

## A “kind of impiety”: Deforestation, Sustainability, and Self in the Works of Samuel Richardson and Yuan Mei

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In line with scholarship by Timothy Clark, Erin Drew and John Sitter, David Fairer, and Tom Keymer, I argue that it is a distortion of eighteenth-century literature to identify the Romantic period as the origin of modern ecological consciousness. Indeed, according to Drew and Sitter, the dismissive characterization of the eighteenth century in current ecocritical scholarship is “puzzling” because much of the literature of that period “not only deals with the natural world but does so in ways arguably more ecocentric and less egocentric in orientation than much Romantic writing” (227). And, according to Clark, some ecocritics

have increasingly come to question deeply ingrained presuppositions that the ‘natural’, as opposed to the cultural, necessarily names a condition of balance, harmony, stability and health. They argue that what critics and writers in the romantic tradition have often called ‘nature’ or ‘natural’ have been insufficiently examined, and that the terms act sometimes as an unacknowledged norm in arguments that belong more properly to openly contentious political debate. (14)

Furthermore, eighteenth-century literature shows an abiding concern with environmental issues that inform, and are informed by, representations of class, race, and gender. In other words, ecocriticism needs a revisionist historiography that attends to the complexity, diversity, and possibilities of eighteenth-century environmental thought.

One productive starting point is the representation of deforestation—an environmental concern that the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries share. Tom Keymer, for instance, argues that eighteenth-century depictions of deforestation suggest what could be termed a “preromantic” ecological awareness—a “quiet foretaste of that more conspicuously ‘environmental tradition’ in English poetry that Wordsworth has ... been held to inaugurate” (269, 275). Building on Keymer’s argument, I will explore how trees are implicated in a model of patriarchal sustainability in the works of two eighteenth-century writers: British novelist Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) and Chinese poet, gardener, and scholar Yuan Mei (1716-1798). Yuan Mei, one of the most famous eighteenth-century poets in the canon of Chinese literature, kept an unusual 21-year record (beginning in 1749) of the evolution of his Sui-Yuan (Garden of Accommodation or “Harmony” Garden) located outside Nanjing.

I focus on “patriarchal sustainability” not because patriarchy should be seen as sustainable, but because “patriarchal sustainability” illustrates how historical visions of sustainability that no longer work in the twenty-first century may nevertheless demonstrate how sustainable progress grows out of tradition, convention, and historical situatedness. Since no one is exempt from historical situatedness it is just as worthwhile for the modern reader to analyze case studies of how sustainability has been theorized throughout history as to analyze its theorization throughout the global contexts of the contemporary world.

In English literature Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* serves as a link between the value of trees in Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, and Henry Fielding and their value in Jane Austen’s fiction. Taking the titular hero Sir Charles’s comment that cutting down a tree is a “kind of impiety” (Richardson 3: 273) as the fulcrum point of the argument I will explore how Richardson uses the gardens, orchards, and trees of the country estate to construct a vivifying,

recuperative model of patriarchal authority that makes some progress toward recognizing women's literary productions. Yuan Mei was a younger contemporary of Richardson and lived in China during the Qing Dynasty. A poet and government functionary, Yuan was also concerned with the proper way of exercising domestic or state authority. He, too, used trees to conceptualize a sustainable personal and communal identity. For both Richardson's Sir Charles and Yuan Mei's characters (and variously constructed autobiographical poetic speakers) the garden and its trees represent a self-in-continuity, a legacy of cultivation to sustain the self while sustaining the memory of the past and hope in the future. Though both authors focus on patriarchal figures—male property owners—they also characterize these figures as representatives of a sustainable tradition in which history is respected while progress is encouraged. This progress is most evident in the patriarchal welcoming of women into the space of arboreal stewardship.

This argument points in the direction of a cross-cultural analysis of environmental consciousness and builds a bridge between different literary traditions. The poetry and prose of the controversial Yuan Mei indicate that trees and gardens function for him, as for Richardson's Sir Charles, as a method of cultivating the self while preserving patriarchal heritage.<sup>1</sup> Both Richardson and Yuan Mei mentored women writers and their works demonstrate how tradition can be adapted and revised to include those previously marginalized. Obviously it is structurally untenable to formulate an "add women to patriarchy and stir" model of a sustainable society; but acknowledging that both Richardson and Yuan Mei incorporated women into spaces that symbolized personal, professional, and natural sustainability enables the contemporary critic to historicize sustainability discourse, to discern these authors' attempts to envision a responsible and progressive steward with one foot in the patriarchal tradition and the other in a

transformative process that establishes new human networks and new ways of relating the self to society and to the natural world. For both writers, cultivating the natural world is depicted as a personal, but also a communal, model of creative production. The works of Richardson and Yuan Mei suggest that envisioning personal identity as variously implicated in one's relationship with the natural world was a well-established and culturally diverse set of literary traditions that did not originate with the Romantic poets, but to which they contributed.

My argument intervenes in two sustainability discussions: 1) By situating contemporary sustainability discourse in relation to eighteenth-century studies I suggest that developing a "prehistory" of sustainability studies will facilitate imagining alternate models and trajectories of sustainability that multiply and complexly resist the binary divisions between "anthropocentrism" and "biocentrism," between self interest and idealism. 2) By comparing two writers from different cultural contexts I suggest a reorientation of eighteenth-century studies toward a more global, less "anglo-centric," and more sustainable perspective.

