

**Luke Morgan. *The Monster in the Garden: The Grotesque and the Gigantic in Renaissance Landscape Design*.**

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In his book, *The Monster in the Garden: The Grotesque and the Gigantic in Renaissance Landscape Design*, Luke Morgan argues for the significance of the monster and the grotesque in Italian Renaissance landscape architecture, especially the garden. Morgan's opening question sets the tone for his further investigations into the connections between the Italian Renaissance garden and philosophy, law, medicine and literature: why, "if they were universally conceived as places for perfect amenity and pleasure, did some Renaissance gardens incorporate images of violence and suffering?" (3)

From the outset, Morgan gives a contemporary definition from Leon Battista Alberti on gardens as "Arcadian refuges from reality" where "there should be gardens full of delightful plants." (2) The traditional literary ideal of the garden, from classical works by Homer, Theocritus and Virgil, was the *locus amoenus* (pleasant place). With references to the discursive theoretical framework of Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin, Morgan tries to develop a new conceptual model for the understanding of the monster as a vital element in the Renaissance garden. His main arguments concern the incorporation of images of violence and suffering in several of the Renaissance gardens, and Morgan argues that the theme of violence in the garden "problematizes the traditional view that the development of Renaissance landscape design was motivated by a coherent and narrowly focused desire to reinstate the classical *locus amoenus*" (2). To oppose this traditional classical view of the gardens as a pleasant place, Morgan draws heavily on Renaissance literary sources for his discussions on monstrosity and the fantastical. Among the most influential are Rabelais' *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*, and *Hypnorotemachia Poliphili* (attributed to Francesco Collona). The inclusion of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the "principle source of the imagery and iconography of Renaissance garden design" (3) is well argued and strengthens Morgan's argument of the garden incorporating the unpleasant and frightening, and establishes a red thread in the discussion with classical literature and philosophy to the Renaissance garden. As for the classical heritage of garden architecture, Morgan draws on ancient and Renaissance works like Vitruvius' *De architectura*, Alberti's *On the Art of Building*, and Giorgio Vasari's discussion of the garden of Villa Medici in Castello. By interlinking the discourses of architecture with literature and philosophy, Morgan emphasises the fascination with the unnatural in the Renaissance, giving examples of dissection, medical treatises describing the abnormal, newly discovered animals from foreign lands, and the gigantic nature of historical ruins, to which he devotes a significant portion of chapter 5.

The main theoretical frame, which is discussed in detail in chapter 1, is Foucault's theory of the garden as a heterotopic space, in that it transgresses the boundaries of place, time and language.<sup>[1]</sup> The book argues for the garden as a heterotopic space which inhabits a *locus amoenus*, and the *locus horridus*, a place of otherness (36). It is the search for, and interest in, this other and un-natural in Renaissance medical books, legal taxonomy, cartography and iconography that is mirrored in literature about the garden and in the diversity of the heterotopic garden. Morgan pursues his argument by dividing the physical unpleasantness into two distinct groups of grotesque and the monstrous in the architectonic elements in his

second chapter: the first is the monstrosity, which he further categorises into three examples, the “excessive”, the “deficient”, and the “hybrid” (chapter 3); the second group is the colossal mode (chapter 4).

One of the book’s central gardens of investigation is the Sacro Bosco from the Gardens of Bomarzo beneath the Castle of Orsini, near Rome, to which Morgan repeatedly returns and ultimately devotes a whole chapter (chapter 5). Morgan argues that the Sacro Bosco in particular “can be characterized as heterotopic in the sense that it continuously denies or calls into question its own ‘utterances,’ which results in a form of lexical and syntactic incommensurability or instability.” (46) The Sacro Bosco is thoroughly exemplified and discussed within the overall theory of the garden as a complex space of time and societal identification, and provides a clear argument for the proposed thesis of the garden as a heterotopic space where monsters and the gigantic inhabit a key proportion of its conceptual architecture.

In his conclusion, Morgan introduces the familiar concept of the sublime. He introduces Leonardo da Vinci’s letter to the Florentine traveller and merchant Benedetto Dei retelling a fiction about an encounter with a Libyan giant. Morgan retraces the colossi to “personifications of unruly natural forces” signifying nature both benign and malign. It is this duality of nature, its cruel and amoral manifestations, that acts as the fearful side of society. He then concludes that “the garden holds a mirror up to its society, mimicking its preoccupations and simulating its forms.”(170)

Morgan’s book encompasses a great scope of empirical analysis of Italian Renaissance gardens and the heterotopic space in which the otherness of the monstrous and the gigantic constitute key figure. The heterotopic concept is used as a means to describe the otherness of a garden, a place of contradictory times and pace, of the real and the unreal. The concept of the garden, in historical, philosophical and architectural terms is well described and argued for in an interesting and innovative manner. Morgan’s inclusion of a broad spectre of discourses, such as medicine, law and literature, to support his claim that the monster was a key figure in the Renaissance Italian garden, works well with his overall scope of the book. Though the book is limited to a rather small selection of literary texts, and perhaps lacking in incorporating the medieval garden heritage of theology and philosophy, as argument for the contextual and social realisation of society in the heterotopic place of the garden, it goes a long way in giving a more conceptual theory and explanation of the garden as a composite and heterotopic otherness, and convinces that the garden, thus, mirrors society’s fascination with the grotesque and the monstrous as against nature.

[1] Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. 1986. “Of Other Spaces”. *Diacritics* 16 (1). Johns Hopkins University Press: 22–27. doi:10.2307/464648.