“Unpleasant, tho’ Arcadian Spots”:
Plebeian Poetry, Polite Culture,
and the Sentimental Economy
of the Landscape Park

In an essay on Oliver Goldsmith’s The Deserted Village, the Quaker poet and commentator John Scott told the following anecdote: “The late Earl of Leicester, being complimented upon the completion of his great design at Holkham, replied, ‘It is a melancholy thing to stand alone in one’s country. I look round; not a house is to be seen but mine. I am the giant of giant-castle, and have eat up all my neighbours.’”¹ By the 1770s Scott was one of a growing number of critics who, like the repentant Leicester, found it difficult to see a moral justification for the enormous parks associated with Lancelot “Capability” Brown. This was partly because Brown’s ascendancy in the second half of the eighteenth century coincided with a perceived breakdown of paternalistic social relations and an actual decline in the real living standards of rural laborers.² For Scott, these “fashionable” “improvements” had been made possible by the accumulation of wealth into fewer hands, a development that, as Goldsmith had sought to show, involved the enclosure of commons; the “demolition,” or at least relocation, of cottages; and the engrossment of small farms.³ Landscape parks, in other words, were funded by a highly commercialized system of agriculture, and this was profiting landlords, pauperizing laborers, and thus eroding the “moral” economy of a once paternalistic rural society. Isolating the country house from the working countryside, parks accordingly became signs of how landlords were abandoning public duty for private pleasure, leaving laborers with “less work, the same wages, and more expence for necessaries.” “Pleasure,” Scott protested, “may be justly said to have encroached on cultivation, and the rich to have remotely abstracted from the provision of the poor.”⁴

A supporter of the American Revolution,⁵ Scott considered the landscape park as proof that the landed classes had become parasitic on the populace they
were supposed to sustain. The Whiggish idea of liberty that such parks symbolized—what Horace Walpole described as "the opulence of a free country, where emulation reigns among many independent particulars"—was thus redefined as a form of luxury, the freedom of the patrician elite to make the land and its inhabitants serve their own personal pleasure. To a large extent this ethical attack on luxury was rooted in a classical republican theory of liberty that, since it defined a free and just polity as a manly and agrarian polity, was as hostile to women as it was to commerce. Indeed, many educated women moralized the Brownian landscape park in order to legitimize their participation in polite society, along with their involvement in the public sphere of aesthetic and political judgment. Walpole's friend Hannah More, for example, revealingly referred to "Browne" as a modern "Midas" who turned "gold itself into beauty," before adding "I had always a particular love for the talents of a man who could improve the taste of a country without impairing its virtue." In light of Scott's comments, More's insistence on the ethical probity of Brown must be read as an attempt to prevent his style of gardening from being apprehended as merely a form of luxury. Rather than embodying the corruption that was the outgrowth of conspicuous consumption, she regarded such parks as emblems of liberty—defined much more narrowly than Scott had defined it as the security of property. In this respect, More's argument paralleled that made by those apologists for modernity, from David Hume onward, who contended that women and commerce civilized and uplifted the nation. For More, as for a growing number of polite observers, the landscape park exerted a civilizing influence on agrarian life, refining a formerly brutal patriciate and reforming an intractably idle and irreverent populace.

Clearly, this conflict over the meaning of the landscape park was informed by two competing definitions of morality. On the one hand, there was the ancient, public, and (implicitly) masculine version of morality that emphasized the disinterested virtue of the gentleman of landed property and the consequent loyalty, bravery, and independence of the laboring population he ruled. In this ideal "moral" economy the use of the land was meant to be subordinate to the preservation of social harmony and the limitation of extremes of wealth and poverty. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, such moral imperatives had been rendered increasingly redundant as the rise of commerce, in theory and in actuality, reduced social relations to purely economic relations between consumers and producers, the owners and the disinherited workers of the land. On the other hand, this demoralized view of society was frequently justified by being linked to a modern, private, and (implicitly) feminine version of morality that emphasized the refined sensibility of the polite and the consequent passivity, industry, and contentment of the plebeian recipients of their sympathy. The result was that the casualties of the market economy were reimagined as the beneficiaries of a new, sentimental economy, and the landscape park,
despite embodying a widening gulf between the rich and the poor, continued to
be seen as a distinctly moral phenomenon.

Well before the picturesque controversy of the 1790s, then, the landscape
park popularized by Capability Brown was a highly contested space in relation to
which the social implications of the commercialization of the agrarian economy
were aggressively debated. Yet the competing representations this kind of park
elicted did not just debate the role it seemed to play in the alteration of the rural
social order. They also disputed who was qualified to judge the beauty of land-
scape and, as a result, who could determine the meaning of liberty the landscape
park was meant to embody. For in the late eighteenth century, there was still a
strong, if increasingly attenuated, link between the discourses of aesthetics and
politics—both of which were embedded in the cognate discourses of natural
theology and moral philosophy—so that the capacity to reflect on objects of taste
remained, to some extent, coextensive with the ability to pronounce on affairs of
state. Thus, access to the realm of aesthetics had to be carefully controlled if the
liberty of the ruling class, of men of substantial property, was not to be chal-
lenged. Given this connection, the following essay will investigate how the
Brownian idea of improvement contributed to reconfiguring social relations in
the late eighteenth century, as well as how the aesthetics of landscape were nego-
tiated by two social groups who were excluded from full participation in the pub-
lic sphere of polite culture: women and plebeian poets. Initially, the complex
responses of these social groups to the landscape park will be discussed inde-
pendently in an attempt to account for their divergent perceptions of, and vary-
ing levels of investment in, the new social order. But the chief object of the essay
is to map the interplay of gender and class ideologies at a time when this kind of
park became a primary focus for assessing the consequences of the rise of com-
mercial modernity. To this end, I will conclude with an original, multidisciplinary
study of Sandleford Priory, the estate of the philanthropist and woman of letters
Elizabeth Montagu, which was designed by Brown in the 1780s, partly under the
supervision of the shoemaker poet, James Woodhouse.

