

‘Poetry, Painting and Gardening, or the Science of Landscape, will forever by men of taste be deemed Three Sisters, or the Three Graces who dress and Adorn Nature’.
(Horace Walpole)¹

A comparative study of Lady Hertford’s grotto at Marlborough and William Kent’s illustration of *Spring* in James Thomson's *The Seasons*.

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Abstract: in a reading of William Kent’s illustration of *Spring* in James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), this essay offers an interpretation which connects the artefact with Lady Hertford’s grotto in Marlborough, Wiltshire, designed and constructed between 1725 and 1735. This essay examines both the shared landscapes, contexts and oppositions of the two artefacts and shall illustrate the interconnectivity and significant developments between poetry, painting and gardening in the 1720s - with Lady Hertford as patron, muse and innovator.

John Millan and Andrew Millar, two London-based booksellers and publishers, recommended to the poet James Thomson (1700-1748) that his 1728 edition of *Spring* should contain a ‘Proposal for printing by subscription The Four *Seasons*’, and should advertise that it would be ‘printed in one Volume in Quarto, on a Superfine Royal Paper, and with Copper-Plates adapted to the Subject’.² This one guinea subscription edition included four full page frontispieces, in baroque style, designed by William Kent (c.1685-1748) - which were also available for purchase – and was engraved by Nicolas-Henry Tardieu (1674-1749); it was published between 6th and 10th June, 1730.³

Kent’s frontispiece presents Spring, personified as a celestial being, forming a circle hand in hand with putti and other deities, and suspended on clouds above an unidentified landscape. One celestial figure escorts the ominous storm clouds of Winter out of the top right hand corner of the picture and, with hands raised, commands Winter’s temporary banishment from the springtime landscape. The clouds form a swirl of chiaroscuro, with the contrasts creating and identifying Spring as the central figure of the illustration. Benevolent Spring, wearing a wreath of flowers on her head and with her garment revealing the upper part of her right breast, drops fruits from her platter onto the landscape below. The sunshine emerges from behind the clouds with a rainbow running from the top right hand corner to the middle-scape of a river – its reflection in the river provides a natural continuation of this composition line. The rainbow connects the emblematic world of Spring with the pastoral landscape below. The image of a bull, an allusion to the second astrological sign of the zodiac, Taurus (April 20th to May 20th), is depicted above the celestial figures, wandering down one of the curves of the wider rainbow.

¹ MS annotation to William Mason’s *Satirical Poems*, published in an edition of the relevant poems by Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1926), p. 46.

² James Thomson, *Spring, A Poem* (London: printed and sold by A. Millar and G. Strahan, 1728), p. 59.

³ See Sandro Jung, ‘Visual Interpretations, Print, and Illustrations of Thomson's *The Seasons*, 1730-1797’, *Eighteenth - Century Life*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2010) 26 for further information on the print history.



Figure I: full-page plate (220mm x 176mm) by Kent, engraved by Tardieu, for “Spring”, from *The Seasons* (London: printed for J. Millan and A. Millar, 1730) © The Trustees of the British Museum.

In the foreground, two lovers recline – he plays a pipe to his alert audience of sheep whilst his lover lays a suggestive left hand on his right thigh. Their presence in this pastoral idyll is echoed by a second pair of lovers kneeling (or standing) behind in the middle ground of the illustration and holding each other’s arms – the pair of slender tree trunks emerging from the same base provides symmetry to their union. This bucolic scene is enhanced by the presence of the lovers with their suggestion of procreation and fertility in springtime. A shepherd, positioned near the left hand corner and with staff in right hand, points with his left hand across the landscape to the villa ahead. He looks back towards the observer or reader and invites us to explore. The villa’s architectural clarity is slightly obscured by trees but one can discern the façade of a Palladian villa with columns, architrave, and entrance to what one assumes is an undercroft grotto. The shepherd’s lambs play within his vision, and unidentifiable birds glide towards the trees with one perched erect and vigilant on an upper branch. On top of a mound, another shepherd engages with some playful goats. On the far side of the river, two circular buildings with domes nestle into the landscape. In spite of the guidance of the shepherd towards the villa, the eye is led in many directions by the artist – around, upwards and then away into the distance. The wild trees frame the whole, and the joyous figures in this *fête champêtre* suggest the influence of Poussin (1594-1665) on Kent’s presentation of *Spring*.

