



Medieval Gardens: Body, Space, and the Allure of the *Locus amoenus**

Ortaçağ Bahçeleri: Beden, Uzam ve *Locus amoenus*'un Cazibesi

Züleyha ÇETİNER-ÖKTEM**

Abstract

In the literary tradition, the *locus amoenus* meaning pleasant place, is generally deployed and envisioned as a garden that is idyllic, peaceful, and safe. This place is commonly considered to be a space momentarily frozen in time creating the illusion of eternal bliss. The landscape, however, may not be as innocent as it seems as it bears underlying instances of an insidious nature. Although, for instance, the Garden of Eden is apparently an archetypal garden that is deemed to be pleasant, under the seemingly safe and peaceful surface is also a space wherein gendered bodies are tempted to fall from grace. On the other hand, spaces imbued with mystifyingly sinister aspects do not completely transform into a *locus horridus* (“fearful place”) their functions go beyond being a simple *locus amoenus*. This becomes even more evident when we reflect on the placement and/or displacement of bodies within these spaces. By exploring the gardens in canonical medieval narratives, such as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, and Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Merchant’s Tale*, this article analyses the various functions of the *locus amoenus* with a specific focus on how certain bodies are perceived within these spaces through the lens of spatial theories.

Keywords: Medieval literature, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* and *Merchant’s Tale*, garden, body, space.

Öz

Edebi gelenekte, hoş yer anlamına gelen *locus amoenus*, pastoral, huzurlu ve güvenli bir bahçe olarak konuşlandırılıp hayal edilir. Bu mekân genellikle zamanda kısa bir süreliğine donmuş bir uzamı ifade ederek ebedi saadetin yanılsamasını yaratır. Tabiat, halbuki, sinsi ve gizli doğası gereği görüldüğü kadar masum olmayabilir. Mesela, her ne kadar Aden Bahçesi görünüşte bir arketipsel bahçe olarak hoş bir yeri temsil etse de yüzeyde görünen güvenli ve huzurlu olmanın kisvesi altında cinsiyetleştirilmiş bedenlerin ayarılarak tanrının lütfundan düşmelerine neden olan bir uzamı da temsil eder. Öte yandan, esrarengiz ve sinsi yönlerle aşılınmışsa da bu uzamlar tamamen bir *locus horridus*'a (korkunç yer) dönüşmez ama işlevleri de basit bir *locus amoenus* olmaktan öteye geçer. Bu uzamlarda bedenlerin konuşlandırılmaları ve/veya yerdeğişimleri incelendiğindeyse bu daha da belirgin bir hal alır. Dante'nin *İlahi Komedya*'sı, Boccaccio'nun *Dekameron*'u ve Chaucer'ın *Kuşlar Meclisi* ile *Tüccar'ın Hikayesi* gibi kanonik ortaçağ metinlerini göz önünde bulundurarak, bu makale *locus amoenus*'un farklı işlevlerini, özellikle bazı bedenlerin bu uzamlarda nasıl algılandığına bakarak, uzamsal teoriler ışığında irdelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Ortaçağ edebiyatı, Dante'nin *İlahi Komedya*'sı, Boccaccio'nun *Dekameron*'u, Chaucer'ın *Kuşlar Meclisi* ve *Tüccar'ın Hikayesi*, bahçe, beden, uzam.

*A shorter version of this article was presented at the 12th International IDEA Conference: Studies in English (Akdeniz University, Antalya, 18-20 April 2018).

**Dr., Ege University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, e-mail:zcoktem@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-7401-0437

Introduction

In a fifteenth-century illumination to Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (On the Fates of Illustrious Men and Women),¹ the central image is the temptation scene of Adam and Eve who are depicted in the Garden of Eden surrounded by tall hexagonal walls. The portal towards the left exposes the first couple being expelled from paradise as punishment for their sin, and beyond the garden walls Adam is portrayed toiling in the field while Eve sits spinning wool. The bottom right half of the page illustrates the now elderly and stooping first couple approaching Boccaccio to tell their side of the story. What is remarkable about this piece is not only how various stages of Adam and Eve's story are shown but also how furtively the Garden of Eden simultaneously becomes a space that bears multiple connotations.