Woodhouse first thrust himself into the public sphere in the early 1760s by
writing a poem about another garden, the Leasowes, the ferme ornée of William
Shenstone. The georgic ethos of Shenstone’s garden, its fraught synthesis of util-
ity and beauty, helped the then shoemaker to assert a degree of aesthetic compe-
tence that was theoretically denied to manual laborers. This was a competence
jeopardized in Woodhouse’s case by his lack of a classical education, for such a
lack rendered inaccessible the numerous Latinate monuments that were the cri-
teria by which the polite spectator could be distinguished from the vulgar inter-
loper, the person of taste from the pretender to taste. Yet, regardless of their
limited access to classical precedents, rural artisans and agricultural workers
found the georgic fiction of a free and just polity relatively attractive. Through-
out the first half of the eighteenth century, the georgic ethos envisaged all classes
partaking in the production and consumption of national prosperity, a libertarian ideology that was as germane to defending the customary labor rights of the small workshop as to criticizing the private property rights of the great estate. This was borne out in Woodhouse’s magnum opus, *The Life and Lucubrations of Crispinus Scriblerus*, in which he strategically used the Leasowes as a yardstick to judge a nearby park, Himley.

Designed by Brown in the 1770s and 1780s, Himley was the estate of the second Lord Dudley, a peer so renowned for his supposed benevolence that one contemporary described him as “the Poor Man’s Friend.” Yet, during the years Brown was improving his estate, Dudley initiated four parliamentary acts of enclosure in order to secure exclusive rights to the coal reserves he required to fuel his ironworks. In addition to dispossessing local plebeian communities, these rights entitled him to obtain minerals from any part of his estate without compensating tenants for damages. For Woodhouse, therefore, Dudley was an exemplar of “Wealth’s greedy pow’r, and grasping paw / Urg’d on by selfishness, and back’d by law.” A “cropless” park, parasitic on the land it adjoined, Himley was the antithesis of the Leasowes, where, in modest georgic fashion, there had been “No dome dismantled; field or fence, destroy’d, / To stimulate a Lord’s, or Prince’s, pride!” (1:20). Like Woodhouse, numerous critics of Brown—including Goldsmith and Scott—regarded the Leasowes as a paradigm of true taste while denouncing the landscape park as a despotic fashion, alienating the laborers whose customary notions of freedom and justice it violated. The park’s most vocal opponent, Uvedale Price, for instance, praised Shenstone’s garden for being an exception “to the national taste” that hungered after Brown’s landscapes of exclusion. Woodhouse was performing a populist variation on the same theme, and, in doing so, he was adopting a tactic that was endemic to garden historiography—deploying the aesthetic form of the garden to draw an explicitly political conclusion.

For Brown’s supporters, such as Horace Walpole, William Mason, and Thomas Whately, the park was a naturalistic garden, the improvement of which was a liberal art. Yet this pro-Brown propaganda produced, as it was supposed to do, a highly edited view of the countryside and greatly accentuated the distance between the high and the low, the polite and the vulgar. With its vast, undulating lawns and informally arranged lakes and clumps of trees, the landscape park could be perceived from the landed point of view as an elegant yet irregular space wherein the rural environment had been freed from its defects and nature had been portrayed in its idealized state. Obscuring the sight of agricultural production by placing a belt of trees along the perimeter of the estate, it offered landlords extensive views over a secluded piece of their own property, views that, since they were unimpeded by utilitarian objects and unavailable to anyone but the proprietor and his guests, exemplified both the liberty of the polity and the fitness of the patriciate to see, comprehend, and, hence, rule it. This required, in the words
The only casualties of the new regime would seem to be the hunted animals, whether beasts of chase—hare and deer—or vermin—the fox. Yet if Bloomfield aimed to give the impression, in this passage, that the prominent setting of the mansion and the enormity of the park could be reconciled with a tradition of landlordly benevolence, as “joyous” villagers joined in the “cry” of the chase alongside the “Great,” then the “stiff-limb’d peasant” who trailed behind his
superiors told a different story: “For who unmounted long can charm the eye, /
Or hear the music of the leading cry?”21 Without a horse, that crucial signifier of
gentility, this laborer was twice marginalized, for he was excluded from both the
contemplative pleasures of landscape and the visceral pleasures of agrarian life.
Claiming that pedestrians were less picturesque than equestrians, and thus
largely excluded from the painterly prospect of the chase, Bloomfield also man-
aged to imply that a plebeian eye could no longer be charmed by an estate, nor
could a plebeian ear now enjoy the hunt that in earlier times had functioned as
a kind of public festival that muted the divisions between the laboring and
landed classes.22 And this was not because of any innate lack of understanding
of beauty or liberty in the plebeian participant in the chase and perceiver of land-
scape, but because of the exclusivity of the private landscape being perceived.
The park was for laborers a locus of aesthetic and social delights that now accen-
tuated their inferiority and subjugation.

