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Michel Baridon, *A History of the Gardens of Versailles*. Translated by Adrienne Mason. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. vii + 296 pp. 48 illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4078-8.

Alain Renaux. *Louis XIV's Botanical Engravings*. Hampshire, England and Burlington, Vt: Lund Humphries, 2008. 144 pp. 70 illustrations, bibliography. £30 UK. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84822-000-3.

Review by Elizabeth Hyde, Kean University.

The last week of January 2009 saw the toppling of one of the last surviving trees planted for Marie Antoinette. Since 1786 the beech tree had grown in the gardens of the Hameau, the queen's pastoral retreat (just recently renovated) at Versailles. The tree had born witness to the collapse of the French monarchy and had survived the ambivalence felt towards Versailles and the royal gardens, symbols as they were of Bourbon rule, as France lurched right and left in search of political stability in the century afterwards. The beech had been weakened in the 1999 storms that devastated the gardens of Versailles (and forced a replanting on a scale not undertaken since the 1770s); January's storm finished it off. Associated Press photos showed gardeners unceremoniously sawing up the arboreal remains of the ancien regime.

Meanwhile across the Atlantic, a storm of a different sort swirled around the most public of American landscapes, the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Originally planned by Pierre l'Enfant as a parade ground setting off the federal buildings under construction in the new capital, the Mall has become the space most illustrative of the freedom of speech and participatory democracy in America. It is the space where Americans make themselves seen as they demand equal rights and the place where every four years Americans gather to bear witness to the peaceful transfer of power. As many as 1.8 million people converged on the Mall to see Democrat Barack Obama sworn in as the first African American president of the United States. The economic stimulus bill proposed by Democrats and President Barack Obama provided monies for the refurbishing of the Mall. Some cried foul, arguing that the \$20 million intended for the grounds would not provide sufficient economic stimulus, and the proposal was dropped. That Republicans criticized the Democratic proposal to restore the Mall suggests that landscapes can be partisan, although one suspects that similar outcry would have come from the other party had Obama's opponent been victorious. Either way, both l'Enfant's Mall and the trees planted for Marie Antoinette demonstrate that the meaning of landscapes can and does evolve over time, but in ways that evoke both the past in which they are rooted and the present to which they have come.

Michel Baridon explores this phenomenon in his *History of the Gardens of Versailles*. "Gardens," he argues, "have a different relationship to history from that of buildings alone" (p. 238). "Stone speaks for itself," he continues. "It is fashioned and put in place by men of another age, drawing visitors imaginatively into the past. Gardens, on the other hand, relate less directly to history. Their foliage and the water in their basins, constantly moving in the unseen wind, remind us of what they really are: a living fabric reacting to the constant changes of their environment" (p. 238). Yet that environment, he acknowledges, is shaped by humankind. In the gardens of Versailles, "we see how this vast expanse of nature has been ordered by human intelligence" (p. 4). In his study Baridon seeks to reconstruct the

intervention of human intelligence in the gardens over the course of their creation and perpetual re-creation from Louis XIV's earliest interests in the hunting park at Versailles to the present day, with an emphasis, of course, on their evolution under the care of André Le Nôtre.

Baridon's book first appeared in French in 2003. This English translation has been published by the University of Pennsylvania in its Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture series, which is responsible for a growing body of works on the French garden. The series includes both English translations of important French works, such as Thierry Mariage's *The World of André Le Nôtre* (1998) and original works including, most recently, Claire Goldstein's *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriations, Erasures, and Accidents, that Made Modern France* (2007), and Robert W. Berger and Thomas F. Hedin's *Diplomatic Tours in the Gardens of Versailles under Louis XIV* (2008).<sup>[1]</sup> Like the others, Baridon's work engages the larger cultural meaning of the garden. He examines the gardens in their political, scientific, and cultural contexts. The book is divided into four parts that examine, respectively, the relationship between the French monarchy and gardens; the role of geometry and the sciences in making the gardens; the importance of the arts in achieving Le Nôtre's aesthetic; and the gardens from Louis XV to the present.

For Baridon, the manipulation of the landscape in the swamplands of Versailles offered the opportunity to project both the image of good government (its goodness made, of course, by the king at the center) and the place of France and its king within the world. The ability to project those images was dependent upon the exploitation and exhibition of science. If the Renaissance garden, with its water-driven automata, was the triumph of mechanical physics, the Baroque was the consequence of astronomy, geometry, and their instruments. Galileo's turning the telescope towards the infinity of space made possible visioning the vista on the horizon and thereby the long perspective that becomes the hallmark of the French garden. Geometry, Baridon explains, was the science employed by Le Nôtre to enter the realm of beauty (p. 139). It made possible the measuring needed to manipulate perspective, light, and shadow. Properly achieved proportion and symmetry employed in the creation of that perspective were evidence of concord and harmony—in the landscape and in France. Collectively, the result was “pure intellectual pleasure” (p. 147).