One interpretation associated with the Garden of Eden is that it is a *locus amoenus* (pleasant place), which in the literary medieval tradition generally refers to a garden that is idyllic, peaceful, and safe. One would naturally assume that the archetypal Garden of Eden engaged with not only the connotations of being a safe place but would ingrain the very essence of being so. This however is not the case. Although this space does not completely transform into a *locus horridus* (fearful place) its functions go beyond being a simple *locus amoenus*. The serpent, the source of temptation,² somehow makes its way into this safe and pleasant garden. Perhaps, Eden's pleasantness is exactly where the danger lies as one would naturally assume that this space did not, or could not, harbour any inimical beings or objects. Yet with the inclusion of the serpent, this garden becomes a space where gendered bodies are tempted to fall from grace. Once excluded from Eden, then, Eve and Adam face punishment in the forms of manual labour and of aging: in other words, exclusion from the archetypal garden implies struggle and transformation. But it also implies growth and development, a transformation from innocence to experience. As this change is only allowed outside the garden and not in it, the Garden of Eden, under the guise of being benign, becomes a perfect site of entrapment and a space of divine confinement.

It is not a coincidence, then, that the Boucicaut Master³ depicted the Garden of Eden as a *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden), as all gardens by definition are enclosed spaces,⁴ generally surrounded by walls, fences, or even with various flora, such as bushes, hedges, and trees. These enclosures are always human-made spaces that are constructed and shaped, meant to keep others out as well as in. This general physical description of the garden, however, falls short when we consider the multifaceted meanings the spaces created within these gardens signify. Furthermore, it is quite difficult to precisely define the garden, as it is "a fruitless task, for gardens in medieval and early modern Britain occupied all shapes and sizes of spaces and performed multiple functions . . . gardens were and still are diverse, complicated spaces rich with interpretative possibilities" (Skinner and Tyers, 2018, p. 5). For Frye, for example, the garden is one of "the organizing metaphors of the Bible and most of Christian symbolism (1990, p.141). Rudd, on the other hand, considers gardens to be "particularly interesting spaces, owing to the cluster of associations that gather within them, some at odds with others" (2007, p. 165). For Foucault, the garden, as a heterotopia, is deemed to be one of the oldest examples of contradictory sites (1986, p. 25) where layers of meaning inform several juxtaposing spaces. As these varying views and descriptions illustrate, there is no singular, all-encompassing definition that may be attributed to the garden: gardens are intricate spaces open to multifaceted interpretations.

As much as striving to form a unified definition of the garden is problematic so is defining the concept of space: where philosophy generally chooses to deal with it as an abstract concept, geography usually sees it as something more concrete; yet even here it becomes quite problematic to draw a clear cut line between these disciplines as they tend to intertwiningly engage with one another at some point

¹ The miniature in question is from Laurent de Premierfait's French translation *Des Cas des Nobles Hommes et Femmes* (first in 1400 then again in 1409) of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (from 1355 to 1374), illuminated by the Boucicaut Master around 1415. The piece is dubbed "The Story of Adam and Eve" and is currently housed in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 63, fol.3. <<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/105151/boucicaut-master-the-story-of-adam-and-eve-french-about-1413-1415/>> accessed on 10 February 2018.

² See Genesis 3, in which Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God had forbade. Eve then persuades Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit. The couple having disobeyed divine law are punished along with the serpent and are expelled from the Garden of Eden.

³ See note 1.

⁴ Note that the PIE root (Proto-Indo-European morpheme) for the word garden is *gher which means "to grasp, enclose" <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/garden>> accessed on 12 March 2019.

inherently blurring the lines.⁵ Literature, perhaps, better illustrates the dialogue between disciplines as it has the possibility of enveloping both strands—the abstract and the concrete—more harmoniously. The garden in medieval literature, for example, although imaginative, may more or less be seen as a concrete place that generates abstract connotations. While place gives us a specific location, space allows for a certain reading of the context generated by the place. But perhaps the following explanation will better clarify what we mean when speaking about space within the confines of this article:

“Space” often elicits modification. Complications sometimes arise from the modifications (which all too frequently get omitted in the telling or the writing) rather than from any inherent complexity in the notion of space itself. When, for example, we write of “material”, “metaphorical”, “liminal”, “personal”, “social” or “psychic” space (just to take a few examples) we indicate a variety of contexts that so inflect matters as to render *the meaning of space contingent upon the context*. (Harvey, 2006, p. 119; emphasis added)

