

Daft discussions & gardens

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 21 May 2000

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Peter Stephenson — 21 May 2000, 18:44

From: "Jonathan Laidlow" <LAIDL@J.M at hhs.bham.ac.uk>

Subject: Quiet around here

You've all gone quiet so I'll ask a daft question.

A propos of which (although it doesn't apply any more), I noticed an oddly Wolfian passage the other day. It would be ultraborskian to suggest any genuine parallel, but it rather tickled me to find anything even approximately relevant in so unexpected a source.

Reminder... from Shadow, chapter XX, in the Jungle Garden (Sverian speaking):

"Where does the path lead? And how can the cat be so far off when all this is only one room of the building we saw from the top of the Adamnian steps?"

"I've never gone so deeply into this garden. You were the one who wanted to come."

"Answer my questions," I said, and took her by the shoulder.

"If this path is like the others---I mean, in the other gardens---it runs in a wide loop that will eventually return us to the door by which we came in. There's no reason to be afraid."

"The door vanished when I shut it."

...

"When you were at the top of the steps and you looked down and saw these gardens, could you make out the entire building?"

"No," I admitted. "There were pylons and spires in the way, and the corner of the embankment."

"And even so, could you delimit what you saw?"

I shrugged. "The glass made it difficult to tell where the edges of the building were."

Now read on:

"Here is a nice little wood, if one can but get into it. What happiness if the door should not be locked!---but of course it is; for in these

great places the gardeners are the only people who can go where they like."

The door, however, proved not to be locked, and they were all agreed in turning joyfully through it, and leaving the unmitigated glare of day behind. A considerable flight of steps landed them in the wilderness, which was a planted wood of about two acres, and though chiefly of larch and laurel, and beech cut down, and though laid out with too much regularity, was darkness and shade and natural beauty, compared with the bowling-green lawn and the terrace. They all felt the refreshment of it, and for some time could only walk and admire. At length, after a short pause, Miss Crawford began with, "So you are to be a clergyman, Mr Bertram."

[several paragraphs of smalltalk on the subject of Anglican orders between Miss Crawford, who is sort of angling for Mr Betram, although at this stage hasn't given up on his elder brother, and Edmund himself omitted]

[Miss Crawford speaking again:] "I am really not tired, which I almost wonder at; for we must have walked at least a mile in this wood. Do you not think we have?"

"Not half a mile," was his sturdy answer; for we was not yet so much in love as to measure distance or reckon time with feminine lawlessness.

"Oh, you do not consider how much we have wound about. We have taken such a very serpentine course; and the wood itself must be half a mile long in a straight line, for we have never seen the end of it yet since we left the first great path."

"But if you remember, before we left the first great path, we saw directly to the end of it. We looked down the whole vista, and saw it closed by iron gates, and it could not have been more than a furlong in length."

"Oh, I know nothing of your furlongs, but I am sure it is a very long wood---and that we have been winding in and out ever since we came into it; and therefore, when I say that we have walked a mile in it, I must speak within compass."

"We have been exactly a quarter of an hour here," said Edmund, taking out his watch. "Do you think we are walking four miles an hour?"

"Oh, do not attack me with your watch. A watch is always too fast or too slow. I cannot be dictated to by a watch."

A few steps farther brought them out at the bottom of the very walk they had been talking of, and standing back, well shaded and sheltered, and looking over a ha-ha into the park, was a comfortable-sized bench, on which they all sat down.

Mansfield Park, chapter IX (towards the end of it)

It seems Mr Rushworth's little wood has something of both the Sand Garden and the Jungle Garden about it. There is no hut, but maybe after the `improvements' he is planning, one will be introduced. Sir Thomas Bertram could perhaps supply some slaves from his West Indian plantations.

Other parallels: Edmond's becoming a clergyman and Severian's quasi-religious calling; Miss Crawford is something of a vamp, like Agia; Dorcas and Fanny Price (the heroine, who has been hanging around in the background in the above) are both shy types who eventually get the man; Sotherton and the Botanic Gardens are both being visited for the first time; probably other things too feeble to mention.

On the other hand, it's probably true to say that Miss Austen hadn't read Borges' `The Garden of Forking Paths'.

I await your qualified indifference.

Corncrake (endangered species in this country, apparently).

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Michael Straight — 21 May 2000, 21:57 · follows Peter Stephenson

Aha! I like this practice of letting Wolfen weirdness and ambiguity invade other books. Reading Mansfield Park as if it were written by Gene Wolfe; Borges would approve! Or would he?

-Rostrum