to erotic imagery when it needed to make a point and saw the Virgin as the Hortus Clus impenetrable by normal means in book IV, and the happily violated and fertilized garden as the Church itself in book V, bursting in to life after impregnation by the word of God.

The garden-as-a-woman allegory gains extra weight from the fact that some Roman texts, employ "Hortus" as a metaphor for "Pudendum muliebre". Whatever other literary conventions were lost in the dark ages, this was one that survived unchecked and recurs in the work of the Troubadour poets and the familiar passage in Villon's "Les Regrets de la Belle Heaumiere" which refers to "ce sadinet assis sur grosses fermes cuisses, dedans son petit jardinet" hence the importance ascribed to the paradox that, unlike "normal" women, this garden-woman was shut up making her not just special but unique. Such is this uniqueness that it is generally accepted by medievalists that the Hortus conclusus existing outside the normal parameters of space and time, must be a mystic and abstract symbol for a soul freed from any material consideration. It can therefore exist only in the mind.

As many modern writers now say, the Hortus conclusus was a garden "in a relatively small space", but omit to mention that this small space was the beholder's head. Moreover, being a wholly abstract conception, the size of the "garden" was potentially infinite, limited only by the breadth of the beholder's vision. It therefore stands to reason that the very real Park of Hesdin with thirteen gates in its vast wall, its succession of owners and crooked administrators fails to qualify as an Hortus Conclusus on several counts. Likewise the fictional garden in the Roman de la Rose is disqualified on grounds of transience, for although walled, the procreative activities pursued by both man and beast within imply regeneration and therefore the passing of time. More arguable is the Terrestrial Paradise, which only became

"Clus" after the fall and was subsequently used as a clearing-house for the dead awaiting entry into the Celestial Paradise. Some theologians argue that after the Great Schism, no more souls were allowed in.

Predictably, there is no reference to the Hortus conclusus as a literal garden as opposed to a spiritual one in any medieval text that I know of. On the other hand literature abounds with the idea of a walled garden to keep wives inviolate that made such a strong appeal to Medieval men obsessed with maintaining the purity of their precious bloodlines. Notwithstanding that women's alleged appetites made rape from their point of view an impossibility, men, who had no compunction in regarding the wives of others as fair game, saw rape as affront to their property and shut their women up as tightly as they could. Women turned this to their advantage and used their secluded gardens as meeting places for their lovers

"D'auira maniera cogossos

Hi a rics homes e baros

Qui las enserron dinz maios

Qu'estraïns non l poscar intrar

E tenon guirbautz als tiss

Cui las comandon a gardar"

(Lynne Lawner "Marcabrun and the origins of the "Trobar clus" 496)

In this instance, the poet is suggesting that it is the chaperones who happily allow themselves to be seduced, but medieval romance centres on women like Isolde and the girls of the "Decameron" who devise ways of getting men into their gardens and their beds. Clearly neither the gardens nor the women are "clus" so why the assumption that all Medieval walled gardens are Horti Conclusi?

It may be fair to assume that the misunderstanding originates from pictures of the Annunciation in which the archangel Gabriel appears to Mary in a walled, fortified and luxuriant garden complete with gates

and spurting fountains. But a hortus that is gated can be no more a "Hortus conclusus" than a spurting fountain, sealed, so in these paintings, most of which are Renaissance rather than Medieval, it is Mary herself who is the Hortus conclusus, and her surroundings that are the metaphor, not vice versa. Indeed a painting of a Hortus conclusus in its most refined form would be intensely boring to look at and the artists can scarcely be faulted on either iconographic or populist grounds for their portrayal of the burgeoning walled garden as an attribute of the Virgin rather than an equation of the Virgin.

Unfortunately some medievalists have created unnecessary problems by

misinterpreting the garden itself as the Hortus conclusus. This may seem like nit-picking, but there is an essential link between the Hortus conclusus and the philosophy behind it, an understanding of which is essential if one is to successfully re-create any medieval garden.

As Pearsall and Salter have pointed out "The walled garden was called upon to serve purposes and masters unsuited to it. The lesson to be learnt from the Roman de la Rose, from Chaucer's poetry and from the experiments of fifteenth century artists is that these gardens can not really be adapted or changed without being destroyed. It is significant that emblem literature showed itself in a strict version of that most strict of medieval walled gardens, 'the garden shut up from the beginning' the Virgin herself "

Moreover, there is also a relevance to Renaissance gardens where it is frequently suggested, usually in an Italian context, that the "Giardino segreto" is derived from the Hortus conclusus, I would suggest that it wasn't but instead may have taken its inspiration from the pictures of the Annunciation referred to above and from the non-devotional Serraglio-type gardens of love which form the back drop to the the work of such influential writers as Andreas Capellanus.

If people want to build a hortus conclusus today rather than some pastiche, they will have to begin by cleansing their minds of any worldly thoughts whilst expanding their horizons. Curiously, whilst a similar state of detachment is achieved by Indian Sadhus, the hippies in the sixties came closer to accomplishing this ideal than anyone in the West is likely to achieve in the current millennium.

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