In this sense, if gardens are intricate spaces open to multifaceted interpretations and the meaning of space depends on the context, then the spatiality of the garden is ambiguous at best. The cultivated and organised garden both includes and excludes nature since it is a part of nature that is shaped and defined by the human component. The garden as a construct becomes a transitional space that belongs to humans, only connotatively connected to nature. Furthermore, as the garden is also ambivalent,⁶ because it belongs to both nature and culture simultaneously, it begs for reinterpretation. With this in mind, this article will now proceed to analyse and interpret the imaginatively constructed canonical medieval gardens as particular places that generate spaces with various connotations dependent upon the context by specifically focussing on the placement and/or displacement of bodies within these literary spaces.

A Garden in Limbo

One such imaginatively constructed gardenesque place that sparks interest is located in Limbo, on the edge of Hell. In *Inferno*, Canto IV of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the place in question is described as “a meadow of fresh green” (*Inferno*, IV: 111),⁷ a clashing image with how hell is generally perceived. The inhabitants dwelling here are virtuous pagans and those that are unbaptized. Sayers in her assessment of the virtuous pagans residing in Limbo writes “they . . . choose human virtue, and for that they have their reward. . . . [T]hey enjoy that kind of after-life which they themselves imagined for the virtuous dead; their failure lay in not imagining better” (1949, p. 95). Limbo thus becomes an extension of earthly life carried on into the after-life. Although the imagined place is but a flawed, imperfect version of heaven, it is still a *locus amoenus* where there exists “a noble castle” with “high walls” surrounded “by a lovely stream” leading “into a meadow of fresh green” (*Inferno*, IV: 106-111). The greenery entices travellers to pause for comfort. This is the point where the hero is generally on the verge of peril for the idyllic surrounding relays a place of endless and timeless leisure, a place of relaxation and comfort, a place where one is supposedly safe. This space, however, also becomes a site of temptation akin to the archetypal garden.

It is in this first circle of Hell where Dante, along with Virgil as his guide, sees four mighty shades approaching them. These shades draw near with their semblances “neither sad nor happy” (*Inferno*, IV:

⁵ See for example Plato’s *Timaeus* where space is viewed as a passive receptacle wherein all creation is placed; contra Plato, on a more specific vein, Aristotle discusses locality and the object-place relationship in his *Physics*. In a wide brush stroke, consecutive philosophers have taken up either side of the argument. See Descartes’s *Principia philosophiae* where space is defined as *res extensa*, a definition linking space and matter; Kant argues that “absolute space has a reality of its own, independent of the existence of all matter,” in *Kant’s inaugural dissertation and early writings on space*, trans. J. Handyside, ed. N.K. Smith (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1929), p. 20; taking a Jungian approach, Bachelard discusses the psychic influences of different types of space in *The poetics of space*; building on Bachelard’s work, Foucault indicates that “we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well” (1986, p. 23); de Certeau’s *The practice of everyday life* argues that social spaces are shaped through human agency wherein individuals create space through their daily actions; and Lefebvre’s *The production of space* meshes Marxist theory with geography to produce an ideological understanding of social spaces. The geographer Tuan influenced by Bachelard, discusses the ways in which people attach meaning to and organize space and place in *Space and place*; see also other geographers such as Harvey (2006) who argues that space is simultaneously absolute, relative and relational, and that these three concepts are in dialectical tension with each other (p. 126); for Soja it is not possible to conceive of space without the human component; and Massey approaches spatial theory through feminism and gender relations.

⁶ Bauman on the ambivalence of classification writes “The situation turns ambivalent if the linguistic tools of structuration prove inadequate, either the situation belongs to none of the linguistically distinguished classes, or it falls into several classes at the same time” (Bauman, Z. (1998) *Modernity and ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 2).

⁷ All quotations from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* are cited from Durling’s 1996 translation of *Inferno* and are identified parenthetically within the text by work, canto, and line numbers to this edition.

