

[Review of *Le Jardin et la nature: Ordre et variété dans la littérature de la Renaissance*, by Danièle Duport](#)

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Abstract:

This article is a review of *Le Jardin et la nature: Ordre et variété dans la littérature de la Renaissance* by Danièle Duport.

Keywords: Book Review | Renaissance French literature

Article:

Danièle Duport. *Le jardin et la nature: Ordre et variété dans la littérature de la Renaissance*. Geneva: Librairie Droz S. A., 2002. 408 pp. index. append. bibl. €125. ISBN: 2-600- 00689-3.

As its title and introduction indicate, this book proposes to reexamine the philosophical and poetic antithesis between order and variety in Renaissance French literature as that opposition relates to anterior and contemporary manifestations, conceptions, and representations of the garden. For Duport, the rationale for this approach lies in the fact that, since antiquity, that space has served as an emblem for the activity and outcome of all creation. Furthermore, on the reality and images of the early modern French garden, the author rightly affirms that relatively little has been written and that her study therefore stands to set a needed foundation for scholarship on such matters.

The book is divided into three main parts, each defined by a different order of textual evidence. Subdivided into three chapters, the first part considers what may be broadly described as the scientific discourse on horticulture. Here Duport surveys an array of treatises, from Pliny's *Natural History* through Claude Mollet's 1652 *Theatre des plans et jardinages*. Her attention centers on tracing not only evolutions in the theory of the *jardin d'agrément*, but also shifts in the values ascribed to gardening over the centuries. Of particular interest are the remarks on the Protestant horticulturist, Bernard Palissy (chap. 2). The author highlights an important distinction

between Palissy's reformist concept of the garden, which celebrates the unaffected mimesis of nature in recognition of the perfection of God and His creation, and the prevailing Neoplatonic (essentially Catholic) mannerist aesthetic favoring the garden that imitates an idealized *disegno interne*. The latter style receives further consideration in chapter 3. Anchoring a review of garden descriptions furnished in sixteenth-century travel accounts is an examination of commentaries from the likes of Montaigne and Claude Virey on the *terza natura* played out in the mannerist gardens of Italy.

The second part inaugurates an investigation of the garden as a *topos* in Renaissance literature of the imagination. The writings studied are of three types, each the object of a separate chapter: pieces in which the garden assumes or challenges a certain allegorical significance, those in which it invites an alchemical reading, and those where it figures the newly redeemed rustic life. In the first case, Duport focuses on the works of Jean Lemaire and Clement Marot. Both poets are shown to build upon or parody the terrestrial and celestial Paradises received from the medieval Christian tradition. Whereas Lemaire pursues creative innovation by synthesizing the allegorical *loca amoena* of the Middle Ages with the deity-filled landscapes of antiquity, Marot advocates a garden that combines the delectability of the ancient model with something more personal, a space that simultaneously emblemizes a nature-inspired poetic and a rejection of the limits of conventional allegory. In her study of the gardens of alchemy, Duport discovers an emphasis on processes of growth and metamorphosis. Analyses of the alchemical representations of fountains, grottoes, and flowerbeds by Jacques Gohory and Béroalde de Verville provide evidence of a metaphorical association between gardens and the alchemical principles of material and spiritual transformation and reintegration. Turning finally to the garden as synecdoche for the rustic life, the author reviews the renewed interest of writers such as Noël du Fail and Germain Forget in the rural lifestyles promoted by Cicero, Virgil, and Horace. Following their ancient antecedents, Renaissance French writers found the topic an inspiration for the prospects of a new Golden Age based on the virtues of agricultural work and the kind of contemplative *otium* that attends a retreat from the corruptions of court and the horrors of the religious wars.

The third section expands on the previous inquiry with a four chapter examination of the garden's role in royal entrance literature and Renaissance French poetic theory. The discussion of *entrées royales* in chapter 1 foregrounds the pivotal place of garden descriptions in the form's generic shift, around 1548, from historical chronicle to *tour de force* of ephrastic poetry. The same chapter exposes the influence of Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* on that shift and the concomitant taste for mythological ornamentation and spatial fragmentation. The remaining three chapters afford an unnecessarily convoluted view of the garden and *paysage jardin* as metaphor for poetic creation from Cicero to Vauquelin de la Fresnaye. After establishing the prevalence of two contravening currents, the georgic (associated with labor, stasis, and control) and the bucolic (identified with diversity, movement, and freedom), Duport contrasts the favor accorded to the first by theorists like Peletier and Du Bellay with the preference for the second expressed by Ronsard.

The book concludes with a recapitulation of the previous findings that reemphasizes the links binding the real and metaphorical gardens of the Renaissance to prevailing Neoplatonic views of nature and to the perennial aesthetic dichotomies between nature (variety) and art (order). As an addendum, Duport supplies eight appendices, the first of which provides a brief history of Renaissance gardens, and the last, excerpts from Nancel's account of the Duc d'Alençon's 1577 entrance into Tours. While there can be no dispute that Duport has met her goal to set a foundation for future investigations into this topic, that foundation is not without flaws. Beyond the periodic opacity of its presentation (due to an overly dense style of expression and some factual inconsistencies), the analysis seems wanting for its relative (or wholesale) neglect of garden and rustic imagery in works such as Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*, Belleau's *Bergerie*, and Tyard's *Douze fables de fleuves ou fontaines* and *Discours du temps*. One also regrets the exclusion of all illustrations from a study whose primary sources are themselves often enriched by pictorial supplements. These shortcomings aside, Duport's book has much to offer the scholar with an interest in Renaissance French literature and cultural history.

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