Before turning to Richardson and Yuan Mei, let me provide a brief overview of the place of deforestation in the scholarship of English literature and the need for a 'prehistory' of sustainability that may *also* help to reorient eighteenth-century studies. Richardson's and Yuan Mei's modeling of sustainability—the preservation by the present generation of what is valuable in the past in order to transmit it to the next generation—tells us about ways of constructing a human-nature relationship that attends to human flourishing while conceptualizing the natural world as valuable and worthy of preservation. Trees figure significantly as symbols not only of personal security, but of national security, too, and this is true of contexts beyond England and China.

For instance, in her 2007 article “A Culture of Trees” Giulia Pacini amply demonstrated the politicization of tree felling in the Versailles garden in the period preceding the French Revolution. In her more recent “At home with their trees: arboreal beings in the eighteenth-century French imaginary” Pacini has also shown that French writers Jacques Delille and Jacques-Henry Bernardin de Saint Pierre had a “shared understanding of the notion that human beings – *homines ecologici* – have ‘arboreal habits’ that are critical to their happiness and sense of belonging”—arboreal habits that Delille and Saint Pierre praised the French government for manipulating through bio-prospecting (103). Delille and Saint Pierre encouraged the French government to “deploy” trees for their “performative faculties,” their ability to have a “transformative” effect on transplanted humans (104). In short, the “eighteenth century culture of stewardship” assumed that the “ways in which a king (or property owner) managed his lands—and his forests in particular—spoke to his moral and political legitimacy” (104). This culture of stewardship undergirds the significance of forestry displays, and the rejection of deforestation, in the novels not only of Samuel Richardson but also of his contemporary (and sometime rival), the novelist Henry Fielding.

Yuan Mei’s rejection of deforestation does not *seem* to comment on his political status, but it does have personal meaning for his poetic speaker as someone who has withdrawn from official government service in order to cultivate his own garden. And, as Stephen McDowall has pointed out, Yuan Mei’s description of his garden is unusual: while garden poetry was an established genre in Yuan’s time these poems tend to emphasize itemization and naming of garden features since these allowed “Ming and Qing garden owners” to construct “meaning within the designed space. As this was usually achieved by allusion to historical or literary figures and places, the naming of features was a task that drew on all of the knowledge and learning of

the garden designer” (138). Garden poems thus tended to have a “spatial composition” (138).

That Yuan Mei refers only slightly to items in his garden shifts his emphasis to “the overall *idea* of the Garden rather than the Garden itself,” so that the “*process* of garden design becom[es] the repository of meaning” (138-9). In other words, like Delille’s and Saint Pierre’s assumption that trees have “performative faculties,” Yuan Mei’s garden records present trees as implicated in the transformation of the self.

This is not to ignore the limitations of such eighteenth-century (or earlier) discourses. As Andrew McRae has acknowledged in his study of Michael Drayton’s impassioned attack on deforestation in *Poly-Olbion* (1612-1622), the way that early modern (and, I would add, Enlightenment) thinkers envisioned humanity’s relationship with the natural world falls “short of any modern standards of ecological thought” (430). Yet Drayton’s “idealism” and his “exercises in imagination” enable the reader to “conceive of a model of the nation which is dependent not on the constructs of human culture, but rather on the absence of humanity” (430). And as Carl Griffin has said of tree maiming as an act of political protest, examining this practice “allows us to better understand how, during periods of dramatic economic change, the relationship between people and the ‘natural’ changes as the needs of capital utilizes—and defines—flora in different ways” (93). Any description of the natural world has the potential to be a political act, a way of placing the “natural” within the coordinates of a specific ideological framework within which some group benefits.

In other words, these historical models—applied with circumspection and a sense of their limits—furnish contemporary green studies scholars with a set of alternate ways of envisioning humanity’s relationship with the natural world that can be combined and adapted to suit the current global environment. Sustainability is a relational framework and this underscores the

need to take both humanity's requirements and the requirements of the natural world into account in order to effect flourishing and, ultimately, a sustainable model of human development. In this respect my argument coincides with McRae's defense of Drayton's affective rather than rational and economic evaluation of natural resources.

My argument also coincides with Greg Garrard's call for the humanities to become more involved in the discourse of sustainability. As Garrard says, one of the greatest current challenges of ecocriticism is that of

developing constructive relations between the green humanities and the environmental sciences, which is especially urgent and problematic in the light of developments in ecology that expose the rhetoric of balance and harmony as, in effect, versions of the pastoral. This notion of nature's wisdom is so deeply ingrained in environmentalist discourse and ecocriticism that only sustained research at the borders of the humanities and the new postmodern biological sciences can disentangle it from our systems of basic presuppositions. (203-4)

Like Clark, Garrard realizes that the model of balance and equilibrium needs to give way to a model of flux and adaptation.

The final caveat regarding the use of historical protests against deforestation involves the theocentric model and the extensive use of divine authority in early modern and Enlightenment defenses of the natural world. If arguments in alignment with Drayton's idealistic "national providentialism" (McRae 410) and eighteenth-century visions of "providential reforestation" (Keymer 273) are no longer possible in the largely secular public sphere of the developed world, perhaps a secular Chain of Being—in which interdependence and mutual flourishing for the human community and the natural world are seen as inextricably intertwined—is yet possible.<sup>2</sup>

What the sustainability community needs is a more historicized awareness of the “long durations through which environmental imaginations are shaped” (LeMenager, Shewry, and Hiltner 1). Only by understanding the history of sustainability discourse can that discourse be channeled in new directions that neither idealize nature nor reduce it to a set of resources for human consumption. As LeMenager, Shewry, and Hiltner point out, studying the history of environmental thought enables the contemporary critic to recognize the “multiplicity of historical trajectories of environmental thought, across varied regions of the globe and beyond the traditional epochal breaks (e.g., the Industrial Revolution) that once stabilized Euro-American environmental imaginaries” (8). That is why thinking about trees in cross-cultural contexts as sustaining and being sustained by a self- or community-in-continuity is so useful a model to combat deforestation.