84), which is actually a situation that befits Limbo as this place is stagnant as well as timeless—timeless with a negative connotation—as nothing here actually changes. The shades they encounter are the great Greco-Roman poets: Homer, the poet sovereign, followed by Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. The poets of old hold each other in esteem and converse—probably about poetry one would assume—while Dante is briefly left outside of their exclusive circle. So Dante describes the grand assembly before him as “a school of that / lord of the highest song, who soars above the others like / an eagle” (*Inferno*, IV: 94-96). Even though the resemblance made to an eagle connotes that they have sharp vision and are able to see with a bird’s eye view in depth and detail, they are also blind in that they turn inwards in order to compose. Here, there is self-absorption, a kind of self-enclosure, a metaphorical walled garden of the self, so to speak. The threat of temptation, however, reveals itself in the following lines:

When they had spoken together for a time they
turned to me with sign of greeting, and my master
smiled at that;

and they did me an even greater honor, for they
made me one of their own band, so that I was sixth
among so much wisdom. (*Inferno*, IV: 97-102)

At this point, Dante has fallen under the spell of the garden that has unwittingly ensnared him. By considering himself to be one of the great poets, Dante is intentionally inscribing himself into the canon of western literature: from Homer to Dante. Before, at the beginning of his journey that began in the Dark Wood, he was humble and terrified, but now, in a serene surrounding, by considering himself to be the sixth greatest poet, Dante is on the brink of being devoured by his own hubris. This is the great temptation that the garden in Limbo offers; this is Dante’s version of grandeur and self-absorption.

Dante’s journey to this garden had brought him from the Dark Forest and through the Gates of Hell on which the inscription had warned the weary traveller about the very nature of the space that awaited them on the other side: “Abandon every hope, ye who enter” (*Inferno*, III: 9). Dante’s mobility and movement throughout the *Commedia* is travelling from one enclosed space into another interlocking enclosure, very much like a prison within a prison. Not only is Hell an enclosed space with its own surveillance systems but the same also follows for Purgatory and Paradise. Moreover, the garden is also a *hortus conclusus* which may denote that there are layers and layers of supervised, or self-supervised, micro-prisons throughout the various regions of all three realms. Dante, unfortunately, has yet to travel from one enclosure to the next until he can finally meet his Maker. But for now one is left wondering whether the garden in Limbo is a *locus amoenus* or a *locus horridus* in disguise.

Spaces of Re-Creation

Moving from the periphery of Hell to the outskirts of Florence, the timeless garden depicted in the frame narrative of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is perhaps the most Edenesque, and therefore, the most dangerous of them all. A group of ten people—seven women and three men—flee, albeit briefly, from Florence where due to the devastating plague people are rapidly dying, falling like leaves in autumn. The *brigata* composed of colourful characters decides to take a brief reprieve from the engulfing devastation brought about by the calamity. By escaping to the countryside, however, this group metaphorically surrounds itself willingly by invisible bars that enclose them. Instead of embracing the freedom offered by the rural landscape, they choose to construct a micro society that mirrors Florence before the deadly pestilence, thus re-establishing a societal hierarchy, by doing so, the brigata reinforces the notion that “*space is a practiced place*” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117; emphasis in original) and that “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 96). Since spatial practices had degenerated in the city, no longer were there any structures, secretly or otherwise, steering social life or implementing societal values; hence the brigata’s need to recreate a familiar structure in order to establish some sense of normalcy.

The Black Plague of 1348 depicted in the *Decameron* not only affected the perception and function of urban and rural spaces but also forcibly altered social practices carried out within these spaces: “In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city” writes Boccaccio, “For like everyone else, those ministers and executors

of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased” (1353/1995, pp. 7-8). Besides the deterioration of government, close familial bonds also disintegrated where even parents would refuse to take care of their own children. Servants demanded higher wages, women did not object to being cared for by male servants or male doctors. But perhaps the most telling sign of the decline in societal values was the rapidly changing burial customs where instead of honouring the dead “they hastily lowered the body into the nearest empty grave they could find” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 10). Shortly after, due to the multitude of corpses, mass graves were dug: “there were no tears or candles or mourners to honour the dead; in fact, no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 11).

