

Women Writers and the Garden: Metaphors of Power and Place

Faculty Name: Dr. Rimi Nandy, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Christ University, Pune Lavasa Campus

Course Description:

This course explores the multifaceted relationship between women and gardens in literature, focusing on texts from the [Women Writers Online \(WWO\) collection](#). From enclosed convent gardens to expansive landscapes of romance, resistance, and knowledge, gardens have long served as rich literary and cultural spaces where women write, dream, court, heal, and rebel.

Through close readings of texts spanning the 16th to the 19th centuries, students will analyze how women writers use gardens to negotiate identity, power, sexuality, and scientific knowledge. Alongside literary analysis, students will engage with **digital humanities methods**, utilizing the [Women Writers Vector Toolkit](#) to examine keyword trends and thematic networks in historical women's writing. The course will also incorporate interdisciplinary approaches, including ecofeminism, historical botany, and gender studies, to uncover the symbolic and practical roles gardens played in women's lives.

By the end of the course, students will have a deeper understanding of how women writers have historically used gardens as spaces for storytelling, self-expression, and resistance.

Course Objectives:

- Analyze the representation of gardens in women's literature from the early modern period to the 19th century.
- Explore the intersection of gardens with themes of gender, romance, medicine, and sexuality.
- Apply digital humanities tools to examine textual patterns in WWO.
- Compare historical representations of gardens with contemporary ecofeminist and literary theories.
- Develop research and writing skills through textual analysis, digital projects, and independent research.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. **Critically analyze** representations of gardens in women's writing, identifying their symbolic and thematic significance across different historical periods.
2. **Evaluate women's contributions** to botanical and medicinal knowledge through historical texts, particularly in relation to healing practices and domestic medicine.
3. **Apply digital humanities methodologies** by using the **Women Writers Vector Toolkit** and other text analysis tools to study patterns in women's garden writing.
4. **Develop original research projects**, integrating close textual analysis, historical context, and digital methods to explore the role of gardens in women's literary traditions.

Required Materials:

- Primary texts from **Women Writers Online (WWO)**
- Supplementary readings on **eco-criticism, gender studies, and digital humanities**
- Access to **digital tools** for text analysis (Women Writers Vector Toolkit, Voyant Tools, etc.)

Unit I: Introduction

We begin by examining how gardens are situated within literary traditions of the pastoral and Romantic. This unit introduces key texts and digital tools to analyze how early women writers used the garden as a site for philosophical reflection, poetic creation, and intellectual engagement. The focus on the Women Writers Vector Toolkit enables students to develop critical digital literacy from the outset.

Thirty Years, Thirty Ideas: Gardens

Jennifer Munroe,

(<https://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/context/index.html#munroe.30gardens.xml>)

Anne Bannerman [Poems](#) 1800 (The Genii)

Anne Finch [The Spleen](#) (Eighteenth Century Poetry Archive)

Mary Wortley Montagu *Turkish Embassy Letters*

Additional Reading:

1. [The Garden as Occasional Domestic Space](#), Catherine Alexander
2. Home, the culture of nature and meanings of gardens in late modernity

Unit II: Gardens, Parks and courtship

Building on the conceptual grounding in Unit I, this unit turns to the garden as a site of gendered interaction. Through texts centred on pleasure gardens and romantic encounters, students explore how

public and semi-public green spaces mediated societal norms, courtship rituals, and personal agency. This unit connects literary representations to historical practices, reinforcing the garden's role as both real and imagined space.

Fanny Burney *Evelina*

Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice*

[*Letters of Love and Gallantry*](#)

Anne More Candler [*Poetical Attempts*](#)

Hannah Cowley [*The Belle's Stratagem*](#)

Jeanette Winterson *The PowerBook*

Unit III: Women, Gardens and Medicines

The course then shifts to the garden's medicinal and epistemic functions. In this unit, students investigate how women's roles as healers, herbalists, and midwives intersect with representations of gardens as spaces of care, resistance, and embodied knowledge. The texts analyzed here highlight the intersection of gender, science, and marginalization.

Jane Sharp, [*The Midwives Book*](#)

Anne Wheathill, [*A Handful of Wholesome \(Though Homely\) Herbs*](#)

Rebecca Laroche, [*Women and Medicine \(and Witchcraft\) as Revealed through WWP texts*](#)

Unit IV: Women, Literature and Domesticated Landscape

The final unit consolidates earlier themes by focusing on the garden as part of the domestic and cultural landscape. Students consider how gardens reflect and critique the domestic ideologies of their time, serving as metaphors for women's labor, creativity, and confinement. This unit brings together literary analysis and social history to underscore how the garden operates as a mirror of evolving gender roles.

Anna Laetitia (Aikin) Barbauld [*A Legacy for Young Ladies*](#) 1826 (On Plant)

Hannah Woolley, [*The Cook's Guide: or, Rare Receipts for Cookery*](#) (Kitchen garden)

Mary Wroth, [*The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*](#)

Caroline Elizabeth Cushing, *Letters Descriptive of Public Monuments, Scenery and Manners, in France and Paris, Vol 2*

Assignment I : Assignment (To be completed to progress to next unit)

Instructions:

Using excerpts from Unit I texts, learners will select 3–5 garden-related keywords. They will create a single-slide or digital panel “garden map” that places each keyword in a section of a symbolic garden (e.g., “Enclosure,” “Growth,” “Solitude”) and pair each with:

- A quote from the text

- A short (100-word max) reflection
- One image (public domain)

Assignment II : Choose one primary text from the course and explore whether it acts as a *window into*, or *exception to*, the gendered and cultural dynamics of its literary period.

Instructions

1. Select one text you've read (from any unit).
2. Research two historical or literary facts about the time period in which the text was written (e.g., women's roles, garden use, courtship norms, medical practices).
3. Create a **digital poster** or **slide** that includes:
 - A short summary of the text's portrayal of gardens or gender.
 - Your two historical/literary facts (with sources).

Additional Readings:

1. **Melissa Bailes** – *Women, Gardens, and Solitude in Eighteenth-Century Britain*
2. **Deidre Shauna Lynch** – *"Young Ladies are Delicate Plants": Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism*
3. **Sarah Bilston** – *Queens of the Garden: Victorian Women Gardeners and the Rise of the Gardening Advice Text*
4. **[Anonymous/Compiled Work]** – *The History of Women in Gardening: From Ancient Times to Modern Landscapers*
5. **Jennifer Munroe** – *Gender and the Garden in Early Modern English Literature*
6. **Catherine Horwood** – *Women and Their Gardens: A History from the Elizabethan Era to Today*
7. **Catherine Alexander** – *The Garden as Occasional Domestic Space*