For plebeian poets, then, the landscape park was the ultimate expression of the
polarization of relations between the patriciate and the populace. The walls and
lodges that kept laborers out of these parks were being erected at the same time that
landlords, through the streamlining of their estates, were taking advantage of the
high unemployment rates, low wages, and high food prices that were causing wide-
spread poverty in plebeian communities. These conditions, moreover, diminished
the relative independence of laborers by reducing their bargaining power and thus
making them more subject to the discipline of their superiors and employers.23
While all laborers resented this discipline, plebeian poets did so for the additional
reason that it prevented them from acquiring the leisure they needed to read and
write poetry. The periphery of the park policed the boundary of politeness precisely
by restricting who was entitled to leisure. By visiting a park, affluent tourists may
have been able to lay claim to a measure of polite status, but laborers were turned
away at the lodge unless they were going to work. In fact, it was a dual aspiration
for the status and leisure of the poet that motivated John Clare to trespass over the
local estate of Burghley Park after purchasing his first piece of polite culture, The
Seasons, by the landscape poet James Thomson:

I coud not wait till I got back without reading it and as I did not like to let
any body see me reading on the road of a working day I clumb over the
wall into Burghly Park and nestled in a lawn at the wall side / the Scenery
around me was uncommonly beautiful at that time of the year and what
with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature in the
park I got into a strain of descriptive rhyming on my journey home / this
was “the morning walk” the first thing I commited to paper24

Paradoxically, Clare found the exclusivity of the landscape park its chief
attraction. As a private space, it enabled him, without being accused of idleness,
to escape the vigilant eyes of fellow country dwellers and to feel himself to be a
poet through appreciating the beauty of landscape—a landscape rendered politely pastoral by its separation from the working countryside wherein he usually toiled. In a curious sense, therefore, he both accepted the legitimacy of politeness and undermined the principles it helped to enforce: the rule of law, the security of property, and the division of labor.  

This fantasy, however, was a brief one, and the next time Clare entered the landscape park it was as a laborer who felt the repressive weight of these principles. When he began working at Burghley as an apprentice kitchen gardener, his “little ambitions” were already pressing him to become “something better than a ploughboy,” but such ambitions remained painfully unrealized in a private space that muted his poetic voice:

I commenced Gardiner, but my employment in that character was short, for I liked to work in the fields best / the continued sameness of a garden cloyed me and I resumed my old employments with pleasure were I coul look on the wild heath, the wide spreading variety of cultured and fallow fields, green meadows, and crooking brooks, and the dark woods, waving to the murmering winds / these were my delights and here I coul mutter to myself as usual, unheard and unoticd by the sneering clown and conscieted cox comb, and here my old habits and feelings returnd with redoubled ardour, for they left me while I was a gardiner

With the exception of Woodhouse, as we shall see later, no one offered a more astute insight than Clare into the psychological morass of the park, as it ensnared the laborers who worked there. At the most basic level, he was simply contending that work in an improved, stylized estate was a more degrading affair than work in a utilitarian but unmodernized countryside of fields, meadows, and brooks. This was heightened by the fact that, in the park, the kitchen garden and other utilitarian precincts were deliberately divorced from the main areas of aesthetic interest so as not to debase the refined pastoral vision of the proprietor. In other words, labor and leisure were segregated along class lines in an estate in a way that they were not in, say, a field, where laborers, as evidenced by the popular rural songs that exerted such a profound influence on Clare, considered it a customary right to integrate their work and recreational practices. Even in instances when the park self-consciously resembled a pre-enclosed landscape, the kitchen garden continued to exhibit a workaday “sameness” opposed to the diversity of open fields, and in that respect it was hostile to the singing of a song, the narration of a story, or, perhaps most relevantly, the composition of a poem. Accordingly, such horticultural workplaces reduced laborers to mere tools, subjecting them to newly severe forms of discipline and surveillance, alienating them from the land they worked.

On the whole, plebeian poets justifiably found older estates not only more conducive to their individual aspiration to be regarded as poets, but more
sympathetic to the social outlook of their class. The formal geometrical structure of early eighteenth-century gardens, of course, was as much a visual expression of power and ownership as the informal structure of the parks that succeeded them. During this period, however, exclusive ownership of property did not always imply exclusive use of that property. At the estate of Sir Charles Woolsley, for instance, laborers were legally entitled, by custom, to collect blueberries from beneath an avenue of trees and thence to organize a fair or public festival on the edge of the property in order to sell and celebrate their yield. This may have been a “very ill Custome,” according to Celia Fiennes, but it had to be honored nonetheless, an obligation that later landlords enacted laws to annul in the interests of both refining their landscapes and disciplining their laborers. It was out of a belief, then, that older estates reflected a less oppressive regime that Mary Leapor, in *Crumble-Hall*, defended a geometrically structured garden in which a mansion was held in balance with the working countryside, granting laborers a permissive, if relative, independence over their rhythms of work and leisure. While this preference for older forms of land use, with their vestiges of common rights, was partially informed by a conservative vision of agrarian life, it differed from such earlier influential texts of advice to landlords as Pope’s *Epistle to Burlington* by satirizing modern landscape improvement from below. In a pithy summation of the georgic system of estate management, Pope had argued, “‘Tis Use alone that sanctifies Expence.” Reshaping this authoritative dictum to criticize the current deterioration of the social circumstances of the propertyless, Leapor appears to be claiming that turning oak woods into profits in order to finance modern improvements to the house and grounds destroyed the very features of the landscape that had sanctified its possession by landowners in that such features—the groves, the protective “shades”—had also sheltered and entertained servants and rural laborers:

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But, hark! what Scream the wond’ring Ear invades!  
The Dryads howling for their threaten’d Shades:  
Round the dear Grove each Nymph distracted flies:  
(Tho’ not discover’d but with Poet’s Eyes):  
And shall those Shades, where Philomela’s Strain  
Has oft to Slumber lull’d the hapless Swain;  
Where Turtles us’d to clap their silken Wings;  
Whose rev’rend Oaks have known a hundred Springs;  
Shall these ignobly from their Roots be torn,  
And perish shameful, as the abject Thorn;  
While the slow Carr bears off their aged Limbs,  
To clear the Way for Slopes, and modern Whims;  
Where banish’d Nature leaves a barren Gloom,  
And awkward Art supplies the vacant Room?  

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Brown was not the target here, for Leapor was writing just before his rise to fame. But the depiction of established avenues of oaks being replaced by “Slopes, and modern Whims” was indisputably an attack on the style of gardening he was to perfect. In particular, it repudiated an idea of improvement that divorced the mansion from the working countryside, only to place the estate far more firmly under the controlling eye of its proprietor. This sense of surveillance was widely acknowledged as part of the purpose of the park. One of Brown’s leading supporters, William Mason, for example, praised the broad, undulating lawns of the modern, naturalistic park for creating unimpeded views that made it as easy for landowners to survey the extent of their property as to keep an eye on the laborers who worked it. The georgic ethos of the garden that Leapor preferred, by contrast, enabled “swains”—laborers rather than lovers—to remain somewhat independent of the mansion by concealing themselves from it. Beneath the groves, they were able to steal the leisure necessary for taking at least a degree of pleasure in the estate they worked. Moreover, these groves provided Leapor with the source of her aesthetic authority, the nymphs and dryads that confirmed that she had “Poet’s Eyes” and, hence, possessed the ability to see when a just and free polity was being corrupted. And from this point of view, the landscape park was the supreme symptom of despotism, silencing the voice of the poet and diminishing the welfare and autonomy of the populace.

Insofar as Leapor’s critique of the modern idea of landscape improvement was informed by an opposition to luxury, her gender must be understood in relation to her class. Educated women were generally less hostile to luxury or, at least, to those forms of luxury that could be mediated by taste, perhaps because the pleasures that legitimized their participation in the public sphere of polite culture were also those routinely blamed for causing deterioration in the moral fabric of rural society. “To shew her taste in laying out ground,” for example, the appetitive Mrs. Baynard in Humphry Clinker cut down “tall oaks,” engrossed small farms, and destroyed the georgic balance of her husband’s estate. In this context, educated women had a vested interest in moralizing the modern style of gardening, for as Walpole contended, it did not so much despoil and corrupt the countryside as “polish” and “chasten” it. The transition from formal garden to informal park, in other words, converted a rough countryside into a refined landscape, inculcating ideas of liberty and progress in much the same way as did aesthetically minded, socially reforming women.

Women’s capacity to moralize the landscape park became significant during the 1770s when the freedom symbolized by the Brownian idea of improvement was redefined by malcontents as despotic luxury. From this time forth, radicals and reactionaries began to equate Brown’s naturalistic lawns and extensive views less with beauty and liberty and more with tyranny, social dissolution, and the meretricious display of wealth. Accordingly, parks became associated with the conspicuous consumption of an increasingly commercially active class
of proprietors—nabobs, industrialists, and rack-renting landlords—whose effeminate manners were depopulating a manly, agrarian polity and transforming a vital populace into a dejected, indigent, and estranged proletariat. This thesis was expressed most famously by Oliver Goldsmith in his famous satire on enclosure, engrossment, and, in this instance, emparkment:

The man of wealth and pride
Takes up a space that many poor supplied;
Space for his lake, his park’s extended bounds,
Space for his horses, equipage, and hounds;
The robe that wraps his limbs in silken sloth,
Has robbed the neighbouring fields of half their growth;
His seat, where solitary sports are seen,
Indignant spurns the cottage from the green

It has been convincingly argued that The Deserted Village was a representation of Nuneham Courtenay, the estate of the first Lord Harcourt, which Brown “improved” in the early 1760s by removing the local village. Keeping in mind that Goldsmith’s poem referred to a general process as well as to an actual practice, it may be usefully contrasted with the offensively sanguine remarks of the prominent woman of letters and lover of peers Elizabeth Montagu, concerning the same village after it had been relocated:

Lord Harcourt built a very pretty Village; the Cottages are comfortable and convenient and there is a pretty garden allotted to every House. Lord and Lady Nuneham are the Tutelar Angels of the place. I think I never saw so many happy people as the Inhabitants of the Village; there is neither poverty nor vice there. Ten sheets of paper wd not contain all the regulations they have made; amongst others, for your hint, every Villager puts in a penny pr week as a fund for time of distress, Lord Nuneham doubles it, and there is now a large fund. They make a feast every summer, and bestow prizes on the Persons distinguished for spinning or rural labours. There is a school under excellent regulations. The Cottages are so neat, have such store of excellent bacon, and garden stuff to eat with it, I think I could lodge and board there very comfortably.