The city having transformed into a mass grave inevitably changed the function of urban spaces: the city no longer was a site of social interaction and exchange. The situation in rural areas was not all that different: “in the scattered hamlets and the countryside proper, the poor unfortunate peasants and their families . . . collapsed by the wayside, in their fields, and in their cottages . . . dying more like animals than human beings” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 12). Perhaps due to the low population density of rural areas, when compared with the city, “the spectacle is less harrowing inasmuch as the houses and people are more widely scattered” hence the need to “get away from this city” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 16) in favour of spending time in the countryside where

There we shall hear the birds singing, we shall see fresh green hills and plains, fields of corn undulating like the sea, and trees of at least a thousand different species; and we shall have a clearer view of the heavens, which, troubled though they are, do not however deny us their eternal beauties, so much more fair to look upon than the desolate walls of our city. (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 16)

The contrasting images of urban and rural areas inevitably construct binary oppositions: where the lived experience of the city proves to be no different than hell, the countryside provides the semblance of being heaven on earth: “The spot in question was some distance away from any road, on a small hill that was agreeable to behold for its abundance of shrubs and trees, all bedecked in green leaves” furthermore, “Delectable gardens and meadows lay all around, and there were wells of cool refreshing water” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 19). This sharp contrast between the confines of the city and the freedom offered by the countryside is however only superficial.

Dioneo, one of the three men in the brigata, proposes that they spend their time with an abundance of “laughter, song and merriment” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 20). Dioneo not only represents the pleasure principle but he is also the most digressive character in the group; yet he embodies a social necessity as an anarchic figure that acts as a safety valve for frustrations and anxieties of his society. Pampinea, on the other hand, reigns in the chaotic tendency of absolute freedom and suggests quite lengthily that their days should have some structure as “nothing will last for very long unless it possesses a definite form” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 20). She proposes that they choose a leader from amongst themselves whom everyone would honour and obey, whose sole concern would be to devise how they should pass their time, and this sovereign should only rule for one day, electing a successor at the end of their reign. As the mother of ideas, Pampinea is elected queen for the first day as initially it was she who had suggested the retreat then later advocated for the group to have a certain form and semi hierarchical structure. Within the structural format proposed by Pampinea, the unseen workforce consisting of seven servants are given their duties while the upper class is free to roam in the gardens and meadows “and other places of great charm and beauty” where “the young men and their fair companions sauntered slowly through a garden, conversing on pleasant topics, weaving fair garlands for each other from the leaves of various trees, and singing songs of love” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, pp. 21-22). The Edenesque space inhabited by the brigata serves as an example of how the countryside is metaphorically transformed into a *hortus conclusus*, a sort of enclosure that limits movement and mobility, through an invisible yet present periphery. After an afternoon nap, the group later assembles in “a meadow, where the grass, being protected from the heat of the sun, grew thick and green, and where, perceiving that a gentle breeze was stirring, the queen suggested

that they should all sit on the green grass in a circle” and they should pass their time in this “cool and pleasant spot” by “telling stories—an activity that may afford some amusement both to the narrator and to the company at large” (Boccaccio, 1353/1995, p. 23). This suggestion confines the group to a specific spot restricting freedom of movement; yet, on another level, this space also becomes a place where stories are composed, most of which are transgressive in nature. This space may be read as simultaneously embodying a *locus amoenus* and a *locus horridus* as it encompasses transgressive as well as meditative aspects.

The Duality of Spaces

The dual nature found in these gardens is perhaps more explicitly illustrated in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* through the theme of love where the duality of temporal love is embodied in two distinct personalities: Venus (erotic love) and Nature (procreative love). Similar to Dante, the narrator is led by an authoritative figure; yet where Virgil accompanied Dante throughout most of his arduous journey, Africanus (the supposed guide) abandons the narrator on the threshold of the walled and gated garden, unceremoniously shoving him through the infamous gate with its dual inscriptions, one in gold, one in black:

“Thorgh me men gon into that blysfyl place
Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure;
Thorgh me men gon unto the welle of grace,
There grene and lusty May shal evere endure.
This is the wey to al good aventure.
Be glad, thow redere, and thy sorwe of-caste;
Al open am I—passe in, and sped thee faste!”
“Thorgh me men gon,” than spak that other side,
“Unto the mortal strokes of the spere
Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde,
Ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere.
This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were
There as the fish in prysoun is al drye;
Th’eschewing is only the remedye!” (*Parliament of Fowls*, pp. 127-140)⁸

These inscriptions, reminiscent to Dante’s *Inferno*, warn the narrator beforehand about the dual nature of the garden. The signs suggest that once in the garden there are only two available paths that may be followed: one full of bliss and the other full of sorrow. Yet Chaucer, or rather the persona chooses neither, for once he enters the garden guideless, he also becomes bodiless.