The traditional emblems and expressive landscape work as metaphor for man’s relationship with Nature and capture the correlation between man’s journey through life with the annual progress of the seasons. Kent combines a visual narrative of an English landscape and its inhabitants responding to the arrival of springtime with a mythological tableau. The

upper and lower visual spaces of the illustration juxtapose the classical and Christian worlds, the celestial and the terrestrial, alongside an allegorical rendition and naturalistic representation of the arrival of springtime. Indeed the illustration plays on opposites – from the sun to the rain and rainbows of April, from rural simplicity to architectural sophistication.⁴

Horace Walpole (1717-1797), novelist, man of letters, parliamentarian and architectural enthusiast, wrote that Kent ‘was a painter, an architect, and the father of modern gardening. In the first character he was below mediocrity; in the second, he was a restorer of the science; in the last, an original, and the inventor of an art that realizes painting and improves nature’.⁵ Perhaps Walpole’s assessment of Kent as a mediocre painter and illustrator is a little unfair. Early in his career Kent provided illustrations for John Gay’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (1720) and his *Fables* (1727); Alexander Pope’s *Odyssey* in 1725; and James Thomson’s collected volumes of *The Seasons* in 1730.⁶ It is interesting to note the influences on Kent evident in this illustration of *Spring*. He certainly captures the locus amoenus of Thomson’s pastoral poetry as he presents an Elysium of comfort, play, allegory, love, and fruitful nature with a generous and watchful deity presiding over the scene. There are recognisable moments from Thomson’s verse as Kent seeks to interpret the poet’s verbal world into his own landscape: the ‘bright enchantment’ (238) of the rainbow, ‘The herds and flocks, commixing, play’d secure’ (287) and the ‘fruits and blossoms blush’d (367).⁷ Kent had also studied in Italy and settled for ten years in Rome. In this time, he developed a reputation as a specialist in painting ceilings, having executed the ceiling of the church, S. Giuliano dei Fiamminghi, in 1717 and, on return to London, he was commissioned to paint the ceilings at Burlington House in 1719/20. The frontispiece of *Spring* undoubtedly draws upon the tradition of baroque ceiling painting and Renaissance iconography.

James Thomson was invited by Lady Hertford (1699-1754) to stay at Marlborough in 1727 and is thought to have composed part of *Spring* whilst there in advance of his publication deadline.⁸ Samuel Johnson in *Lives of the Poets* (1781) reveals that Lady Hertford invited ‘every summer some poet into the country, to hear her verses and assist her studies’ and playfully relates that Thomson ‘took more delight in carousing with Lord Hertford and his friends than assisting her ladyship’s poetical operations, and therefore never received another summons’.⁹ However, the anecdote seems inaccurate given both the lasting correspondence between poet and patron following the residency and his dedication of *Spring* to her. In the opening of the poem, and on the page directly opposite Kent’s illustration of *Spring* in the 1730 edition of *The Seasons*, he compares Lady Hertford to Nature, ‘blooming and benevolent’ (10) and invites her to ‘listen to [his] song, / Which her own Season paints’ (9-10).

The identification of the building on the right-hand side of the illustration and the landscape itself has stimulated scholarly discussion.¹⁰ In Kent’s frontispiece of *Autumn*, he includes a domed villa with a Diocletian window, reminiscent of his friend and patron Lord Burlington’s Palladian Chiswick House. It has been said that the villa in the illustration of *Spring* is a grander version of Alexander Pope’s in Twickenham.¹¹ Pope’s Neo-Palladian portico at Cross Deep was itself designed by Kent but two years after his production of the plates to accompany Thomson’s poems. However, Peter Tillemans’ *The Thames at*

⁴ See John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 105-144.

⁵ Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (London: printed for J. Dodsley, 1777), p. 111.

