

Virtual Delville as Archival Research:
Rendering Women's Garden History Visible

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The eighteenth century is known as "the great age of English garden design." Critics in the period agreed that while the French were the best writers and the Italians the best painters, the English were the true masters of the third of the "sister arts," landscape gardening. Masterpieces such as Stowe, Stourhead and Painshill are now National Trust sites, having been lovingly preserved through generations as family heirlooms. As "matrimony" rather than "patrimony," however, gardens designed by women have not survived: the Duchess of Portland's Bulstrode and Mary Delany's Delville are just two examples of gardens celebrated in their day that did not achieve posterity. In this essay, I describe the project of re-creating a three-dimensional virtual version Mary Delany's Delville, considered the finest picturesque garden in Ireland in the mid-eighteenth-century, using the same Maya software used in the Lord of the Rings movies. Drawing on conventional archival sources such as letters, drawings, paintings, and poems, the project poses challenges in terms of design, politics and epistemology. How can digital tools such as Maya expand the frontiers of feminist research?

In September 2009, an exhibition entitled "Mrs. Delany and her Circle" opened at the Yale Center for British Art. The exhibition was the first in more than 30 years to focus on Mary Granville Pendarves Delany, best known for her extensive correspondence describing eighteenth-century aristocratic life (collected into six volumes in the 1860s)

and her nearly one thousand paper-collage botanical illustrations, in many cases the first scientifically-named accounts of new plants introduced into England as botanical knowledge exploded through technology, taxonomy, trade and colonialism. The Yale exhibition went farther than the late 1970s New York Public Library show of Delany's work in that it not only collected and displayed objects made by and associated with Delany, it also imaginatively reconstructed the material culture of her world. In the first category, works by Delany herself, more than 25 of the beautiful botanical illustrations were borrowed from the British Museum; examples of her drawings, paintings, cut-paper silhouettes, and shellwork were retrieved from public and private collections; and most spectacularly, the black silk court dress, its skirts nearly five feet wide, that she had embroidered with botanically accurate flowers of her own design was reconstructed. The dress attracted notice and praise when it was first worn in the 1730s and was, as Hannah Greig notes, a key part in Mary Delany's ambition to secure an income through appointment to a place in the court of George II. Although Delany never achieved that goal, her dress was so highly valued as an object of beauty that after her death it was unpicked and the pieces divided among her heirs. Lovingly preserved for centuries, the pieces are re-assembled in the exhibition, allowing us to visualize and study an important aspect of women's material culture in the period.

There are no objects remaining to help us see Mary Delany's Delville, however. Garden art is created from the impermanent materials of earth, plants and weather. As such it is inherently one of the most ephemeral of aesthetic objects. But because landscape gardening has been seen since the eighteenth century as part of England's national heritage, some famous eighteenth-century gardens were preserved and

maintained by generations of great families and ultimately passed into the National Trust. None of these, however, are gardens by women. In researching and teaching about Delville, I studied extant gardens from the same period, visited the site outside Dublin where the garden once existed, and immersed myself in the surviving documents—literary and visual—that described the garden. I began compiling a website called Sister Arts to put all of these materials in one place, supported by a program at The University of Texas that provided faculty members with talented undergraduate technology assistants. The supervisor of that program, Suzanne Rhodes, convinced me that we could find the right student to re-create Delville online. In 2004, we began working with Richard Meth, then an undergraduate computer science major, to turn the Delville documents into a virtual garden.

The research goal of the project was to understand the design problem facing Mary Delany when she married Patrick Delany and began work on the Delville garden in 1743. Mary Delany's work on Delville took place at a critical moment in the shift from French formal gardens to English open prospects, and even anticipated the next turn in fashion by creating a hybrid the next generation would call "picturesque." In reconstructing the garden with Maya, what were we able to learn about her design choices and challenges?

