Appendix 5.6: from Horace Walpole's correspondence with Mary and Agnes Berry, Hannah More, and Thomas Barret (1789)

Horace Walpole (1717–1797) was a formidable figure in society and the arts. He was the author of the seminal gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). He established his own press in 1757 at Strawberry Hill, the house that he had transformed into a Gothic castle. Walpole also carried on a vast correspondence which is a rich reflection of his time and society as well as of his own taste and opinions. Walpole and Darwin never met, but a mutual friend, Richard French (1738/9–1801), corresponded with Walpole. After *The Loves of the Plants* was published, French wrote to Walpole in some detail about Darwin's progress with the other half of *The Botanic Garden*, *The Economy of Vegetation*, discussing the Portland Vase, mentioning plans for the book's Frontispiece, and sharing draft passages. Walpole made some suggestions for revision. (Letter from Richard French, 14 February 1790, in *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, Volume 42, pp. 268–72).

The following letters, and selected notes, are taken with permission from *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, edited by W. S. Lewis (Yale University Press, 1937–1983), available online through the Lewis Walpole Library.

[Vol. 11, p. 10]

To Mary and Agnes Berry,[1] Tuesday 28 April 1789

[Berkeley Square,] April 28, at night, 1789.

By not saying *no* to Thursday, you I trust understood that I meant *yes*, and so I do. In the meantime I send you the most delicious poem upon earth. If you don't know what it is all about, or why, at least you will find glorious similes about everything in the world, and I defy you to discover three bad verses in the whole stack. Dryden was but the prototype of *The Botanic Garden* in his charming 'Flower and Leaf';[2] and if he had less meaning, it is true he had more plan, and I must own that his white velvets and green velvets and

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rubies and emeralds[3] were much more virtuous gentlefolks, than most of the flowers of the creation, who seem to have no fear of Doctors' Commons[4] before their eyes. This is only the second part, for like my king's eldest daughter in the *Hieroglyphic Tales*, the first part is not born yet[5]—no matter; I can read this over and over again forever, for though it is so excellent, it is impossible to remember anything so disjointed, except you consider it as a collection of short enchanting poems, as the Circæa and her tremendous devilries in a church;[6] the intrigue of the dear nightingale and rose;[7] and the description of Medea;[8] the episode of Mr Howard[9] which ends with the most sublime of lines—in short all, all; all is the most lovely poetry—and then one sighs, that such profusion of poetry, magnificent and tender, should be thrown away on what

neither interests nor instructs, and with all the pains the notes take to explain, is scarce intelligible.

How strange it is that a man should have been inspired with such enthusiasm of poetry by poring through a microscope, and peeping through the keyholes of all the seraglios of all the flowers in the universe!—I hope his discoveries may leave any impression but of the universal polygamy going on in the vegetable world, where however it is more *galant* than amongst human race, for you will find that they are the botanic *ladies* who keep harems and not the *gentlemen*—Still, I

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will maintain that it is much better that we should have *two* wives, than your sex two husbands—so pray don't mind Linnæus and Dr Darwin: Dr Madan[10] had ten times more sense. Adieu!

Your doubly constant

Telypthorus[11]

From Mary Berry, Wednesday 29 April 1789

Somerset St, Wednesday morning, [April 29, 1789.]

A thousand thanks for *The Botanic Garden*. The first thirty lines, which I have just read, are delicious, and make me quite anxious to go on, for I must at last own with blushes what I have hitherto concealed, perhaps improperly, from my husband: but as I *am* married[12] it must at last come out that I was early initiated into all the amours and loose manners of the plants by that very guilty character, Dr Solander,[13] and passed too much time in the society and observance of some of the most abandoned vegetable coquettes. I hope my having long entirely forsaken all such odd company and lived a very regular life will in some degree apologize to you for my having been early led astray.

We rejoice in the hopes of seeing you tomorrow evening.

M. Berry

[Vol. 11, p. 22]

from letter to Mary Berry 30 June 1789

You should admire all bold and unique essays that resemble nothing else—*The Botanic Garden*, the *Arabian Nights* and King's Chapel[14] are above all rules, and how preferable is what no one can imitate to all that is imitated even from the best models!

[Vol. 11, p. 211]

from letter to Mary Berry 26 February 1791

Dr Darwin alone can exceed his predecessors.

[Vol. 11, p. 339]

from letter to Mary Berry 17 August 1791

–but Dr Darwin has destroyed any admiration for any poetry but his own–do you recollect how he has described some antique statues? That canto is not yet published.[15]

[Vol. 31, p. 292]

from letter to Hannah More,[16] Wednesday 22 April 1789

Berkeley Square, April 22d 1789.