This harmony was achieved through the tasteful combination of water, stone, trees and other plant life. And Baridon explores the role of each. Like other scholars of the gardens at Versailles, Baridon addresses the application of the latest engineering developments in the constant struggle to provide sufficient water to the canals and fountains of the park. But he is more interested in the aesthetic effect achieved through the use of different water features in the garden. Baridon argues that the introduction of the canals and pools of water were not only an important French contribution to the Baroque garden, but also a crucial element in generating the play of light and shadow. Functioning as “water mirrors,” the reflection of sky and trees on the smooth shallow pools created dimension in the landscape, adding depth to the foreground and heightening visual interest in the vanishing point on the horizon. For Baridon, the masterful mixture of these elements resulted in a visually dramatic scene reminiscent of Baroque painterly aesthetics. The Grand Canal, occupying the central axis of the Versailles gardens, is therefore the focal point of Baridon's analysis of Le Nôtre's achievements at Versailles. “From this point of view,” he writes,

the Grand Canal is unique. In Vaux-le-Vicomte or Sceaux, you can come upon the canal unexpectedly. In Chantilly, it intensifies the solemn atmosphere of the place with the incessant sounds of the cascade .... In Versailles, the canal has a completely different role to play. By continuing the central axis beyond the Bassin d'Apollon, it controls geometrically the transition from the bosquets to the horizon and imperceptibly adds the gradation of colors used by the landscape artists to the tapering effect of linear perspective .... It appears to be the pivotal point around which the whole landscape is laid out, and this is true for two separate reasons: in a geometrical sense, insofar as all

the different volumes are constructed in relation to it, and in an optical sense since it is both light and color (p. 168).

The Grand Canal, then, is watery canvas upon which Le Nôtre paints. And as the central axis of the park, it leads the eye outward to the horizon, suggesting that the ordered landscape within the park was representative of the order created by the king beyond. In this way, the intellectually ordered landscape is the model government the king wants to project: nature is harnessed by science in the achievement of order and harmony.

Baridon is drawn, too, to the water in the fountains, the play of which he describes as pure Baroque fantasy. He reminds us that the fountains were not just about diverting rivers and streams and pumping their waters into the park. To demonstrate engineering in service of artistry, he includes a photograph of surviving adjutages, or fountainheads, in the collection of the Musée du Château de Versailles, the different shapes of which were responsible for creating different arcs and sprays and patterns of water in the sky. Always changing, capturing and fracturing light in midair, the fountains demonstrated the evolution in the use of water in the garden from its mechanically playful role in the automata of an earlier era to the aesthetic delight it offered in the Baroque.

While the long *allées* leading to the horizon were evidence of royal absolutism, it is in the bosquets, writes Baridon, that “the court culture and the complexity of its intellectual life can best be recaptured” (p.171). Walled off from the *allées* by walls of hedge and clipped trees, the bosquets concealed the rich and sometimes ambiguous textures of French elite culture. Baridon traces the history of the bosquets and their respective fountains and sculptures—not a simple task given the frequent destruction, reconstruction, and redesign of these elements in the garden. Baridon sees the worlds created within the bosquets as evidence the gardens of Versailles cannot be read simply as absolutist control of nature achieved through the royal marshaling of science, engineering, and iconography. For common to the bosquets were their use of classical culture intermixed with Christianity, chivalry, and the pastoral, each of which had cultural meaning and resonance beyond the court. Within them, Baridon writes, “sentiment mattered more than science” (p. 171).

The sentiment within the walls of the bosquets was created through the use of classical sculptures, the gods of Olympus as well as allegories of the elements, seasons, and continents. Baridon argues that “the culture of classical antiquity allowed nature to be represented intellectually in a way that corresponded with the thinking of contemporary science” (p. 173-175). But it also allowed for the expression of literary and aesthetic sentiments favored by the cultural and literary elites. The sentimental affects were heightened by the theatricality of design within the bosquets. Baridon notes the role of Italian set designer Carlo Vigarani in the design of the Théâtre d’Eau. Within the bosquet, narrowing alleys drew the eye from the stage/fountains into the vegetation, thereby creating the illusion of size and depth. But he also notes that the garden was very much a stage upon which the courtiers played to each other and the king. The garden’s origins as settings for the grand but ephemeral fêtes staged in the early years of Louis XIV’s reign become permanent in both the use of the garden in court life and in the recognition by playwrights and librettists of their suitability for and potential as literary settings.