In this garden the narrator, as a disembodied observer, remains unperceived throughout the ordeal(s) he witnesses. “It is as if Chaucer were using the narrator,” says Sklute, “as a living camera through whose lens we are allowed to see what he sees, but who rarely manipulates our responses by his own interjections or emotions or amplifications” (1981, p. 120). Wherever the narrator’s gaze is cast, however, there “Were treës clad with leves that ay shal laste, / Ech in his kynde, of colour fresh and greene / As emeraude, that joye was to seene” (*PF*, pp. 173-75), which lends the perception of the garden to be an ethereal, paradisiacal space. The narrator documents this earthly paradise by enumerating a great number of trees (*PF*, 176-82), where he then describes a bountiful meadow with running water and flowers in full bloom (*PF*, pp. 183-89), and comments on an abundance of wildlife (*PF*, pp. 190-196). This earthly paradise is further described as a timeless place:

Th’air of that place so attempre was
That nevere was grevaunce of hot ne cold.
There wex ek every holsom spice and gras;
No man may there waxe sek ne old;
Yit was there joye more a thousandfold

⁸ All citations of Chaucer’s poetry are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, and will be identified parenthetically by work and line numbers within the text. In subsequent quotations the *Parliament of Fowls* will be abbreviated as *PF*.

That man can telle; ne nevere wolde it nyghte,
But ay cler day to any mannes syghte. (*PF*, pp. 204-210)

Being “Timeless and absolute, this place holds people in suspension as well” (Howes, 1997, p. 61) as no man there becomes sick nor old (*PF*, p. 207); furthermore, the garden defies human descriptions, as the joy found there was more than man could tell (*PF*, pp. 208-209); yet it is through language and perception that the garden may be known to humans, as it is never night but a clear day to any man’s sight (*PF*, pp. 209-210); hence “human language is both inadequate for describing paradise and necessary for its description” (1997, p. 61).

Within the walls of this garden are two different yet linked spaces: Venus’s Temple and Nature’s Garden. While the temple is described as being a semi-dark place, its walls adorned with broken bows, Nature’s garden is soaked in daylight, sweet and engulfed in greenery. The temple symbolises erotic love and death, where stories of old are remembered. It is a place that dwells on the past as the broken bows represent the maidens who had chosen to follow the goddess of chastity, Diana, but have fallen prey to sexuality and earthly desire induced by Venus. The relationships depicted in Venus’s space are those that were pointless, fleeting, and fruitless all ending in their demise. Nature’s garden, on the other hand, celebrates the present where future stories are yet to be told. This space symbolises an abundance of life as prospects of procreation are underway. Here, Nature assembles all species of birds to choose their mates on Saint Valentine’s Day. The birds having gathered in Nature’s garden are categorised according to their eating habits, from fiercest to mildest. In accordance with the hierarchical ordering, the three tercelles are given the opportunity of wooing the formel. At the end of a long debate, the formel rejects all three suitors. As much as Nature’s abode celebrates procreation, in the formel’s case this becomes a failed attempt to propagate. Even though a sharp contrast exists between Venus’s temple and Nature’s garden in the descriptive sense, the underlying connotations are similar in that these spaces emphasise unsuccessful relationships.

What about the Dreamer? What has the garden done to him? Or, what has he done to the garden? For the occupants, this garden is a place of perpetual dwelling, for the observer, a place of brief voyeurism where he is able to record all that he sees and witnesses, mentally gathering material. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these spatial elements within the garden may be read as the act of composition. When selecting material to compose, should the poet look backwards to the past for inspiration as signified by Venus’s temple? Or should one consider the presentness and abundance of Nature’s garden and produce stories that go against the grain creating new compositions all together? This view would transform this *hortus conclusus* into a mental space where Chaucer is undergoing serious deliberations on which path to take.