⁶ See Mavis Batey, *Alexander Pope: The Poet and the Landscape* (London: Barn Elms, 1999), p. 99.

⁷ All citations are from James Thomson, *The Seasons* (London: printed and sold by J. Millan and A. Millar, 1730).

⁸ See Helen Sard Hughes, ‘Thomson and the Countess of Hertford’, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1928) 443.

⁹ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), II, p. 271.

¹⁰ See Margaret Willes, *The Mound Lecture 2011*, unpublished article.

¹¹ See Batey 1999, p. 100.

Twickenham (c. 1730) provides us with a view of Pope's villa from across the river with the entrance to the undercroft grotto open and dark beneath the external twin staircase which led up to the main reception room on the piano nobile – a recognisable entrance to a grotto as included in Kent's illustration.¹² This was not the first time that Kent had depicted a grotto in his pictures: he had already designed a frontispiece for Volume V of Pope's *Odyssey* in which he depicts Calypso's grotto and had sketched Pope writing in his grotto at Twickenham (1725). In a later drawing, *A View in Pope's Garden* (c. 1730-48), he depicts the pagan deities, presented previously in the frontispiece to *Spring*, having descended to earth and the grotto entrance via the watery rainbow.¹³

However, Jane Brown suggests the landscape of Kent's *Spring* is in fact the local environs of Marlborough Castle, seat of the Earl of Hertford, with the hill a romanticised interpretation of the Mound and Lady Hertford's grotto at the foot of the Mound transformed into a villa.¹⁴ The circular motion of the putti and Spring in the sky are echoes of the larger circular rhythms suggested by the double rainbow which are, in turn, vertical expressions of the horizontal rings of the path winding its way, in the form of a circuitous perambulatory, up the Mound. The Mound itself appears to have a larger sister in the background, which is possibly Silbury Hill: the two are linked by the waters of the River Kennet – from source to downstream (as indeed they are today) – and, again, the rainbow is reflected in the river. William Stukeley's *View of Lord Hartford's House at Marlborough* (1723), with its southward perspective, provides us with an insight into the dimensions and design features of Lady Hertford's house and estate in this period. If Kent did indeed draw upon this landscape, the artist would have looked westward from the house, past Merlin's Mound and up the Kennet valley.



Figure II: William Stukeley's *View of Lord Hartford's House at Marlborough* (1723). Reproduced by courtesy of Marlborough College Archives from first edition of William Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum, or An Account of the Antiquities and Remarkable Curiosities in Nature or Art* (London: For the author, 1724).

¹² See *ibid.*, p. 42 and Hazel Jackson, *Shell Houses and Grottoes* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2001), p. 6.

¹³ See Batey 1999, pp. 58, 63, 64.

¹⁴ Jane Brown, *My Darling Heriott: Henrietta Luxborough, Poetic Gardener and Irrepressible Exile* (London: Harper Press, 2006), p. 55.

Not only is *Spring* dedicated to Lady Hertford but the painting evokes a distinctly familiar Marlborough landscape with another connection revealed seven years later. Mrs Rowe, in a letter to Lady Hertford from Frome in 1737, writes and speculates about the engraving: ‘I have been reading over Mr Thomson’s Seasons with a new truly rational delight. One would think you had sat for the picture of the Spring. The resemblance I found induced me to copy it, for drawing is the constant amusement of my leisure time’.¹⁵ Fanciful or not, portraits of Lady Hertford do reveal a certain likeness.¹⁶

In *Spring*, Thomson asks ‘For who can paint / Like nature’ (429-430) and questions whether imagination and language can succeed in reproducing its likeness. At one level, Kent’s illustration and Thomson’s poem seem to attempt to capture Nature’s wild essence but, by the selection of their media, can never fully succeed in reproducing her colour and unbounded beauty, ‘undisguised by mimic art’ (465). In fact, Thomson explores this sense of artifice in his poem when he guides the reader through an unidentified landscaped garden with ‘its vistas open’, ‘alley greens’ (477), ‘verdant maze’ (478), ‘bowery walk’ (479), ‘rising spire, Th’aethereal mountain’ (484-5) and compares it to the natural landscape close at hand.