For Baridon, the bosquets also demonstrate that with the complexity of allegory, narrative, and design come the impossibility of controlling reception. Here Baridon, as others have done, explores the ambiguities surrounding the labyrinth. The labyrinth was a series of *allées* decorated with sculptures illustrating Aesop’s fables. The intent seems to have been the moral instruction of the Dauphin. Verses by poet and librettist Isaac de Benserade interpreting the labyrinth were painted on plaques placed beneath the sculptures. And yet the circulation of Charles Perrault’s competing interpretation of the labyrinth and popular editions of Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables* demonstrates that even Louis XIV could not rein in fully the sometimes intersecting, sometimes contentious literary circles in Paris and at the court.

Baridon, not unlike other historians, ends his analysis of the contributions of Le Nôtre with the curious Bosquet des Sources he constructed first in the main park, then again at the Trianon de marbre. The creation has led some to speculate about Le Nôtre's anticipation of the eighteenth-century landscape garden typified and codified across the English Channel. Le Nôtre explained the garden rhapsodically, yes, but uncharacteristically in terms of its use by the courtiers: "I cannot describe how lovely this place is. Its coolness allows the ladies to work, play games, and eat there .... I may say that, with the Tuileries, it is the only garden I know, and the most beautiful, where it is so easy to walk" (p. 196). If Baridon sees origins of the emerging rustic style in the Bosquet des Sources, he connects it to historically French roots. Baridon reads in Le Nôtre's description of his springs and meandering streams the legacy of the pastoral and Honoré d'Urfé's *L'Astrée*, a looking forward and backward occasioned not by the king but by the use of the garden: "One might honestly wonder if, at the turn of century, the aging Le Nôtre was not promoting a new style, 'elegant and winding' like the alleys described in *L'Astrée*. Looking back at d'Urfé, he was opening the way for the young Watteau" (p. 199).

Versailles came increasingly to resemble the world Watteau depicted in his painting: the vegetation reached its maturity in the first decades of the eighteenth century as the reign of Louis XIV gave way to the Regency and the early reign of Louis XV. Its luxuriance suited well the tastes of Louis XV who, suggests Baridon, preferred opulence to formal splendor. But the tastes of Louis XV also ran to the botanical. Baridon sees the eighteenth century as the age of the life sciences, with Louis XV's projects at Versailles contributing a "fascinating note of rustic elegance and scientific curiosity" (p. 206). These themes were combined most effectively at the Petit Trianon where the architectural refinement and intimacy of the palace was accompanied by a model farm and botanical garden overseen by botanist Bernard de Jussieu. The emphasis on the gathering and analysis of botanical and agricultural data leads Baridon to suggest that "the Petit Trianon model estate could be interpreted as an interesting attempt to establish a link between the king and the peasants producing the wealth (in other words, the vast majority of the population), a relationship based in a scientific concept of economic life" (p. 209).

This aesthetic of opulence and scientific economy cultivated by Louis XV would not survive long in the reign of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Early in his reign, Louis XVI decided to undertake a long overdue replanting of many the trees and hedges that provided the vertical definition to the bosquets and *allées* of the grand park. The destruction of the vegetation, while necessary, must have been visually jarring, as Hubert Robert's paintings suggest (see fig. 36). The replantation and regrowth evoked a sense of youth and possibility that Baridon detects in the age, despite the preservation of the formal symmetry of Le Nôtre within the grand parc that was deemed, even by theoreticians of the French picturesque like Morel, most suitable for royal landscapes (p. 212). The greatest changes to the landscape of Versailles were carried out on behalf of Marie Antoinette in the grounds surrounding the Petit Trianon and beyond. There, where the artist Hubert Robert and architect Richard Mique gave form to the French picturesque with hybrid elements of English and Chinese style, Baridon reads the Enlightenment idea of perfectibility, explored scientifically by Turgot, socially and historically by Rousseau, being applied to the landscape. Baridon suggests, in Marie Antoinette's *Bosquet des Bains d'Apollon*, for example, or the *Hameau de la Reine*, most importantly, the "rustic landscapes seemed enchanting at that time because the dreams of human perfectibility, encompassing all of humanity, gave them the power to regenerate the people inhabiting them" (pp. 222-223). But this regeneration was about the person of the queen, not the state, and therein lies part of the historical failure of aesthetic politics at the end of the ancien régime.