This account of the recently evicted villagers was far longer than Montagu’s more thoroughly aesthetic appreciation of Nuneham, indicating that she wanted the estate to be seen as a site of charity as much as an object of taste. Reversing Goldsmith’s logic, she elided the demolition of the village by opening her narrative with its reconstruction, an act that turned the “man of wealth and pride” into the benevolent landlord. Yet, as the vicar of the parish, James Newton, noted in his
diary, even the most privileged tenant knew Harcourt to be an avaricious landlord for whom the abuse of power was coextensive with its exercise:

January 7, 1762: Lord Harcourt sent word that Bowly would come to me in the evening to settle accounts, but they were not settled for my lord. Demanded £6 for rent due at Ladyday . . . wch Self had paid already & very luckily I found my lord's receipt.

January 8, 1762: Br[ea]kfast at the Great House & acquainted my Lord of his great mistake about rent but now he demands two thousand Furze faggots out of those I cut in Forewood wch seems to be a very unjust demand.41

The vicar of Nuneham had been in ongoing conflict with Harcourt while he was creating his park, and he probably provoked his landlord's ire by seeking to discontinue his service after the relocation of the village. Whatever the case, Newton must certainly have opposed the fact that the villagers had to travel much farther to attend church as a result of the emparkment. And yet this was undertaken by that "most kind Master" whom Montagu extolled for doing "the honours of his magnificent and beautiful place with the greatest cheerfulness and politeness" and for never saying "an illnatured or even unpolite thing to the very Grooms in his Stable."42 Nevertheless, her portrayal of Nuneham as a site of charity was no simple mystification of the practices of enclosure, engrossment, and emparkment by which landlords like Lord Harcourt manipulated the law to finance parks that, in the end, pauperized the plebeian communities they bordered. Rather, it justified that pauperization. For the kind of charity Montagu praised did not pertain to the customary rights that protected the independence of laborers, but to the spurs to industry that boosted their productivity, ensured their discipline, and intensified their dependence on the market-driven employment arrangements of persons of property.

At Nuneham, Montagu assumed that the landscape park exerted a civilizing influence on the countryside by purifying it of "common" rusticity and liberating landowners from adhering to the "low" customary rights of "common" laborers. Whereas these rights were held to make laboring people unruly, forcing employers to concede to the practice of idle and irreverent customs, the new village was indicative of the fact that its inhabitants had been "improved," habituated to labor, coerced into postures of deference, and subjected to the surveillance of their superiors through a variety of philanthropic schemes. One agricultural writer described the Nuneham "Spinning Feast" in these very terms as an "encouragement" and a "kindness" to the "poor" that ensured "that their veneration, and attachment [was] secured, and their spirit excited to industry."43 It was this kind of charity—the schools of industry, the "rewards for virtue," and the
benefit club overseen by Lord Nuneham—that Montagu presciently linked to the rise of the landscape park. The emptiness that Goldsmith condemned as the hallmark of the improver’s luxury permitted a new set of social relations to be inscribed on the land, with the “moral” economy of an independent populace, a “bold peasantry,” being replaced by the market economy of a disciplined workforce or, as it was then usually defined, the deserving poor. This market economy, however, was softened by being represented as a sentimental economy in which the imposition of discipline was itself seen as the dispensation of charity and in which employment relations were imagined as moral relations of duty and deference between masters and servants and, at the same time, as pragmatic relations of surveillance and industry between proprietors and proletarians. The solidarity of laboring people was thus thwarted, and they were encouraged to vie with one another for the favor of their employers in contests that were designed to make them more diligent, more competitive, and more tractable in the workplace. Assistance was no longer an entitlement that laborers were able to claim, but a gift that they had to work for with gratitude.

These new social relations precisely resembled those advocated by political economists like Joseph Townsend, who, dismayed at the increasing incidence of poverty, aimed to replace the customary rights of laborers to parish relief with an ethic of voluntary charity that made such relief contingent upon a demonstration of industry and passivity: “To relieve the poor by voluntary donations,” Townsend wrote, “is most excellent in . . . cherishing, instead of rancour, malice, and contention, the opposite and most amiable affections of the human breast, pity, compassion, and benevolence in the rich, love, reverence, and gratitude in the poor.”

But notwithstanding such self-congratulatory protestations of humanity, this constituted a very widespread, although extreme, bid to blame poverty on the victims rather than on the victors of the commercialization of the agrarian economy, on the improvident conduct of its plebeian casualties and their refusal to relinquish their moral privileges rather than on the exploitative conduct of its patrician beneficiaries and their willingness to abandon their moral obligations. As a consequence, it vindicated the payment of low wages, the reduction of poor rates, the suppression of popular privileges—talking in the workplace no less than organizing a parish wake, drinking in an alehouse, or, worst of all, enjoying Saint Monday—and the adoption of any other methods that incited laborers to industry and subjected them unconditionally to the economic demands of the superiors who employed them. By equating the landscape park with the kind of charity that validated the implementation of this economy, Montagu did not so much reject Goldsmith’s attack on luxury as remoralize it.

Describing the Brownian idea of improvement in terms of the charity it generated, Montagu was also claiming a stake in the polite public sphere of aesthetic and political judgment. In his History of Modern Gardening, Walpole defined the art of appreciating landscape as the sole preserve of patrician men, connoisseurs
who enjoyed the extensive views their parks replicated. As part of this elitist project, he pilloried a gentleman who combined “gardening with charity” for making the contemplation of landscape available to anyone who could exhibit feelings of sympathy. Given that these vague feelings, the outgrowth of sensibility, were deemed to be as especially characteristic of women as extensive views, the outgrowth of wisdom, were deemed to be especially characteristic of men, this was obviously intended to exclude women from joining the elite core of polite society on the basis of their inferior, though still valuable, taste. At a time, however, when the unbounded “prospect” of the patrician elite was being equated with despotic luxury, Montagu recuperated its link to liberty by affixing it to a kind of miniaturized prospect. Seeing the landscape park as a locus for the activation of her innately charitable disposition, she asserted the public significance of her sensibility and, hence, of her private virtue.