Landscape gardeners of the period were beginning to explore the possibilities of reproducing the variety of nature in terms of light, shade and perspective and directing the visitor – as Kent’s shepherd guides us to the undercroft grotto – to imitative features and distractions. As with Kent’s illustration, Lady Hertford provides us with a grotto, with its pagan connotations, as part of the tour of her estate: a distraction - but not an unplanned one - a curiosity, a place to commune with the Muses, to think and to write with a view of her gardens and the Kennet valley, and to retreat – as Pope understood when he inscribed a line from Horace, ‘Secretum Iter et Fallentis Semita Vitae’, above the garden entrance to his grotto.¹⁷ As the formality of Neoclassical gardens gave way to more naturalised gardens, grotto designers focused on the reproduction and improvement of nature – as Pope identifies in *An Epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington* (1731), ‘In all [design], let nature never be forgot’ and he explains in a letter to Reverend Dr William Borlase (1695-1772) that his grotto is ‘an imitation of Nature’.¹⁸ Indeed, Pope perceived, according to Joseph Spence (1699-1768), that ‘all gardening is landscape painting’ with the designer and artist guiding the observer through multiple scenes.¹⁹

Lord and Lady Hertford are thought to have moved into the house at Marlborough in 1718 and work started on the grotto immediately after their arrival. The grotto is positioned at the foot of the Mound. The town of Marlborough’s motto, ‘Ubi nunc sapientis ossa Merlini?’ (‘Where now are the bones of wise Merlin?’) plays on Arthurian legend that the Mound is, in fact, Merlin’s burial barrow. The entrance to the grotto marks the beginning of the perambulatory which winds to the top of the mound and its roof is level with the first circuit of the walk. As one enters the main chamber, through the hinged and folding wrought iron gates, there is a central water receptacle at ground level and, directly ahead, a decorative wall niche with an urn with a large seashell basin beneath it. The only light available comes from the arched entrance. The underlying structure of the grotto is brick with encrusted shells and stones intricately decorating the surfaces; it was originally decorated with flint, shells and

¹⁵ *Percy Family Letters and Papers* (1730-1736) (Alnwick MSS), No. 110, p. 228.

¹⁶ See flyleaf in Helen Sard Hughes, *The Gentle Hertford: Her Life and Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1940) for a portrait of Lady Hertford by Allan Ramsey.

¹⁷ Horace, *Epistles*, 1, xviii, 103: ‘A hid recess, where life’s revolving day,/ In sweet delusion gently steals away’.

¹⁸ See Alexander Pope, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. R Mutter and M. Kinkead-Weekes (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), p. 50 and Anthony Beckles Willson, *Alexander Pope’s Grotto in Twickenham* (London: Twickenham Museum Press, 1998), p. 17. It is worth noting that he cannot perceive of Nature without reference to design and to artificial mimesis.

¹⁹ Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Observations of Books and Men*, ed. J Osborne, 2 Vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) I, No. 606, p. 252.

probably glass and mirrors. The unknown grotto designer has used local building materials and recycled furnace slag – popular, due its resemblance to Italian volcanic lava.²⁰ In the historical tradition of grottoes, they were built originally in natural caves with springs and, as nymphaea, were dedicated in both Greek and Roman times to water nymphs. Lady Hertford's grotto includes a water feature in the form of a wall fountain, with water drawn from the top of the Mound, which would have been included both as an allusion to the world of classical nymphs and to provide sound effects: the 'perpetual rill', of running water for the visitor.²¹



Figures III and IV: *The Grotto at Marlborough, 2012*. Photographs courtesy of Simon McKeown.