Written approximately two centuries earlier, Marie de France’s *Guigemar* depicts a similar garden that meshes carnal and procreative aspects of love. In this Breton lai, a noble lady is entrapped in a garden by a jealous husband who is later cuckolded. The description of the garden is as follows:

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 . . . 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 skilfully depicted together with the nature and obligations of love; how it should be observed with loyalty and good service. (de France, c.1170/2003, p. 46)

As a traditional literary topos, this description of the *locus amoenus* resonates with both the *Parliament* and the *Merchant’s Tale*, and as a *hortus conclusus* also poses as a prison in which the feminine component gains agency over her male counterpart. The intended and actual utilisations of these gardens, however, do not always contradict one another. As Howes notes “In *The Canterbury Tales* . . . gardens function mainly as mechanisms of control, primarily by men over women. In the Knight’s, Merchant’s, and Franklin’s tales, enclosed gardens represent the way in which women, as wives or as prospective wives, are treated as the property of men” (1997, p. 12). Rather than focus on male dominance as evinced in the Knight’s and

Franklin's tales, I would like to steer the argument towards female liberation from the garden-prison which the *Merchant's Tale* offers.

The Gendered Garden

The *Merchant's Tale*, comparable with Marie de France's *Guigemar*, also depicts a jealous husband who treats his wife more like a prisoner and in a similar fashion is cuckolded for it. In the tale, all we know about January's garden is that it is "walled al with stoon" (*Merchant's Tale*, p. 2029),⁹ that it has a well "under a laurer alwey grene" (*MerT*, p. 2037), and as a *hortus conclusus* has a single entrance through a "smale wyket" (*MerT*, p. 2045) that is always locked. January keeps the key to this gate in his pocket and is its sole bearer; the garden, therefore, is January's private space, allocated for his own personal use. Although Chaucer does not provide a comprehensive description of January's garden, the allusions he uses to define it offers more or less vital mental imagery:

So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon.
For, out of doute, I verrailly suppose
That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose
Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse;
Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
The beautee of the gardyn and the welle
That stood under a laurer alwey grene. (*MerT*, p. 2030-37)

A garden that not even the composer of the *Romance* or the god of gardens Priapus could describe is left to the imagination where one would assume that this was indeed a heavenly garden. In the ensuing lines, however, we read that Pluto, his queen Proserpine, and all their fairies often visited this garden to amuse themselves and dance around the well which inevitably links the garden to a hellish space simply by association. Through this clashing imagery we receive a double meaning/reading that January's garden offers: it may be a heavenly paradise as well as a purgatorial place. Even at the beginning of the tale, the institution of marriage, or more specifically being married to a woman, was described as being both "hevene in erthe" (*MerT*, p. 1647) and the very definition of "purgatorie" (*MerT*, p. 1670). While the mention of Priapus, a fertility god generally depicted with an enlarged, permanently erect penis, alludes to erotic desire and sexual intercourse, the reference to Pluto and Proserpine brings to mind the abduction of Proserpine which "underscores May's [a young and beautiful woman's] probable reluctance to marry [the elderly] January as well as the extent to which she may have been forced into the arrangement" (Howes, 1997, p. 99).

In the summer, January would use his private garden as a pleasure park, where "he wolde paye his wyf hir dette" (*MerT*, p. 2048) metaphorically transforming the garden into a bedchamber; however, May does not seem to enjoy his "worldly joye" (*MerT*, p. 2055). While May seems to share a similar fate with Proserpine, January embodies aspects of both Pluto and Priapus to some extent. Amid his pleasure and prosperity, however, January becomes blind for no apparent reason, driving him to be "jealous everemoore" (*MerT*, p. 2086) to such a degree that he would constantly have a controlling hand on May to ensure her whereabouts. On one fine summer day, blind January wants "to pleye / In his gardyn" (*MerT*, p. 2135-36) that "is enclosed al aboute" (*MerT*, p. 2143); yet May has already selected her playmate and it is not January. Perhaps this is where his space gradually shifts to become her space, or as Howes puts it "the narrative progresses until *her* paradise becomes *his* hell" (1997, p. 97; emphasis in original).

As the tale ensues, Chaucer allows us to further peek into the garden where we see Damian—January's servant and May's lover—perched atop a pear tree "among the fresshe leves grene" (*MerT*, p. 2327) waiting for her. The fruit bearing tree May enthusiastically describes to blind January elicits a double entendre:

⁹ Subsequent quotations to Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* will be abbreviated as *MerT* followed by line numbers.