Mary Delany acquired Delville when she married Patrick Delany, an Irish prelate, in 1743. Patrick Delany had begun work on the garden at Delville in 1719, apparently doing his best to incorporate aspects of the geometric French style fashionably imported to England in the late seventeenth century. Over the subsequent years, Patrick Delany improved his tiny eleven-acre estate, gleaning ideas from visits to such English gardens

as Rousham and Twickenham, as well as from the eager assistance of Jonathan Swift, whose correspondence with Pope ensured ready access to the latest English ideas in garden design. Swift's verse descriptions of Delville offers a richly satiric account of Patrick Delany's circumstances during the 1720s and 1730s. Swift wrote at least three poems twitting the clergyman for having written a verse letter to a local nobleman, asking for a court position that would help him defray the enormous expenses of his garden. In "An Epistle Upon an Epistle From a certain Doctor to a certain great Lord: Being a Christmas-Box for D. D—ny," Swift is merciless toward both the finances and taste of his friend, writing in part:

And you forsooth, your All must squander,
On that poor Spot, call'd Del-Ville, yonder:
And when you've been at vast Expences
In Whim, Parterres, Canals and Fences:
Your Assets fail, and Cash is wanting
For farther Buildings, farther Planting.
No wonder when you raise and level,
Think this Wall low, and that Wall bevel.
Here a convenient Box you found,
Which you demolish'd to the Ground:
Then Built, then took up with your Arbour,
And set the House to R-p-t B-b-r.¹
You sprung an Arch, which in a Scurvy
Humour, you tumbled Topsy Turvy.

You change a Circle to a Square,
Then to a Circle, as you were:
Who can imagine whence the Fund is,
That you Quadrata change Rotundis?²

This poem sees Patrick Delany's gardening debts (the squandered “all,” the unimaginable “fund”) with Swiftian double vision, as both the comic extravagances of the over-ambitious squire, and as the necessary greasing of the wheels of local economy. It also tells us much about Patrick's taste. “Parterres, Canals and Fences” and “Walls” are typical features of the seventeenth-century formal garden, with its regular alleyways, balanced designs and clearly marked perimeters. (“Parterres” are patterns on the ground created by careful arrangements of flowers and shrubs.) Similarly, the geometric design features of “Circle” and “Square” suggest the geometric aesthetic that was rapidly going out of style by the time Mary Delany moved to Delville in 1743. As an inducement to accepting his proposal, Patrick Delany offered his wife the project of “improvement,” that is, of renovating the garden, something she had long wanted to do on an estate of her own.

In contrast to the formal features described by Swift, in a 1748 poem Laetitia Pilkington describes the garden's “Prospects large and unconfin'd,” suggesting that Mary Delany's influence on the garden helped create the more modern “natural” style associated with the innovator Lancelot “Capability” Brown.³ Brown earned his nickname because of his ability to completely re-make the estate gardens on which he worked, relocating trees and watercourses, creating lakes, and replacing forests with the shaved lawns that came to be associated with his “English” style. Mary Delany replaced much of the perimeter wall, for example, with ha-has, fences sunk into ditches so that the

viewer saw an unbroken vista “into the central valley in which deer and cattle grazed.”⁴ In the context of an Englishwoman's intervention into the Irish landscape, these innovations carry a political as well as aesthetic weight. Brown's “English” style was so called by its proponents “in order to demonstrate that their nation was evidently progressive and free, not under an absolutist or tyrannical rule, as in France.”⁵ The ha-ha in particular, with its “project of tearing down fences,” is “relished as a figure of liberty” in English landscape theory of the period.⁶ The ha-ha, which was one of Brown's signature effects, is a fence sunk into a ditch so as to be invisible from a distance. It allows grazing sheep and cattle to be kept either in or out without disrupting the prospect with a horizontal line.