In that Baridon seeks a relationship between the garden and the political and scientific goals of the state, his premise is not new. Nor does his argument build upon new archival discoveries. But Baridon's account is original and important in that his analysis of the achievements in the gardens of Versailles requires an acknowledgement of the sensory. In this, his work differs in tone and method from the equally important but very different works by Thierry Mariage and Chandra Mukerji.<sup>[2]</sup> Baridon argues for a reciprocal relationship between the aesthetic and the scientific and intellectual. For the

sciences are exploited in the achievement of the desired aesthetic. At the same time, the aesthetic produces both an awareness of the science mastered and a sensory response. He is interested, too, in passage of time—the rise and setting of the sun, the growth and regrowth of vegetation that alters the garden from one moment to the next, one generation to the next. His account is infused with the personal: One understands that his analysis of the aesthetic achievements at Versailles is based upon his study of them *in situ*. Ultimately, as others have concluded (though by different paths), he maintains that landscape triumphs over narrative at Versailles (p. 176).

Baridon offers an eloquent defense of the garden as distinct from the buildings within it, but he gives relatively short shrift to the horticultural elements within the garden. While he addresses the Bourbon kings' interest in botany, he does not explore the larger history of the flowers and trees within the garden. As other scholars have shown, the trees and flowering plants growing within the gardens tell the story of curiosity and collecting, colonial botanizing, horticultural innovation and agrarian economics, not to mention fashion and aesthetics. Alain Renaux's *Louis XIV's Botanical Engravings* reveals part of that history. Renaux's work reproduces a portion of the engravings created for the *Histoires des plantes*, a work intended to be a compendium of current botanical knowledge when it was planned in the late 1660s. As Renaux explains, the project was to be the work of the newly created Royal Academy of Sciences. The team charged with its production was led by botanist and physician Denis Dodart and included Claude Perrault, Samuel Cotteureau du Clos, Claude Bourdelin, and Pierre Borel, among others, who were all noted for their work in botany, medicine, pharmacology or chemistry. As botanical accuracy was paramount, the selection of illustrators was tremendously important. Commissions for the work were given, among others, to Abraham Bosse, one of the most highly skilled engravers of seventeenth-century France; and Nicolas Robert, who produced watercolor paintings of plants in Gaston d'Orléans's collection (that would eventually form the core of the *Vélins du Roi*). The first and only volume of the work, entitled *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des plantes, Dressez par M. Dodart, de l'Académie royale des Sciences, Docteur en Medecine de la Faculté de Paris*, appeared in 1676.

Renaux's volume reproduces almost sixty of the engravings from the *Mémoires*. He includes a mix of native European plants, flowers important in the seventeenth-century French flower garden, and rare botanical specimens imported from the Americas and other exotic locales. Each plate is accompanied by Renaux's description of the plant. The descriptions variously include the botanical history of the specimen, with particular interest in tracing the introduction of the plant into European gardens, and its appearance in European botanies, as well as the medicinal and other applications of the plant. But Renaux is also interested in exploring the broader cultural history of the plant in its European context. Thus he also describes the mythological origins attributed to the plant, the origin of plant names, and other popular lore associated with the specimen.

The reader therefore learns, for example, about the anemone (*Anemone nemorosa* L.), varieties of which became some of the most prized specimens in the seventeenth-century garden. Renaux describes attempts by Jacques Daléchamps, in his 1615 *Histoire générale des plantes* to distinguish between various anemone varieties, describes the Greek (*anemos*) and Sanskrit (*ani-ti*) roots of the name, and relates the legend of Adonis. According to the myth, Adonis, born from a myrrh tree into which his mother had been transformed in order to save her from her father, became the object of affection of both Aphrodite and Persephone. Zeus declared that Adonis would split his time between the two, Adonis deciding to spend one third of the year below ground with Persephone, then two-thirds above ground with Aphrodite, after which he was killed by a boar sent by Artemis. Anemone flowers sprouted from each drop of his spilt blood (p. 30). Of the sunflower (*Helianthus annuus* L.) one learns that it was introduced into Europe in 1596, described as the *Peru chrysanthemum* by Daléchamps, that it was being selectively bred within the decade, but not for its oil until the twentieth century when Orthodox Russians discovered the seeds to be a source of oil not forbidden during Lent (p. 112). Renaux retraces the introduction of the passion flower (*Passiflora coerulea* L.) to Europe via Spanish explorers, Jesuits and other Spanish monks (who saw in the dramatic flower the crown of thorns, the nails used in the

crucifixion, and Christ's wounds), and Spanish physician and businessman Nicolas Monardes who recorded Aztec medicinal uses of the plant (p. 46).

