

GEOMETRY AND THE GARDEN

by John Barrell

The grounds of Sidley Park, the house which provides the setting for *Arcadia*, are a palimpsest on which all three of the main styles of eighteenth and early nineteenth century landscape garden have at one time or another been inscribed. Until the 1750s, the garden was laid out according to an aesthetic that saw beauty only in symmetry, in the geometrical pattern made by circular pools and the intersecting straight lines of avenues, allées, terraces, hedges. This formal design was then buried beneath the improvements of Lancelot ('Capability') Brown, the most famous advocate of a 'natural' style of gardening that saw beauty only in asymmetrical arrangements of sinuous curves and trees planted in loosely scattered informal groups. As *Arcadia* opens, this design is about to give way to the 'picturesque' style favoured by Mr Noakes. The picturesque was an aesthetic of irregularity, of 'romantic' wildness, in which the continuous, serpentine lines of Brown were deliberately broken and obscured by sudden declivities and the jagged shapes and shadows of rocks and unkempt trees.

These different styles of gardening were treated by some contemporary commentators as mere changes in fashion, and they were frequently compared with changing fashions in dress, particularly in women's dress. For others, however, they were - like fashion itself - part of a complicated history of social and political change. As Britain became a more powerful, more confident nation, more conscious of the uniqueness of its history and constitution, the formal, geometrical style of gardening was understood as an alien and authoritarian imposition on the landscape, an expression of the attempt made by the Frenchified Stuart kings to confine the free spirit of Britain. The 'natural' style of Brown was thought to be more in tune with the informal genius of the English landscape, and it seemed to give the genius of the English people room to breathe and to expand, for Brown was adept at creating open vistas, which made the park and its surrounding countryside seem part of one harmonious landscape that ran unbroken to the horizon and beyond.

Like many stylistic innovations that become popular in Britain, the 'picturesque' style offered the simultaneous pleasures of modernisation and antiquation: picturesque gardens looked new by looking old, as if they had been neglected for centuries, or had never been touched by human hand. An advantage of such gardens was that, once created, they were much cheaper to maintain than those they replaced. But the popularity of picturesque gardens, like that of their predecessors, can be understood also in terms of a changing politics of taste. By the end of the eighteenth century English liberty was no longer defined - or not by those who could afford to think about styles of gardening - against the authoritarian geometry of European absolute monarchies; it was the Jacobins, it was Thomas Paine, who now threatened to force the English to adopt what Edmund Burke described as the geometrical principles of government, newly discovered in America and France. Against this new threat, the stability of England and Englishness was staked on a reverence for the age-old 'Gothic' or feudal institutions of England. Like the decaying oaks and Gothic ruins in a picturesque landscape, these should be propped and patched up, but it would be sacrilegious as well as dangerous simply to sweep them away. The picturesque landscape garden was a visual emblem of all that was threatened by the new democratic politics.

HANNAH: ENGLISH LANDSCAPE WAS INVENTED BY GARDENERS IMITATING FOREIGN PAINTERS WHO WERE EVOKING CLASSICAL AUTHORS. THE WHOLE THING WAS BROUGHT HOME IN THE LUGGAGE FROM THE GRAND TOUR.

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18th-century painting showing the gardens of Blenheim Palace, laid out by Capability Brown in the 1760s

It was an emblem, however, of change welcomed as well as change resisted. The formal, symmetrical landscape garden was conceived as a social, even a public space, a setting in which the members of an aristocracy showed themselves to each other; the same was true in a different way of the open vistas of Brown, landscapes waiting to be animated by figures, like the paintings of Claude on which they were modelled. The picturesque landscape, on the contrary, was full of shadowy and secret places which offered the pleasures of solitude and of not being seen. Garden design, like domestic architecture at the same time, was increasingly acknowledging the value of privacy, of interior life, and this was part of the process by which it was the polite middle class rather than the aristocracy that was beginning to exert the most powerful influence on manners and morals. If the gardens of the earlier eighteenth century seem to endorse a characteristically aristocratic notion of personal identity, as something to be displayed, picturesque gardens endorse the more characteristically middle-class notion that we are truly ourselves only when we are alone. But just because it was conceived as wild and empty space to be enjoyed in solitude, the picturesque

garden could be freely populated with figures supplied by the imagination. The grounds of Sidley Park, one of the characters in *Arcadia* points out, are being remodelled as the landscape of the Gothic novel - in which the gloomiest, most overgrown places of nature are the picturesque settings for lovers' daydreams, for long-awaited meetings of those who love in secret, for terrifying encounters between the heroine and her would-be seducers and abductors. When it is complete, Mr Noakes' garden will be a landscape where the dangers of solitude can be enjoyed in safety, and where romantic reverie can wear the mask of serious contemplation. To the women of the house in particular, Sidley Park, like the Gothic novel itself, will offer new opportunities to enjoy a new kind of freedom. It won't be a political freedom, of the kind enshrined in rights and institutions, for though versions of that freedom are imaged, as we've seen, in the picturesque as well as in the 'natural' style of gardening, that was a freedom open to be enjoyed only by men. It will be the freedom of fantasy, a space in which women can imagine other selves and other futures, perhaps less constrained, certainly more exciting, than those which usually awaited them. ■