This was a strategy used also by Mary Hamilton in her novel *Munster Village*, first published in 1778. Munster Village was a Brownian utopia, an estate so regulated that its architectural layout resembled a spatial system of sumptuary laws. In the past, these laws had protected hierarchical distinctions by stipulating the types of clothing certain ranks were permitted to wear, a form of social control that Hamilton’s protagonist, Lady Frances, followed by engaging Brown to design a village where the cottages were imprinted with signs of the various occupations of their tenants. Presided over by such a benevolent peeress, her statue situated at the center of the village, this newly landscaped estate was intended to establish a micro-society based on “a circulation of kindness” wherein none were in a “state of independency.” To ensure public order, therefore, only the deserving poor were dispensed charity—those quiet laborers whose industry and deference appealed to the refined feelings of their benefactor. Yet, given that these feelings embraced “the wide extended interests of men, of communities, of the species itself,” the nature of the protagonist’s sensibility was categorically public, open to view by being made manifest in both aesthetic and political proposals.

As a large landowner who independently ran her several mining and farming estates, Montagu was well situated to demonstrate her taste and virtue through landscape improvement. At her favorite estate, Sandleford Priory, she created a veritable Brownian Arcadia to display her benevolence as well as her wealth. When she moved there in the 1740s, the grounds were fully integrated with the working countryside, reminiscent of the georgic style of gardening favored by Mary Leapor (see fig. 1). In fact, in Edward Haytley’s portrait of the estate, there was even a sleeping swain, concealed beneath a tree. It has been asserted that in this picture Sandleford exemplified the patrician myth of the “happy rural life,” with landowners and laborers equally at ease in their different stations. Importantly, though, the view from the mansion did not consist solely of the owners’ property. By the 1750s, however, an aptly named Mrs. Medows wrote to Montagu: “I am pleased you have hired the wood, now one may walk in the bowling green without coveting what is
your neighbour's. I hope hiring is a step to purchasing; laying field to field is a natural thought and not a blameable one, when no injustice is meant.\textsuperscript{50} Montagu thought property a great source of aesthetic pleasure, and over the next thirty years she took Medows's advice in order to extend her grounds a great deal. Her employee James Woodhouse, however, responded by damning engrossing landlords as "Nimrods" who, by "joining field to field," hunted "the Poor from each impoverish'd plain" (1:118). The phrase "field to field," of course, came from the fifth chapter of Isaiah, and it was often used by opponents of emparkment, engrossment, and enclosure. For instance, for the laborers on behalf of whom Woodhouse spoke it was part of a popular moral vocabulary that, loosely rooted in an Old Testament theology of retribution, was mobilized in defense of a distinctly plebeian sense of justice. For Montagu and Medows, by contrast, it was an archaic, barbarous moral vocabulary, a barrier to the progress of politeness and to the related ascendancy of private property.

For Montagu, the function of improvement was, paradoxically, to make the countryside appear more natural by refining it. In keeping with her sensibility, she made her estate conform to a pastoral ideal that edited out the vulgar crudities of agrarian life and evoked an air of simplicity and amiability. The "great Mr Brown," she wrote, was "the first man in the innocent & lovely art of adorning the Pastoral scene."\textsuperscript{51} At Sandleford the creation of this pastoral ideal involved a sanitization of labor and, with it, a separation of those whose business it was to work on the land from those who were permitted to enjoy its pleasures. Objects of utility were thus relocated, as Montagu revealed when she wrote that the "beauty" of the grounds had been enhanced by the removal of "the offices and Barns which obstructed the prospect."\textsuperscript{52} Along with the outbuildings, the kitchen garden—where Woodhouse sometimes worked—was also situated in a more suitable location, and to augment the prospect even further, several existing walls and hedges were pulled down.\textsuperscript{53} It was with this in mind that Woodhouse, following the lead of Pope, Goldsmith, and other poets of rural complaint, satirized Montagu for treating the land as if it were a commodity, an object to be embellished in line with changing fashions so that "what one season rear'd the next eras'd" (1:168). However, Montagu's friend James Beattie captured the rapidity and variety of the changes best, remarking: "A great deal of brick-building and garden-wall is cleared away, and the lawn is opening very fast on every side. A little rivulet . . . is now collected into two large and beautiful pieces of water, round which the walks and grounds are laid out to very great advantage indeed."\textsuperscript{54} These were the two trademarks of the Brownian idea of improvement: the vast, informally arranged lawns and waters designed to display private property and the authority it conferred.