Throughout the 1750s, Brown was transforming the straight walls and hedges of English gardens into open parkland, dotted with clumped trees and irregular lakes, in the “natural” style that was to revolutionize landscape design. Mary Delany, through her own travels and through contact with prominent English gardeners such as Alexander Pope, was keenly involved in bringing such changes to her Irish gardens at Delville. Brown and his followers thought of themselves as returning to nature, eschewing a highly formal aesthetic for one that was easy, open, and elegant. The next generation of designers, characterized by Humphrey Repton, went even further in their appreciation of the natural, beginning to celebrate not Nature's symmetry but her asymmetry, not the straight-growing oak but the blasted stump, not the clear, smooth lake but the rough waterfall. This picturesque aesthetic became predominant in Ireland, and some have argued that Mary Delany's Delville was an important early example of this style, anticipating and perhaps even influencing Repton. Irish garden historians Malin and Glin argue that the

naturally mountainous and coastal landscape of Ireland, which made Capability Brown style shaved lawns impractical, influenced Humphrey Repton in his 1783 visit to Dublin, inspiring him to begin trying to recreate the picturesque vistas of the Dublin area in his own English designs.⁷ Thus, they imply, the picturesque aesthetic might be at least partly Irish in origin, and Mary Delany's Delville was its leading Irish example in the mid-eighteenth century. The virtual re-creation of Delville, then, would have to account for at least three styles incorporated by Mary Delany into her design: the geometric, the open park, and the picturesque.

What none of these literary accounts, including Mary Delany's many letters to her sister Anne describing her renovations, would tell us was the relationship between the aspects of the garden they described. These descriptions tend to be pictorial in nature, sketching out a particular scene, area or object in the garden without saying where and how they connected. This is something I would never have observed without attempting to recreate the garden online. I provided Richard with these descriptions and he came back to me with questions: were there one or two stone walkways? Did they connect? Where was the portico in relation to the castle? It turned out Mary Delany never answered these questions, nor did any of the other writers about Delville. This required Richard and I to make some educated guesses, based partly on our emerging understanding of the site itself and partly on the limitations of the technology.

In addition to literary records, drawings and paintings of Delville by Mary Delany and others also give us some sense of the design of Delville. An accomplished artist, Mary Delany created several landscape drawings that illustrate aspects of the garden. In *A View of ye Swift & Swans Island in Delville Garden*, dated two years after her arrival in

Ireland after her marriage, we see how the garden compensated for its small scale. The “island” in the small stream is only a few feet across, but it is given emphasis by a rock wall perimeter and plantings including a yew tree and several water plants. Also visible is the “hybrid” quality of the garden, mixing the geometric stone wall in the distance with the blasted stump, typical of the picturesque aesthetic, artfully placed in the foreground of the picture. Also from 1745, *A view of ye Beggars hut in Delville garden* shows a forested part of the estate kept rustic to achieve similar picturesque effects. The square corner of the wall bordering the walk and the built-up stone arch and purpose-built log bench in front of the doorway to the hillside cave, however, show the hand of the designer working against the irregularity of the leaning tree shown in the foreground of the drawing. Fourteen years later, in 1759, we can see in Delany’s *A View of Part of Dublin Harbour and Delville Garden from the Bow Window in Mrs. Delany’s Closet* how trees have been thinned, following the Brownian aesthetic, to enhance the view of the farmlands and seacoast.

Mary Delany’s drawings show the treescape at Delville as profuse, with thick clumps of trees held at bay by thinning. This turned out to be one of the most difficult details to reproduce in the virtual version of the garden. In Maya at that time, each tree had to be hand-selected from stock images and placed in the landscape by Richard. Not only was there nothing similar to Mary Delany’s Irish yews, limes and oaks available on Maya, it also proved much too time-consuming to re-create the almost furry look of the Delany drawings through the placement of thousands of trees in the landscape. Richard placed many, many trees for me, but finally rebelled, and I realized it would take a separate grant and a dedicated assistant just to tree the Delville landscape. This was itself

informative, helping me understand how the forested site of Delville affected Mary Delany's design choices and possibilities. But the result is that the look of the virtual Delville does is rather more bare than what is depicted in Delany's drawings.