Can we, then, situate pre-Romantic literature within an ecological historiography? One of the main difficulties in establishing such a prehistory is the historical development in vocabulary and conceptualization: pre-Romantic thinkers clearly did not ‘think’ about the natural world in the same way that writers in an industrial world facing multiple, man-made ecological disasters must. Yet historiography is a narrative, a selective way of looking at historical developments, and eighteenth-century scholars are increasingly arguing that that narrative needs to be widened to include both older and historically marginalized ways of conceiving of humanity’s place in the natural world.

For instance, in tracing the differences between the eighteenth-century practice of “physicotheology” and the contemporary concept of “ecotheology,” John Sitter concludes that despite significant differences (the investment in God’s existence, the sense of planetary peril), they “share two visionary premises: the natural world is properly seen as the ‘amazing whole,’ in

Alexander Pope's phrase, and our usual anthropocentric perspective must be overcome to appreciate nature's true meaning" (12). This implicit reference to the relational model of the Chain of Being is helpful. Yet the sense that humanity is embedded in a larger system in which the natural world is also embedded, that the two are in fact interdependent, finds expression in literature even before the eighteenth century, as Drayton's attack on deforestation demonstrates. The task now is to engage in a revisionist ecocritical historiography, to recuperate alternative visions of humanity's relationship with the natural world that have been marginalized and left out of the ecocritical canon. Part of this task is to address the anthropocentrism at the heart of models of unsustainable human progress, models that have encouraged maximum resource extraction in the name of modernization or development and that have now afflicted the planet with dead zones in the ocean, leaking nuclear reactors, oil hemorrhages, and a myriad of other environmental crises that affect humans and the natural world alike.

One way of countering the destructive excesses of anthropocentrism is explicitly to identify the interests of the human community with those of the natural world. As Sitter points out in his contradistinction of James Thomson's anthropomorphized bees in *Autumn* (1730) and William Wordsworth's "apostrophe to the Derwent [river]" in Book I of the "Two-Part Prelude" (1799), Thomson's description of the bees is "anthropomorphic" but it is less "anthropocentric" and, Sitter argues, more "ecologically focused" than Wordsworth's description of the natural world.

Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* also adumbrates the value of anthropomorphism. McRae argues that Drayton's personification of besieged trees enables him essentially to make a sentimental argument against deforestation, the poem's "governing method of personification here interjects into an established economic discourse a powerful affective note, and equally

significant aesthetic assumptions” (420). According to McRae, Drayton helps to shape “a discourse of environmentalism, within which the sustainability of woodlands becomes a value in itself, rather than necessarily in relation to the needs of their human inhabitants” (420). In other words, an anthropomorphic vision of the natural world is not necessarily an anthropocentric one in which human values are privileged at the expense of those of the entire ecosystem.

Anthropomorphic arguments can in fact combat anthropocentrism by recapitulating the interdependency of the ecosystem: humans can identify with aspects of the natural world because those aspects have been translated into human terms. In the Chain of Being what hurts a part also hurts the whole system.

There are of course limits to the application of any anthropomorphic model. Human identification with the natural world threatens to erase the (sometimes hazy) boundary between the human and the non-human. But the anthropomorphic model does have the strength of emphasizing interdependence, of emphasizing that the natural world is as distinct and as unique as another human individual and that the same energy, commitment, and patience must be invested to produce a flourishing relationship. The twenty-first century human community is confronted with a planet depleted, mistreated, and abused by rampant industrial development. But in earlier centuries natural disasters were a constant reminder that humans were *not* in control of the environment. As David Fairer has put it, eighteenth-century poetry, and specifically the georgic mode, offers non-anthropocentric, non-abusive models of the relationship between human survival and the use of the natural world. The linchpin for Fairer is the notion of cultivation as husbandry, a “co-operation” with nature that entails “ingenuity, effort, vigilance, experience, respect, and above all *care*” (205) for the specificity of any given environment. Cultivation requires a relational attitude on the part of humans that is far removed from the

anthropocentric valorization of “human mastery” (Ibid. 205) to the detriment of the flourishing of the natural world.

In other words, scholars can build on the work of Drew, Sitter, Fairer, Keymer, McRae, and others in unearthing the traditions of ecological thought that have been left behind in the march to progress. This article contributes to the conversation in two ways: using the revisionist theoretical framework outlined above, it analyzes an anthropomorphic model in which the natural world is protected and cultivated because it is identified with human flourishing; the article also uses the framework to take the discussion of ecological consciousness in a different direction, to question the anglo-centricity of the theory of the novel.

In response to Ian Watt’s highly influential but anglo-centric account in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Margaret Doody has pointed out that the novel is in fact a multi-cultural product, a genre in which Babylonian, Greek, African, Spanish, French, and Chinese influences can be identified.<sup>3</sup> By comparing a key English novelist of the eighteenth century and a key Chinese poet and short story writer of the same period, this article will argue that, using the framework of anthropomorphic arguments against deforestation, it is possible not only to revise the historiography of ecological thought but also to reorient the way we think of and teach the novel so that historically marginalized influences can be acknowledged. It is time to think of the development of the novel as a family tree, with many roots and branches and sources of fertilization, rather than a single “rise.”