As a landowning woman, Montagu was liable to be condemned as luxurious for engaging in such conspicuous display. Rather than being censured, however, she was commended by many writers for the expensive redesign of her park on the grounds that it served a morally constructive purpose. The traveler and diarist
Lady Morgan, for example, lamented that one neighbor was “Goth enough” to prevent Montagu from extending her grounds even further, for the improvement of her park was virtuous precisely because it enlarged her influence, thereby enabling her sensibility to improve the local laboring population. Hence Lady Morgan lauded Montagu’s policy of employing infirm laborers as a “stroke of benevolent ingenuity” that made those who would otherwise remain dependent on parish relief “useful and happy members of society.” The fact was, however, that these infirm laborers were entitled to parish relief regardless of whether or not they worked. Montagu was not so much dispensing charity as taking full advantage of cheap labor. To some extent it could be said that Montagu did draw, as one critic has argued, on David Hume’s redefinition of luxury as a form of civilized refinement, licensing her lavish consumption by blending it with a virtuous femininity, grounded in charitable benevolence. But Hume, it should be added, wanted to make the pleasures of consumption more widely available, in part by advocating high wages and granting even the poor the “conveniences” as well as the “necessaries” of life. Montagu, on the other hand, believed that low wages kept laboring people in their place, and that luxury was an “innocent” indulgence only for the polite. Nowhere was this adherence to “low wages” theory clearer than...
in her attempt to institute among her recipients of patronage something akin to a system of sumptuary laws. Indeed, she criticized Woodhouse for wearing attire out of step with his station, just as she commanded the plebeian poet Ann Yearsley to avoid the “demons” of “luxury, idleness, and pride.” Evidently, Montagu’s moralization of luxury was intended to promote deference and industry in the poor, not their upward mobility or material comfort. And this, too, informed her desire to improve the grounds of Sandleford.

When she described the redesign of her estate during the 1780s, Montagu always stressed the employment it provided for the local laboring population. As well as asserting that laborers benefited from “adorning and embellishing” her “pleasure ground,” she rendered their work a source of aesthetic delight. Deploying the language of sentiment, she portrayed her charity as indistinguishable from her taste. In one letter, most notably, Montagu waxed lyrical over an “animated” “scene” of laborers before reflecting on the “poor weavers” from Newbury whom she employed to improve her woods. Given the decline of the regional weaving industry, she recorded how grateful these hitherto unemployed artisans were to be improving her grounds. Yet this decline in the weaving industry actually made Newbury a site of popular unrest, a source of constant anxiety for Montagu as for so many contemporary landowners. In an anonymous letter found under the door of a local employer in 1787, one weaver poured scorn on the “Gentlemen Clothiers” in the most militant libertarian rhetoric:

Gentlemen would you Think It a Crime in any one Living, To stand In His Own Defence Against His Enemy, You Gentlemen Are Agreed To Beat Down the Price of the Weavers Work, The Price of the weavers Work is already so Low They Cannot Get A livelyhood like Almost any Other Trade, why should you wish To starve Us Quite, Your Lives As well as Ours are Not Insured One Moment, Neither Can you Carry Your Ill Got Treasure with you Into The Next Life, As For This life I Look upon It as Nothing in Respect of The whole world And at the same Time Greatly Indanger Your Precious soul’s, In what Point Have You The Advantage let me Desire of you Gentlemen To Take This Wicked Device Into Consideration, Or Else Prepare your selves For A Good Bonfire at Both Ends At Each Your Dwellings, which Thing is Fully Determined Without An Alteration within This Month, was I sure to Dey For stand- ing For My Right, I would Dey Willingly

No less than popular protests against enclosure and other violations of customary practice, such defenses of traditional artisanal livelihoods were morally informed by a plebeian conception of justice that Montagu would have found menacing. Rural artisans redeployed Old Testament theology to defend their
own ideal of independence, their right to a fair wage, to a dignified working environment, and to a degree of control over their rhythms of labor and leisure. Montagu’s employment of the infirm and incendiary weavers must be regarded as an attempt, therefore, not just to diffuse unrest, but also to impose upon local laborers a new collective identity. For her pastoral Arcadia was so saturated in the language of sentiment that by placing the laboring population within her aesthetic vision, she could literally see them as dependent on her refined feelings in the same way that they were now dependent on her employment practices—the acceptance of surveillance, the demonstration of gratitude, and the application of industry. And it was precisely by reforming a potentially unruly populace that she thought her landscape park did, indeed, civilize the countryside.

James Woodhouse apprehended this design from the perspective of all those who worked at Sandleford when, comparing Montagu with the then repressive prime minister, William Pitt, he summed up his employer’s ideology by writing: “To keep Men humble you must keep them poor” (2:7). Indeed, almost every aspect of Montagu’s style of improvement was given short shrift by Woodhouse in his long autobiographical poem, Crispinus Scriblerus. Employed as a steward at Sandleford during the 1780s, he supervised much of the work done by Brown, a task he clearly found oppressive, degrading, and painful. “In that unpleasant, tho’ Arcadian spot,” he protested, “Frail were the comforts that reliev’d his Lot” (1:175). Though many of his grievances were personal, he also fashioned Montagu into a generalized type of landlord in the tradition of Pope’s “Timon” and Goldsmith’s “man of wealth and pride.” But whereas both Pope and Goldsmith directed their ire at luxury, Woodhouse directed his anger at the charity that moralized it. Of Montagu he remonstrated, “all her Charities” were “but Cheats to hide / Unbounded Vanities—Caprice—and Pride” (2:30). If this was a conventional attack on wealthy women of fashion, it was nonetheless the point of departure for an insightful critique of the idea of luxury, one that moved it away from its association with conspicuous consumption in the direction of a thoroughgoing analysis of social conflict and economic inequality.