Dear Madam,
As perhaps you have not yet seen *The Botanic Garden* (which I believe I mentioned to you) I lend it to you to read. The poetry, I think, you will allow most admirable, and difficult it was no doubt. If you are not a naturalist, as well as a poetess, perhaps you will lament that so powerful a talent has been wasted to so little purpose, for where is the use of describing in verse what nobody can understand without a long prosaic explanation of every article. It is still more unfortunate that there is not a symptom of plan in the whole poem. The lady flowers and their lovers enter in pairs or trios or etc. as often as the couples in *Cassandra*,[17] and you are not a whit more interested about one heroine and her swain than about another. The similes are beautiful, fine and sometimes sublime, and thus the episodes will be better remembered than the *mass* of the poem itself, which one cannot call *the subject*, for could one call it a subject, if anybody had composed a poem on the matches formerly made in the Fleet,[18] where, as Waitwell says in *The Way of the World*, they

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stood like couples in rows ready to begin a country dance?[19] Still, I flatter myself you will agree with me that the author is a great poet, and could raise the passions, and possess all the requisites of the art. I found but a single bad verse; in the last canto one line ends *e'relong*.[20]

You will perhaps be surprised at meeting *a truffle* converted into a nymph and inhabiting a palace studded with emeralds and rubies like a saloon in the *Arabian Nights*.[21]

I had a more particular motive for sending this poem to *you*: you will find the bard espousing your poor Africans.[22] There is besides, which will please you too, a handsome panegyric on *the apostle of humanity*, Mr Howard.[23]

[Vol. 31, p. 295]

from letter from Hannah More, April 1789[24]

London, April 1789.

I did not feel so much gratified in reading the poem, marvellous as I think it, as I did at the kindness which led you to think of me when you met with anything which you imagined would give me pleasure. Your strictures, which are as true as if they had no wit in them, served to embellish every page as I went on, and were more intelligible and delightful to me than the scientific annotations in the margin. The author is indeed a poet, and I wish with you, that he had devoted his exuberant fancy, his opulence of imagery, and his correct and melodious versification, to subjects more congenial to human feelings, than the intrigues of a flower garden. I feel, like the most *passionate lover*, the beauty of the cyclamen or honeysuckle, but am as indifferent as the most *fashionable husband* to their amours, their pleasures, or their unhappiness. Dr Percival[25] sent me an essay on the sensibility of plants;[26] but if I were to listen to these amiable but romantic philosophers, I should lose one of my greatest pleasures, and should no longer think that wearing a nosegay was a 'venial delight unblamed';[27] but be filled with alarm lest every rose and pink I gathered might make a multitude of widows and orphans. Seriously, one cannot care for the weal or woe of plants; and while one reads with admiration such fine verses, one cannot help wishing that they related the history, or analysed the passions or manners of men and women, the only people in whom, after all, with all their faults, I take any great interest.
[…] I was glad of the success of Gen. Conway;[28] though I have long since become totally indifferent to the fate of any play.

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The loves of our modern heroes and heroines have caught hold of my affections almost as little as the *loves of the plants*. Indeed, they are little more than vegetable loves; as vapid and spiritless; while the old comedies shamefully offend in another way. I could dilate with much *skill and ingenuity*, but that I know you would scold me, so I am obliged to stifle a vast many *good things*.

[Vol. 42, p. 363]

from letter to Thomas Barret,[29] Monday 14 May 1792

Berkeley Square, May 14, 1792

Dr Darwin has appeared, superior in some respects to the former part.[30] The *Triumph of Flora*, beginning at the 59th line, is most beautifully and enchantingly imagined;[31] and the twelve verses that by miracle describe and comprehend the creation of the universe out of chaos,[32] are in my opinion the most sublime passage in any author, or in any of the few languages with which I am acquainted. There are a thousand other verses most charming, or indeed all are so, crowded with most poetic imagery, gorgeous epithets and style—and yet these four cantos do not please me equally with the *Loves of the Plants*.—This seems to me almost as much a rhapsody of unconnected parts; and is so deep, that I cannot read six lines together and know what they are about, till I have studied them in the long notes, and then perhaps do not comprehend them—But

all this is my fault, not Dr Darwin's—Is he to blame, that I am no natural philosopher, no chemist, no metaphysician?

One misfortune will attend this glorious work—it will be little read but by those who have no taste for poetry, and who will be weighing and criticizing his positions, without feeling the imagination, harmony and expression of the versification.

Is it not extraordinary, dear Sir, that two of our very best poets,

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Garth[33] and Darwin, should have been physicians?—I believe they have left all the lawyers wrangling at the turnpike of Parnassus. Adieu, dear Sir!