One root of this family tree, as outlined by Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan, is to see the novel as responsive to “certain kinds of discourses with particular ideological agendas” rather than to analyze it in terms of “specific formal features associated with genre” (25). Another, though, coincides with Doody’s objection to Watt’s anglo-centricity and grows out of the

problem that, given the amount of trade and exploration and cultural exchange that had already informed English consciousness in the eighteenth century, it is strange that non-English sources often continue to be marginalized in the study of the novel. This article will not provide an exhaustive response, but it will imagine one possible approach to incorporating non-English material into the “typographical primal soup” (Hammond and Reagan 16) out of which the eighteenth-century novel developed.

Deforestation is a useful issue with which to begin because it conjoins ideological and aesthetic attitudes that found expression in legislation (as McRae shows) and in literature, whether poetry or the prose fiction of the novel. As Robert Markley observes in his analysis of Andrew Marvell’s poem “Upon Appleton House,” the “planting of trees, particularly oaks, not only perpetuates individuals’ wealth but ensures a coherent national identity that depends on naval strength and international trade to protect England against threats from abroad and ‘a generall scarcitie and penury’ at home. Trees make possible the difference that is the nation” (93). Pacini’s and Markley’s arguments coincide in showing that trees performed an ideological, nationalist function in early modern and Enlightenment French *and* English literature.

Further, as Malcolm Kelsall point out, “In the lifetime of [Alexander] Pope the country house ideal ‘colonises’ the new fictional form of the novel. Fielding’s *Paradise Hall*, Richardson’s *Grandison Hall*, establish a tradition in prose of which the most significant heir is Jane Austen” (8). If this is so, surely the concerns about deforestation that were finding expression in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and earlier) also informed the novel? The description of Sir Charles Grandison’s mansion does partly coincide with the extensive tour Sir Charles gives his new wife and their guests of the estate’s orchards and gardens. No wonder, then, that characters who wish to “improve” an estate by cutting down trees are among the least

sympathetic in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814). Indeed, as Alistair Duckworth has argued, at "the end of the novel, those who have been associated with ... improvements ... are excluded from the park" while the conservationist characters, "Fanny and (less consistently) Edmund ... are committed to a permanent sense of place and a stable idea of identity" (26-7). Perhaps, for Austen, it may not be an "impiety" to fell a tree as it is for Sir Charles, but such destruction nevertheless suggests a lack of sensitivity, intelligence, and taste. It also suggests an unsustainable breach with domestic and national tradition.

As Markley says of the seventeenth-century English context, "arboriculture is marked by patrilineal values familiar to seventeenth-century gentlemen, notably the peaceful begetting of heirs. The legal and familial preservation of the estate thus is linked symbolically as well as practically to the propagation of trees" (93). This article proceeds in its analysis of Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* and several works of the Chinese poet Yuan Mei in order to adumbrate some similarities that could contribute to new ways of thinking about the history of the novel and the history of ecocriticism.

Let me begin with perhaps the most famous "prospect" scene in eighteenth-century English literature—that in which Squire Allworthy, the benevolent patriarch of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), is introduced as the central rung in the Chain of Being—before contradistinguishing it with an analysis of the "prospect" scene from *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4) that has attracted critical attention (Bending and McRae; Keymer 273 n. 40). In the fourth chapter of Book I, Squire Allworthy, the adoptive father of the novel's illegitimate hero, rises in the morning to take a survey of the grounds of his country home, which stood

on the South-east Side of a Hill, but nearer the Bottom than the Top of it, so as to be sheltered from the North-east by a Grove of old Oaks, which rose above it in a

gradual Ascent of near half a Mile, and yet high enough to enjoy a most charming Prospect of the Valley beneath.

In the midst of the Grove was a fine Lawn, sloping down towards the House, near the Summit of which rose a plentiful Spring, gushing out of a Rock covered in Firs, and forming a constant Cascade ... [that] fell into a Lake ... which filled the Center of a beautiful Plain, embellished with Groupes of Beeches and Elms ... It was now the Middle of May, and the Morning was remarkably serene, when Mr. *Allworthy* walked forth ... a human Being replete with Benevolence, meditating in what Manner he might render himself most acceptable to his Creator, by doing most Good to his Creatures. (31)

Both the prospect—including the preeminence of the nationalistically significant English oaks—and *Allworthy*'s contemplation of it place him within an English culture of stewardship consistent with the French model of political and moral legitimacy outlined by Pacini.

Fielding and Richardson were professional rivals (indeed, Fielding inaugurated his career as a novelist with two sendups—*Shamela* (1741) and *Joseph Andrews* (1742) of Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1741)), and their heroes are very different, but clearly they both drew on the culture of stewardship, its success implied by the fecundity and plenitude displayed in the "prospect," in order to identify the centers of moral authority in their novels. Just as Squire *Allworthy* holds himself accountable to God the Creator, so, too, Sir Charles holds himself responsible for protecting the trees planted by his father and ancestors.

The emotional core of *Sir Charles Grandison* is the eponymous hero's dilemma in choosing between the affections of two worthy women—the passionate and emotionally fragile Italian beauty Clementina della Poretta and the modest but independent heiress Harriet Byron, a

veritable English rose. After torturous emotional see-sawing for both women, Sir Charles finally proposes to Harriet and they are married. Once he has brought her back to his tastefully situated estate, Sir Charles takes Harriet and her friends and relatives on a tour of the mansion and grounds. It is the layout of the gardens—designed by Sir Charles’ despotic father Sir Thomas—that has attracted critical attention.