Finally, the original site, though completely transformed, is of course still in existence and was an important research source. During my visit to Glasnevin, now the location of the National Botanic Gardens, in 2002, I was able to determine the orientation of the garden to both the city and the sea. I knew that Mary Delany's bow window faced the sea, and that allowed me to reconstruct the orientation of the rest of the house in walking the site as best I could.⁸ Some yew and lime trees dating from the eighteenth century and the remains of the east wall and the stream are also visible.⁹ My visit to the site was to prove invaluable when Richard used an early version of Google Earth to construct the views of the city and Dublin Bay in our virtual Delville. Surviving photographs of the Delville house and garden from the early 1900s were also available in the Irish Architectural Archives.

Once the landscape existed in Maya, however, a further problem arose. Only someone competent in the software—at that point, only Richard—could access and negotiate the landscape. That meant that neither I nor my students would be able to see the results of all this labor. After considering options such as trying to create a video game or avatar application, we settled on the idea of video fly-throughs as the most practical way to show the garden. In class, I could pause the movement of the camera through the landscape to focus on certain objects or views, but the fly-through would give the students a “tour” around the site that would allow them to see it from different angles. Richard used the Mary Delany drawings we had available as the starting-point for

creating some key views of the estate, using them also as the opening and closing shots of three of the videos:

http://unixgen.muohio.edu/~chat/3d_garden/SisterArts/website_link/delanyVideos.htm

At the beginning of each video, Mary Delany's original drawing melts into Richard's Maya version of it, and the fly-through begins. For two other videos, we did not have original drawings of the starting-points, but Richard tinted the first image sepia to match the others and the effect worked beautifully.

My research and ultimately my conclusions about Mary Delany's work as a garden designer, I have tried to show, were shaped by the kind of visualizing made possible by the virtual garden we created. The powers of Maya as a tool, as well as its limitations, inevitably emphasized some aspects of the Delville garden over others. Creating Delaney's garden in Maya turned out to be a way to remediate the process of Delany's work, that is, both to render it into another medium and to remedy the problem of its disappearance. It thus made visible her planning, her design, and her grappling with a design problem that is at the center of my research.¹⁰ Modeling her work in another medium renders visible and historical what could otherwise be dismissed as mere domestic pastime. Our virtual Delville makes an important work of women's garden history visible.

¹A reference to Rupert Barber (1736–72), the miniaturist, and his wife, a poet, who lived in a house at the end of the Delville garden. (Edward Malin and the Knight of Glin, *Lost Demesnes: Irish Landscape Gardening, 1660–1845* [London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1976], 52.)

² Jonathan Swift, *An Epistle Upon an Epistle From a certain Doctor to a certain great Lord: Being a Christmas-Box for D. D---ny*, first edition (Dublin: 1730).

³ Line 25.

⁴ Malin and Glin, 37.

⁵ Brigitte Weltman-Aron, *On Other Grounds: Landscape Gardening and Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2001), 2.

6. Weltman-Aron, 10. Horace Walpole explains the origins of this odd name thus: “But the capital stroke, the leading step to all that has followed was...the destruction of walls for boundaries, and the invention of fossès—an attempt then deemed so astonishing, that the common people called them Ha! Ha's! to express their surprize at finding a sudden and unperceived check to their walk.” Quoted in Isabel Wakelin Urban Chase, *Horace Walpole: Gardenist* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1943), 25.

⁷ Malin and Glin, xxi.

⁸ A 1974 visitor to the site just before the house was demolished noted the “lovely view of Dublin Bay from end bow window.” Cited in Mark Laird, Afterword, *Mrs. Delany and her Circle* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 248, n. 4.

⁹ Laird, 248, n. 3.

¹⁰ Lisa Moore, *Sister Arts: Lesbian Genres and the Erotics of Landscape* (forthcoming, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011). See also "Queer Gardens: Mary Delany's Flowers and Friendships," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39: 1 (2005), pp. 49-70.