No one was more aware than Woodhouse that the landscape park functioned to embody and, hence, legitimize a polity in which liberty and independence for landowners meant repression and dependence for laborers. The Brownian idea of improvement did not signify the golden mean between the tyranny of monarchy and the anarchy of the mob, but rather the domination of the land and its plebeian inhabitants by a patriciate that was too busy protecting its privileges and pleasures to govern the nation responsibly. Like Britain, Sandleford was “a pure, unmix’d, despotic, state” where there was no “Small room . . . for free debate” (1:131). Woodhouse’s sense of being excluded from polite political culture was sharpened by his exclusion from polite aesthetic culture on the same grounds—his artisanal status. In this context, one of the
most illuminating passages in his poem was an account of the aesthetic pleasures that the laborers who worked at Montagu's Arcadia were disallowed. Speaking for his class but also from his own experience, he posed several aptly sardonic questions about this landscape of exclusivity:

But ought a Clown, with like Companion, rude,
On Scenes, so sacred, daringly, intrude?
Shall vulgar Ignorance dare those haunts invade
For Knowledge—Learning—Wit—and Wisdom—made?
Shall beastly Boors those hallowed paths explore
Which Taste, and Genius, trod just before?
Shall Ignorant Penury trace the tracks where Wealth
E'er paced for pleasure, or patroled for Health?
Loath'd Rustics' footsteps thus presume to tread
Where Fame and Fashion, Lords and Ladies, led?
Such swinish nostrils seek to snuff the scent,
Solely for noble Births and Noses meant?
Those various beauties Barbarian eyes view,
To courtly Pomp and Splendour, only due;
And whence the polish'd Mistress hop'd for praise,
From graceful Politess, at every gaze!

The “polish'd Mistress,” of course, was Montagu, and Woodhouse particularized the issue by recounting how he frequently suffered “lancing looks” and “stinging taunts” from his superiors while “sauntering” around the garden’s “bow'rs,” as if his mere “presence” in this private domain sullied it. Voicing a populist disdain for pretension, this was a rare statement of the ways in which laborers in the late eighteenth century both sought the aesthetic pleasures that the park offered and were denied them. From their perspective, these Arcadias were nothing more nor less than pastoralized fortresses, designed to defend the authority as well as the property of their proprietors against a propertyless, pauperized populace. But equally important was the poet's irreverence, for that in itself was a gesture of resistance to the sentimental attitude toward laborers that the Brownian landscape park helped to consolidate. It was a combination of populist irreverence and political radicalism that throughout the early nineteenth century, thanks largely to the writing of William Cobbett, would become the keynote of plebeian social protest. And on that note, it might be worth concluding this essay with Cobbett's first impression of Sandleford: “Of all the ridiculous things I ever saw in my life this place is the most ridiculous.”

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18. Ibid., 228.


22. For a fine account of “sporting” culture that takes into consideration the landscape park, as well as Bloomfield’s representation of it, see Donna Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking, and Ecology in English Literature, 1671–1831* (Houndmills, Eng.: Palgrave, 2001), esp. 2–3, 44–48, 94–102.


27. Clare, of course, was well versed in rural popular culture, and it informed almost all of his poetry. For the integration of leisure and labor in an exemplary popular song that would surely have been familiar to Clare, see Anon., *The Sporting Haymakers* (Sir Frederic Madden Collection of Ballads, vol. 6, f. 1748, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge).


29. Clare (By Himself, 73–74) recounts with some bitterness the humiliation he and his father felt when they met the master of the kitchen garden. In the alienating environment of Burghley, his father mistook “every body for gentlemen that wore white stockings pulld off his hat to the gardiner as if it had been the Marquis himself.”
Plebeian Poetry and the Landscape Park


32. While Pope’s dictum, of course, was conducive to the commercialization of the agrarian economy in the early eighteenth century, it nevertheless represented the estate, however spuriously, as a public resource as well as an arena of private, polite consumption. See Alexander Pope, “Epistle IV. To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington” (1731), line 179, in _The Poems of Alexander Pope_, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), 594.


36. Walpole, _Modern Taste in Gardening_, 27.


42. Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Carter, 18 September 1777, in Blunt, ed., _Mrs. Montagu_, 2:36–37. Compare this account of Lord Harcourt’s character with Newton, “Diary,” f. 14: “Self Br[reakfasted] at my Lord Harcourt’s & he was much displeas’d at my Milking his Cows too soon & for my talking to Stewart about the Church Yard & for my Saying he had done every thing to me except cutting my Throat wch last Expression is palpably False.”


45. Walpole, _Modern Taste in Gardening_, 23.


48. Ibid., 62.


51. Elizabeth Montagu, 16 September 1781 (Huntington Library Collection, MO 3516).


53. Ibid., 1:129.


55. Mary Morgan, A Tour to Milford Haven, in the Year 1791 (London: Stockdale, 1795), 38.

56. Ibid., 39.


59. See the letters by James Woodhouse to Elizabeth Montagu, 4 May [?] (National Library of Wales, MS. 5433C), f. 4; and Elizabeth Montagu to Hannah More, 1784, in Roberts, ed., Memoirs, 1:368–69.

60. Elizabeth Montagu to Sarah Scott, July 1782, in Blunt, ed., Mrs. Montagu, 2:122.

61. Ibid., 2:122.


63. William Cobbett, Rural Rides, 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1912), 1:5. Interestingly, Cobbett's brief satire of Sandleford, published long after Elizabeth Montagu's death, dwelled not on the obscene magnitude of the Brownian landscape park, but on the obscene uselessness of its diminutive ornaments. Far from dignifying landowners, such modish ornaments were mere toys that fully displayed the infantile minds, gaudy tastes, and mock patrician credentials (or ignobility) of their owners.