Sir Charles is in most ways the antithesis of his father: where Sir Thomas was unkind and domineering to the women of the family Sir Charles is attentive to their welfare and assiduously emphasizes the importance of a woman’s freedom to choose her companion and of her “*choice*” in revealing vulnerability to him (3: 270). Sir Thomas was not a particularly levelheaded manager of either his family or his estate—he neglects his saintly wife, squanders a large portion of the estate Sir Charles is to inherit, forbids his daughters and son to communicate while Sir Charles is touring Europe, and refuses to let his eldest daughter Caroline marry a very eligible suitor whom she loves because he does not want to be a grandfather before he is a “*grey father*” (1: 326). Sir Charles, in contrast, is excellent and well beloved as a manager of both his estate and his family (in fact one character exclaims “every-thing indeed is [flourishing], that belongs to Sir Charles Grandison,” 3:273). So it is striking that Sir Charles considers it a “kind of impiety” to fell a tree planted by his father, despite Sir Thomas’s extensive and highly detailed design of the garden being, according to one character, “fanciful” (Richardson 3: 273).

As Bending and McRae have pointed out, Richardson was, in this respect, following Joseph Addison’s attitude to trees in the epistolary periodical *The Spectator*, No. 589 (September 3, 1714). One correspondent, a “great ... Admirer of Trees” (185), laments the practice of “several prodigal young Heirs in the Neighborhood, felling down the most glorious Monuments of their Ancestors Industry, and ruining, in a Day, the Product of Ages” (185-6). He reminds

Mr. Spectator of the “Veneration the Ancients had for Trees” (186) and assures him that when he is “much against my Will” compelled to “cut down several Trees, I have taken Care to leave the Space, between every Walk, as much a Wood as I found it” (185). Trees, in both the pagan and Abrahamic tradition, as the writer observes, have sacred functions.

Given these discourses it is less surprising that Sir Charles considers it a “kind of impiety” to fell the trees planted by his dissolute father in the “time of his fancy.” The garden and prospect are described beautifully and extensively. The description emphasizes harmony, profusion, and agrarian productivity presided over by the godlike perspective of a benevolent but masterful steward. Grandison Hall is situated in a “spacious park” worth describing at length for the association it establishes between filial piety, landscape perspective, and the cultivation of trees.

The park is

remarkable for its prospects, lawns, and rich-appearing clumps of trees of large growth; which must therefore have been planted by the ancestors of the excellent owner; who, contenting himself to open and enlarge many fine prospects, delights to preserve, as much as possible, the plantations of his ancestors; and particularly thinks it a kind of impiety to fell a tree, that was planted by his father. ...

The orchard, lawns, and grass-walks have sheep for gardeners; and the whole being bounded only by sunk fences, the eye is carried to views that have no bounds.

The orchard, which takes up near three acres of ground, is planted in a peculiar taste ... the higher fruit-trees, as pears, in a semi-circular row, first; apples at further distances next; cherries, plumbs, standard apricots, &c. all which in the season of blossoming, one row gradually lower than another, must make a charming

variety of blooming sweets to the eye, from the top of the rustic villa, which commands the whole.

The outside of this orchard, next the north, is planted with three rows of trees, at proper distances from each other; one of pines; one of cedars; one of Scotch firs, in the like semicircular order; which at the same time that they afford a perpetual verdure to the eye, and shady walks in the summer, defend the orchard from the cold and blighting winds.

This plantation was made by direction of Sir Thomas, in his days of fancy. We have heard that he had a poetical, and, consequently, a fanciful taste. (3: 272-3)

The description emphasizes diversity, variety, beauty, harmony, protection, and utility. And though this is a very different estate prospect than that of Squire Allworthy's, nevertheless Richardson's and Fielding's usually competing aesthetics coincide in the portrayal of an ideal stewardship that invokes the model of the Chain of Being with the benevolent patriarchal landowner as the center rung of an agricultural and natural plenitude approved by Providence. Sir Charles seems to wish to preserve the best of the previous generation and to cultivate it for the communal flourishing of the present and future generations. Just as he bestows his mother's study on Harriet as his wife and the lady of the house, so he husbands his father's one great contribution to the family welfare while undertaking a radically different course in his own husbanding of the family and the estate.

Like Sir Charles, Samuel Richardson seems to have used a coextension of the domestic and natural spaces to express his own personal creativity. There are several paintings or drawings of Richardson (images available in T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel's monumental biography) that depict Richardson's authorial persona in relation to his social network, domestic

realm, and the natural world. In one (Joseph Highmore, 1750; Plate 6, Eaves and Kimpel), with the inscription “Author of *Clarissa*,” Richardson, holding a parchment, stands by a table upon which are placed the symbols of his literary success, a quill and inkstand. Behind him hangs a painting of a mansion and lawn with a seated female figure, a standing male figure, and a dog in the foreground. This painting-within-a-painting recalls an actual painting of one of his real-life correspondents, Lady Bradshaigh, a passionate commentator on *Clarissa*, and her husband, Sir Roger (Plate 5, Eaves and Kimpel). The painting portrays Richardson not just as a successful novelist but also as the correspondent of a well-read aristocratic woman.