Yours most cordially,

ORFORD

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[1] Mary Berry (1763–1852), author, and her sister Agnes Berry (1764–1852) spent their lives together. They were well acquainted with many literary and society figures of their time. In 1788 they moved to Twickenham with their father, where they met the much older Walpole and began a close and lasting friendship. After his death, Mary Berry edited *The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford* (5 vols., 1798), though the publication credited her father. She is also known for her correspondence and journals.

[2] Dryden's modernization of the poem formerly attributed to Chaucer. [from Lewis's note]

[3] See especially 2. 160–6, 245–53, 266, 341–55 of Dryden's poem. [Lewis's note]

[4] The law courts in London that dealt with marriage licenses and matrimonial cases.

[5] The second of HW's *Hieroglyphic Tales* [1785], "The King and His Three Daughters," begins: "There was formerly a king, who had three daughters—that is, he would have had three, if he had had one more—but somehow or other the eldest never was born" (*Works* 4.330). [from Lewis's note]

[6] *LOTP* III:7–38.

[7] *LOTP* IV:305–20.

[8] *LOTP* I:383–92.

[9] *LOTP* II:439–72.

[10] The Rev. (but not Dr) Martin Madan (1726–1790), […] author of *Thelyphthora*, 1780, in favour of polygamy. [from Lewis's note]

[11] Mary Berry altered the signature to "Thelypthorus." [Lewis's note]

[12] Neither Mary Berry, nor her sister Agnes, nor Walpole ever married; Mary refers to their ongoing mutual joke about an imaginary bigamous marriage of Walpole and both sisters.

[13] Daniel Charles Solander (1736–1782), Swedish botanist; pupil of Linnæus; came to England, 1760; catalogued natural history collection at British Museum; accompanied Joseph Banks on Cook's voyage, 1768–1771, and to Iceland, 1772; D.C.L. [Doctor of Civil Law] Oxford, 1771; keeper of the Natural History department of the British Museum, 1773. As he published nothing independently, Mary Berry may refer to his edition of Linnæus's *Elementa Botanica*, Upsala, 1756, or to the collection at the British Museum. It has not been found that Solander gave public lectures, or that the Berrys were acquainted with him. [Lewis's note] Berry's suggestion that he is a "very guilty character" is likely based on the association of Cook's 1768–1771 Endeavour voyage with promiscuous sex, due to reports of the explorers' affairs with the supposedly uninhibited natives of Tahiti, and the main purpose of the voyage being observation of the transit of Venus. See *LOTP* IV:467–86 and editor's note.

[14] The chapel of King's College, Cambridge.

[15] *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) II:101–08.

[16] Hannah More (1745–1833), writer and philanthropist. She was a member of the Bluestocking circle. A devout Christian, she belonged to the Church of England and was inspired by Evangelicalism. Her faith motivated her

efforts to reform manners and morals, her work for the education of the poor, and her activism for the abolition of slavery. She is best known for her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799); the counter-revolutionary Cheap Repository Tracts (1795–1798) which she organized and contributed to; and her one novel, *Coelebs In Search of a Wife* (1809).

[17] *Cassandre*, by Gautier de Costes de la Calprenède (1614–1663), novelist and dramatist. HW owned Vols 3–5 of Sir Charles Cotterell's English translation, 1725. [from Lewis's note]

[18] During the 17th and 18th centuries irregular marriages in vast numbers were performed at the Fleet prison, until 1753, when an act preventing such marriages […] was passed by Parliament. [from Lewis's note]

[19] William Congreve's (1670–1729) Restoration comedy, *The Way of the World* (1700), 1.2.

[20] *LOTP* IV:415.

[21] *LOTP* IV:391–406.

[22] *LOTP* III:347–468.

[23] *LOTP* II:439–72.

[24] This letter did not reach Walpole. In a letter dated 23 June 1789, he reprimands her: "I lent you the *Botanic Garden*, and you returned it without writing a syllable" (p. 300).

[25] Thomas Percival (1740–1804), M.D., F.R.S. [Fellow of the Royal Society]; author. [Lewis's note]

[26] *Speculations on the Perceptive Power of Vegetables*, Warrington, 1785. [Lewis's note]

[27] Cf. *Paradise Lost*, 9.5 ("venial discourse unblamed"). [Lewis's note]

[28] That is, the success of General Henry Semour Conway's (1720–1795) comedy *False Appearances* (1789), which Walpole referred to in his letter.

[29] Thomas Barrett (1744–1803) was a collector and antiquarian, and, briefly, a Member of Parliament. Inspired by Walpole, around 1783 he remodeled his house, Lee Priory, in the Gothic style.

[30] That is, *The Economy of Vegetation* has been published; "the former part" is *LOTP*.

[31] *The Economy of Vegetation* I:59–68

[32] *The Economy of Vegetation* I:103–14

[33] Samuel Garth (1661–1719) […] poet and physician, whose poem *The Dispensary* [1699] was a favorite of HW's. [from Lewis's note]