Renaux draws heavily upon early modern botanies as well as more recent scholarship in his work. His descriptions of the plants depicted in the engravings bear a striking resemblance to the "histories" of plants included in seventeenth-century botanical texts and gardening manuals. Insofar as he is interested in the scientific and the cultural contexts, he captures the essence of the early works produced before such forms of knowledge were more formally segregated by discipline. For in the seventeenth century, the texts produced by botanists and the presumably less scientifically rigorous "curious florists" reveal a shared curiosity that engaged the botanical as well as the historical, mythological, and popular. The result for Renaux is a delightful, but by no means exhaustive or systematic tour of the seventeenth-century world of botany. The serious student of the history of botany and the history of the Royal Academy will need to look elsewhere for a complete history of the volume, as well as for a fuller examination of the culture around plants in seventeenth-century Europe. For example, Renaux includes Abraham Bosse's controversial illustration of the mandragore or mandrake and makes reference to Bosse's recording of the anthropomorphic assumptions about the plant (pp. 86-87). But he fails to recount the negative reaction on the part of the Academy to his engraving and the necessary reworking of it for the published volume. Renaux therefore misses an opportunity to explore the attempts on the part of the botanists to ensure the visual rigor demanded by the project, and the malleable contours of seventeenth-century life sciences.<sup>[3]</sup> But Renaux's volume reveals, if obliquely, the royal emphasis on the generation of knowledge about plant life and its relationship to the curiosity and even aesthetics in the seventeenth century. And it reveals that the plants in the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des plantes*—and those that reached the royal parterres—had a rich history, the exploration of which only makes deeper our understanding of the royal project at Versailles.

January's mourning over the loss of Marie Antoinette's beech tree played on the curiosity around the scandalous queen who liked to play peasant dairy maid in her luxuriously rustic Hameau while the real peasants of France faced increasing hardship. To the democratic minded twenty-first century, the Queen's gardens—the entire project—is symbolic of monarchy (that had, by the era of Louis XVI, seen its taste for luxury overtake its ability to martial the arts in communicating royal power). And yet the tree is a reminder that in the eighteenth century, the reality was much more complex, that the Queen's Hameau and the landscape constructed around it was the result of the evolution of taste and aesthetics, botany and politics. Baridon asks provocatively what we would make of, what would become of the palace of Versailles if the gardens had ceased to exist. He argues that the gardens, living, growing, and evolving, have prevented the empty chateau from becoming a meaningless shell. We cannot relive the rituals and feasts and performances of kingship (and queenship) practiced in the palace. But we can walk through the parterres, see the fountains play, and observe the sun setting on the Grand Canal. Not through seventeenth-or eighteenth-century eyes, of course. But in a manner aesthetically closer to the past than any experience we might conjure in the echo chambers of the king's rooms in the palace. Just as the grass upon the Mall which Americans trample in rituals of marching and speaking makes real the democratic process, makes visible democracy in an era when there is great skepticism over the power of casting votes, Marie Antoinette's beech tree is a reminder that the truth of Versailles was much more complex. The buildings and fountains, trees and flowers were part of a larger culture—of science, metaphysics, engineering, experimentation, aesthetics, literature, and courtliness that survive as long as the garden continues to thrive. The necessary tending and replanting of those gardens requires the engagement with that meaning. "Paradoxically," writes Baridon, "The enduring life of the architecture is made possible by the transience of the vegetation" (p. 4).

## NOTES

[1] In interest of full disclosure, my own book, *Cultivated Power: Flowers, Culture, and Politics in the Reign of Louis XIV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) is part of the same series. See Thierry Mariage, *The World of André Le Nôtre*, translated by Graham Larkin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriations, Erasures, and Accidents, that Made Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Robert W. Berger and Thomas F. Hedin, *Diplomatic Tours in the Gardens of Versailles under Louis XIV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[2] See, for example, Mariage, *The World of André Le Nôtre*, and Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[3] On this controversy, see Alice Stroup, *A Company of Scientists: Botany, Patronage, and Community at the Seventeenth-Century Parisian Royal Academy of Scientists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 82.

Elizabeth Hyde  
Kean University  
ehyde@kean.edu

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