In another painting (Francis Hayman, c. 1741; Plate 3, Eaves and Kimpel) Richardson and his young family sit in the midst of a forest. And, perhaps most pertinently, in the rough sketch by one of his mentees, Susannah Highmore, he is depicted reading a passage from *Sir Charles Grandison* to his friends and protégés in a room with windows and a wide open door through which a vista of trees is evident (no date; Plate 11, Eaves and Kimpel). Miss Highmore’s drawing invokes Richardson’s identity as a mentor of young women as readers and writers: Susanna Highmore (the artist), Hester Mulso, and Mary Prescott are all pictured. Mulso, the future Mrs. Chapone, would become a member of the Bluestocking group of intellectuals with whom Richardson corresponded (particularly Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Carter). Mulso would also go on to write the popular *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) and so was one of Richardson’s most successful mentees (Myers 140-142). Finally, Joseph Highmore painted Richardson again (c. 1750; dust cover, Eaves and Kimpel), this time depicting him holding a book and standing against the backdrop of a formal garden with statues and overhanging trees.

It is at this nexus of literary and visual self-representation, the cultivation of the natural world, and the cultivation of a next generation of writers, particularly female writers, that Richardson and the contemporary Chinese poet, critic, and scholar Yuan Mei can be fruitfully compared. At about the time Richardson was writing his masterpieces *Clarissa* (1747-8) and *Sir Charles Grandison*, Yuan Mei was abandoning his career as a government official to undertake a highly successful and lucrative “retirement” as a poet near Little Granary Hill near present day Nanjing. Here, in late 1748, he bought a garden, called Sui-Yuan (Garden of Accommodation or Harmony Garden), and entertained guests and students.

Yuan Mei was highly regarded and very successful as a poet and critic, but he was also a controversial figure, attacked for what was perceived as a sensuous lifestyle that celebrated the beauties of the human form, sexuality, the natural world, and food (Yuan was a cultivated gastronome and wrote many recipes and cooking guides). He was particularly attacked for his tutoring of what were known as the “moth eyebrow” ladies—fashionable young women who made up their eyebrows to look like moths (Louie and Edwards *xxvi*). Young women of this class were expected to be educated in the protection of the family domestic space; that Yuan Mei welcomed a bevy of intellectual female students to his garden compound was scandalous to more conservative thinkers. Though Richardson successfully cultivated a reputation of virtuous and intellectualized female company, he and Yuan Mei both complicated conventional boundaries of gendered space and intellectual pursuits. Both writers were famous—and to a certain extent notorious—for overturning gender hierarchies, especially regarding female education and literacy. The visual representations of Richardson more than once foreground his relationship—personal and professional—with women and with nature; similarly, Yuan Mei commissioned a painting of himself, his family, and thirteen female students (including the Sun sisters, Yunfeng

and Yunhe, and his top pupil Xi Peilan) pursuing their artistic studies in a friend's garden compound. Jeffrey Riegel's article "Yuan Mei (1716-1798) and a Different 'Elegant Gathering'" provides images and a thorough analysis of this and other paintings of Yuan Mei's "elegant gatherings" (with male literary friends in 1765 and with his female students in the 1790s). Riegel also notes that "Yuan Mei's insistence on the talent of women poets was a recurrent theme in his later poetry and other writings" (97). Like Richardson, Yuan used the sociability of the garden to intervene in cultural constructions of himself as a literary mentor but also of women's learning and poetic abilities.

There may have been some truth to the rumors about Yuan Mei relationships with some of his female acquaintances. But Yuan Mei was an unconventional man who, although deeply read in the Chinese classics, was skeptical about a too-ready adherence to Confucian precepts and Buddhist philosophy. A passage from one of his short ghost stories will illustrate Yuan Mei's unconventional attitude to sexuality and piety and his remarkable use—like Richardson's Sir Charles Grandison—of trees and the natural world as an expression of the best part of the self, even beyond death. Even the title of Yuan Mei's collection of ghost stories is revealing. It can be translated as "Censored by Confucius" or as "subjects on which the Master did not talk" (first published in 1788) and the title alludes to the prodigies, disorders, and supernatural occurrences so popular in folk tradition but explicitly excluded from official Confucian philosophy (Louie and Edwards *xxiii*). One tale describes the reincarnation of a Buddhist abbot known as "the Cool Old Man" of the tale's title. The abbot is reincarnated as a boy and when he reaches early adulthood he is transfixed while traveling one day by a series of pornographic images. He purchases them and proceeds to invite prostitutes and courtesans back to the abbey where he "indulged himself, putting into practice his new-found skills ... as if his desire would never be

satiated” (“Cool Old Man” 156). He begins to use the monastery’s funds for these activities and the scandal becomes public knowledge and a petition of complaint is sent to the emperor.

Distressed, the young abbot responds with a telling image by way of rebuking his detractors:

“Some people mistakenly believe that the world would be just as beautiful as it is now if the landscape were stripped of trees” (156). Having uttered this, he falls into a trance and dies at the age of 24. For the young abbot his sexual indulgence is equivalent to the natural fecundity of the forest: to deny the beauty of one is to reject the importance of the other.