“I moste han of the peres that I see,
 Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
 To eten of the smale peres grene.
 Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!
 I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
 May han to fruyt so greet an apetit
 That she may dyen but she of it have.” (*MerT*, pp. 2331-37)

As a mock temptation scene, the pear tree that May longs to eat from, as Howes also notes, resembles the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. The forbidden fruit May longs for, in this case small green pears, not only connotes her desire for Damian but also in hindsight reflects her unsatisfactory marriage to January. The garden in this text offers different meanings from the perspective of each of the characters that inhabit this space. In Rudd’s words “Januarie’s locked orchard is both a sign of his desire to own the young and fertile May and the place that offers May and Damion their sexual opportunity” (2007, p. 166). Nevertheless, this garden never seems to lose its initial perception of being a very private space.

Taylor suggests that “In Chaucer’s quite different marginality, stories find their solutions *in via*, in the busy city street on the way to the garden but not in it, or on the way to Canterbury but not in it” (2000, p. 75). As much as I would like to agree with Taylor, I believe the gardens in both the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Merchant’s Tale* pose as spaces where certain things are resolved, specifically from the female point of view. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, it is the formel who decides she will not participate in the prescribed ritual of choosing a mate; and in the *Merchant’s Tale*, May is able to transform her prison into a space of liberation. May, in Howes’s words, “challenges and revises the role assigned her by her culture” (1997, p. 102), to this I would add that the formel does so likewise. From the perspective of men, however, the *raison d’être* of these gardens fail them by becoming places where the female element is able to independently thrive.

Conclusion

As the above samples illustrate, the *locus amoenus* in medieval literature suggests multiple meanings on multiple levels. Although the initial sense of the medieval garden alludes to idyllic, paradisaical places that offer eternal bliss, the spaces created within these places digress from the archetypal example of Eden. In Dante’s *Inferno* this space was one that induced self-approval and a celebration of past compositions while Boccaccio’s *Decameron* presented the need to maintain social space and offered a space for composition in the form of telling or retelling stories. Chaucer’s gardens on the other hand presented feminine liberation from norms, and his *Parliament* specifically may be seen as a poet’s struggle with the act of composition while the *Merchant’s Tale* gives us old wine in a new bottle with a twist of lemon as the old temptation scene is comically presented with no ensuing punishment. In all of these metaphorical and literal enclosures, however, temptation, entrapment, and enslavement whether personal, social, or mental seem to be ongoing themes.

References

- Boccaccio, G. (1995). *The Decameron*. (G.H. McWilliam, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Chaucer, G. (1988). *The Riverside Chaucer*. (L.D. Benson, Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dante, A. (1996). *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 1 Inferno* (R.M. Durling, Ed. and Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkley: University of California Press.
- de France, M. (2003). *The lais of Marie de France* (G. S. Burgess and K. Busby, Trans.). London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces (J. Miskowiec, Trans.). *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.
- Frye, N. (1990). *Anatomy of criticism: four essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hansen, E. T. (1992). *Chaucer and the fictions of gender*. California: University of California Press.
- Harvey, D. (2006). *Spaces of global capitalism: Towards a theory of uneven geographical development*. London: Verso.
- Howes, L. L. (1997). *Chaucer’s gardens and the language of convention*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- McAvoy, L. H. (2014). The medieval *hortus conclusus*: Revisiting the pleasure garden. *Medieval feminist forum: Journal of the society for medieval feminist scholarship*, 50(1), 5-10.
- Rudd, G. (2007). *Greenery: Ecocritical readings of late medieval English literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Sayers, D. L. (Trans.). (1949). *Dante: The Divine Comedy 1: Hell*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.

- Skinner, P. and Tyers, T. (Eds.). (2018). *The medieval and early modern garden in Britain: Enclosure and transformation, c. 1200-1750*. New York: Routledge.
- Sklute, L. M. (1981). The inconclusive form of the Parliament of Fowls. *The Chaucer review*, 16(2), 119-128.
- Taylor, K. (2000). Chaucer's uncommon voice: some contexts for influence. In L.M. Koff and B.D. Schildgen (Eds.), *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: new essays on an old question* (pp. 47-82). London: Associated University Presses.