Yet the story continues, for an acquaintance of the narrator had known the Cool Old Man in his previous incarnation and described a similar interchange when he happened upon the Man, scantily dressed in semi-feminine attire and in the middle of a *ménage a trois* with a man and woman. Shocked by what he perceives as licentiousness and impiety, the acquaintance curses the Cool Old Man, telling him “A living Buddha would never behave in such a way!” (157). The Cool Old Man, however, responds “the unrestricted and unhindered acts of love between a man and a woman give rise to the essence of life itself. Indeed this is how the world came to exist. It is only those of ignorance and commonplace perceptions who are frightened and shocked by such things” (157). The resonances between Yuan Mei’s story of the reincarnation of the Cool Old Man and Sir Charles’s peculiar attitude to the trees planted by his “fanciful” and licentious father are striking. In both narratives, unconventional sexuality and the fanciful fecundity of the natural world are associated with an older incarnation or generation that shares some sort of personal or familial identity with the current generation. Promiscuity of both the human and the natural world may need regulation, but it is also the source of life and, therefore, of successive generations. This may explain why the straight-laced, responsible Sir Charles, the consummate and practical manager of a family and a country estate, considers it an act of piety to preserve his

promiscuous, unconventional father's "fanciful" acts of creation. After all, both Sir Charles and the estate's orchards are the products of patriarchal desire. To destroy his father's trees would be a symbolic suicide. Better to recuperate and regulate desires than to deny them outright: Sir Charles is a sentimental hero, not a puritan.

We have looked at one of Yuan Mei's provocative ghost stories. But what about Yuan Mei's nonfiction work and his poetry, especially as they relate to that other long term aesthetic project—his *Garden of Accommodation*? One brief poem of Yuan Mei's coincides in a non-sexual way with the import of the story of the "Cool Old Man." Titled "They Mock Me for Planting Trees at My Age" the poem runs only four lines:

Seventy, and still planting trees...

Don't laugh at me, my friends.

Of course I know I'm going to die.

I also know I'm not dead yet. (qtd. in Seaton 92)

Yuan Mei's poetic speaker, like the young abbot, associates the flourishing of trees with the flourishing of the human self; the responsive thriving of the natural world indicates that the human cultivator is still alive and thriving, too. But the poetic speaker is also concerned with the trees as a legacy, as a product of himself that will continue to live, perhaps, when he is dead. His proleptically nostalgic poem "Planting Pines" is also short enough to quote in full:

These hands have planted green pines,

two rows, or three.

I hear it's hard to grow them here,

beyond Kiangsi.

I'll have to wait to watch

them burgeoning glory...

But will there be a me

to see them then?  
I cannot see them now  
without that question. (qtd. in Seaton 27)

Mourning the loss of his potential future self, the speaker pinpoints his recognition that he is not identical with the trees he plants. Yet there is affection, care, and pride here—a wish to sustain the natural world in relation to the self, combined with a recognition that the self may contribute to a natural world that outlasts the human. This is an individual perspective, but it is far from being an anthropocentric, hierarchical model of the relationship between the human community and the natural world. It is a deeply personal reflection, yet also a profoundly humble one.

In a further similarity to Sir Charles's feelings about his father's orchards Yuan Mei meditates on the legacy of the garden he has bought from a former "Master":

The Master of Sui Garden in the past  
First built buildings here beside these hills.  
Terraces, pavilions summoned clouds and mist;  
Wine cups glittered in the candlelight.  
The old men here all say to me  
That this Master was no vulgar man.  
He took this garden and passed it on—to whom?  
How could he know it would be me!  
Long, long the thirty years; and now I come, to help the flowers and bamboo.  
"Follow Garden": the meaning timely now;  
Consider my present-day happiness  
Continuation of the Master's joy.

Does it really just all “pass away”?

Past and present, still the same chess game!

And who will follow after I have left?

I ask the mountain, but it does not say. (“Miscellaneous Feelings,” 299)

This meditation on life, legacy, and death attends to the passage of time and to the identities and shared modes of production that can extend life beyond the grave. It is a kind of piety, a kind of incarnation, a kind of sustainability and a kind of magic to cultivate someone else’s garden; especially when that garden is also one’s own. This meditation—which Yuan Mei and Sir Charles seem to share—could also be productive in contemporary discourses of environmental and social sustainability. Truly to identify oneself with the natural world and to link that identification with previous generations in a society that encompasses the living, the dead, and the non-human would be a particularly healthy response to the anthropocentric view of the natural world that has caused so much damage to the global environment.

I compare Richardson and Yuan Mei not just because of the remarkable similarities between them—the significance of trees in constructing personal character and intergenerational continuity as well as the use of the cultivated natural world to facilitate a human community that encompasses different generations, classes, and genders—but because these similarities point to a new way of doing ecocriticism and theorizing sustainability. An ecocritical, international approach to the study of cultivated foresting in literature of a given period can complicate conventional periodization (the development of literature between the Enlightenment and the Romantic era looks very different when viewed from an ecocritical lens) but it can also, and perhaps most significantly, answer Gillen D’Arcy Wood’s recent call for the humanities to contribute to the discourse of global sustainability. According to Wood, the future of

sustainability studies is the widespread cultivation of “systems literacy,” defined as “an evolved form of interdisciplinary research practice and pedagogy that calls for intellectual competence (not necessarily command) in a variety of fields in order to better address specific, real-world environmental problems” (4). Such “systems literacy” is vital for the survival of the planet and of the human population, but to understand these systems the data furnished by diverse scientific disciplines (geology, hydrology, biology, and so forth) need to be organized into coherent narratives in conjunction with the “production of models, case studies, and analyses of human-environmental interrelationships that look to an operational horizon, and are legible to collaborators in the sciences, social sciences, and policymaking” (Wood 13). The humanities have paradoxically remained largely at the sidelines in the global sustainability conversation, even though a humanities scholar has recourse to a wide variety of narratives that can be adapted to various cultural contexts.

Yuan Mei, deeply knowledgeable in classical Chinese literature and yet invested in adapting those classics to particular, personal constructions of meaning and experience, furnishes an ideal example of how a scholar might craft a sustainable approach both to literature and to the cultivation of the natural world: the intertwined aesthetic projects of writing and gardening demonstrate an appreciation of tradition while valuing innovation. This is also true of Fairer’s celebration of “the georgic’s interest in how adaptation and co-ordination can be made to work in any mixed economy” (205). Adaptation acknowledges a debt to the past while keeping that past alive in the present, constantly challenging tradition and convention to be meaningful to lived experience. For Richardson, too, innovation is rooted in tradition. Sir Charles certainly does not imitate his father’s unkind and licentious personal life, but he does continue his father’s aesthetic

tradition as represented by his “fanciful” garden of orchards, forests, and flower beds. Sir Charles has preserved the best from the past while using it to forge a novel domestic experience.

I teach a course called “The Rise of the Novel” and one of the points that I make in describing the limitations of Ian Watt’s extremely useful but deeply flawed theory of how the novel developed is its anglo-centricity: Watt really only focuses on English novels. This is strange, particularly given the existence of the Roman Catholic, continental, pre-capitalist novel *Don Quixote*. As scholars like Doody have pointed out, “a certain chauvinism leads English-speaking critics to treat the Novel as if it were somehow essentially English, and as if the English were pioneers of novel-writing” (1-2). But the strangeness takes on a truly tragic dimension when considering that one of the great novels of the eighteenth century is rarely taught—at least in full—in an eighteenth-century literature course. That novel is Cao Xueqin’s *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (also known as *The Story of the Stone*) and brings us full circle from looking back to looking ahead in the relation of gardens and forests to literature. For, according to a widely circulated but perhaps apocryphal anecdote, the semi-autobiographical *Dream of the Red Chamber* was partially set in the Sui-Yuan gardens at one point owned by Yuan Mei. The anecdote furnishes a useful illustration of how ideas, information, and cultural capital circulate and are adapted to new circumstances.<sup>4</sup> To use a tree metaphor, it is not just the roots of tradition and the flowering of the new generation to which an ecocritical perspective can attend; rather, a *family tree* of the novel could be cultivated in a new generation of scholarship that examines the cross-cultural similarities and differences of how trees, flowers, and the natural world have been used throughout the modern era to describe and process human experience in prose fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.

Yuan Mei's Garden of Accommodation has been destroyed, a dark legacy for a nation currently beset by some of the world's most deleterious environmental pollution. And in a further dark legacy, the Samuel Richardson Society has found its plan to establish a memorial for Richardson with the installation of an official heritage "Blue Plaque" for the Grange, his London residence, stymied—his printing house exists, but the home itself was destroyed during World War II. The dream of both writers for a sustainable continuity between the present and the past, the human and the natural world, seems to have been frustrated. It is up to new readers and writers to recuperate and conserve a sustainable network of literary cross-fertilizations and to plant a new family tree in green studies.

This new family tree could be modeled on the rich, varied, and flexible network of personal and communal sustainability that trees materially and metaphorically enable. From a literary perspective, the development of the model could extend back through Western classics such as Virgil's *Eclogues* (c. 37 B.C.E) and Plato's *Critias* (c. 360 B.C.E) through British poems such as John Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-1730) and the protest poems of John Clare, William Wordsworth, and William Cowper (Fulford 47), through nineteenth-century novels such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) and on through the late twentieth-century poetry of Andrea Zanzotto (1921-2011)—in which, according to Robert Pogue Harrison, the forest "figures as a synecdoche for the totality of what comes into, and goes out of, being" (241). The model could, and ought to, be extended across cultures and media.

Yuan Mei is just one of many scholar-gardeners in the Chinese poetic tradition—more Chinese writers, and writers of other cultures, could be included to develop a truly global literature focusing on the stewardship of trees as a fundamental contribution to human

sustainability. Further the “Tree of Life” textile motif is one of the most visible examples of early-modern globalization: the motif originated in China but was adapted to Indian, European, and American contexts (Singh 26). And popular films that confront the destructive potential of deforestation—such as *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) and *Avatar* (2009)—could also be included in this model of sustainability.

Recognizing these possibilities returns us to the eighteenth century for, in the midst of natural and man-made disasters, in the midst of an absurd world in which profit is privileged over communal welfare, it is nevertheless possible to adapt and recycle *Candide*’s conclusion for contemporary use—*Il faut cultiver notre forêt*. That simple but fundamental commitment to labor and process subtends a sustainable model of trees, the self, and the human community.

## Notes

1. There is a large body of scholarship on Yuan Mei that I am unable to consult because it is written in Mandarin and English translations are not yet available.

2. For an overview of the concept of the “Great Chain of Being” see, Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*. My thoughts on the Chain of Being as a helpful conceptual model for contemporary sustainability discourse have benefitted greatly from discussions with my honors student Kenneth Fong. I have also been challenged by many sharp questions and observations made by students in my undergraduate course “The Ecological Enlightenment.” My thanks to all of them.

3. Watt claims the “novel’s formal realism ... involved a many-sided break with the current literary tradition. Among the many reasons which made it possible for that break to occur *earlier and more thoroughly in England than elsewhere*, considerable importance must certainly be attached to changes in the eighteenth-century reading public” (35; my emphasis).

4. For a guarded defense of Yuan Mei’s claim that Sui-Yuan was the same garden as “not entirely baseless” see Shang Wei’s essay in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (2: 261).

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