Stephen Duck, another poet who benefited from Lady Hertford's hospitality and patronage, alludes in his *Description of a Journey to Marlborough* (1738) to Thomson's composition of *Spring*, Marlborough Castle, the Mound and the natural habitat it provided for the poetic muse:

FROM hence the Muse to silver *Kennet* flies,
 On whose green Margin *Hertford's* Turrets rise.
 Here often round the verdant Plain I stray,
 Where THOMSON sung his bold, unfetter'd Lay;
 Or climb the winding, mazy Mountain's Brow;

Duck continues in his poem to describe the grotto and, likening Lady Hertford to Calypso, admires her 'skill' as a designer of the interior of this 'beauteous grot' at 'the basis of the verdant Hill' with its 'ev'ry polished Stone', 'rustic Moss', 'the shining Pearl', and 'purple Shell'.²² Lady Hertford finished her grotto in 1735; Pope completed his grotto in 1725 but continued to make improvements up until his death in 1744. Lady Hertford proudly wrote to Lady Pomfret from Marlborough in a letter dated June 1739 of: 'The grotto that we have made under the mount – and which, without partiality, I think is in itself much prettier than

²⁰ See Jackson 2001, p. 31.

²¹ Alexander Pope, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), Vol II, p. 296, 2 June 1725.

²² Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: printed for John Osborn, 1738), pp. 146-148.

that at Twickenham'.²³ Renovated in the 1980s by Simon Verity and Diana Reynall and again structurally repointed in the autumn of 2012 by Donald Insall Architects, Lady Hertford's grotto, alongside Pope's, has submitted, to 'the Stroke/Of time' with the disappearance of relics to souvenir-hunters and other visitors, as Dodsley predicted in *The Cave of Pope* (1743).²⁴

The grotto has taken on numerous roles since Marlborough College was founded around the same site in 1842: from educational resource to bicycle shed, from heritage site to illicit smokers' lair. In contrast, Kent's illustration in the volume of *The Seasons* was soon superseded: Millan and Millar published a second edition, within six months, in octavo with a different set of illustrations – and followed it with a non-illustrated edition. The first edition of *The Seasons*, with its exquisite engraving, was undoubtedly a luxury item aimed at a certain clientele, with the subsequent editions attractive to different buyers and readers within a competitive marketplace.

What one can claim with some confidence is that Lady Hertford is the nexus between both Kent's illustration and the grotto itself. Both artefacts show a correlation between art and nature and the dichotomy between the classical and contemporary pastoral worlds in a new, evolving landscape. Horace Walpole stated that 'Poetry, Painting and Gardening, or the Science of Landscape, will forever by men of taste be deemed Three Sisters, or the Three Graces who dress and Adorn Nature' – Thomson, Kent and Lady Hertford created their own triptych of interpretations of Marlborough's natural landscape. In 1753, another aspiring poet William Shenstone inscribed Lady Hertford into his verses in *Ode Upon Rural Elegance* –

And tho' by faithless friends alarmed,
Art have with nature waged presumptuous war;
By Seymour's winning influence charmed,
In whom their gifts united shine,
No longer shall their counsels jar.

Lady Hertford was in many ways much more than one of the amateur 'poetical ladies', indulging in grotto design, described by Addison (*The Spectator*, no. 632, 1714) or a 'verse-sick countess'.²⁵ In both her residences – Marlborough, and later Percy Lodge – she showed in her gardens that she understood the crux of the relationship between art and nature and possessed the rare ability to unite them. As Shenstone recognised:

Nature exalt the mound where art shall build;
Art shape the gay alcove, while Nature paints the field.

Indeed Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his notebook in 1480: '...coming to the entrance of a great cavern, in front of which I stood for some time, stupefied and uncomprehending such a thing... Suddenly two things arose in me, fear and desire: fear of the menacing darkness of the cavern; desire to see if there was any marvellous thing within.' Kent's shepherd in *Spring* directs us to the undercroft grotto and we approach it with a combination of fear and desire – but, as we discover, this doorway opens into an enchanted grotto for those who dare explore.

²³ *Correspondence between Frances, countess of Hartford, (afterwards duchess of Somerset,) and Henrietta Louisa, countess of Pomfret, between the years 1738 and 1741* (London: printed by I. Gold, 1805), Vol. 1, p. 103.

²⁴ Serle 1745, p. 19.

²⁵ David Buchan, *Essays on the Lives and Writings of Fletcher of Saltoun and the Poet Thomson: Biographical, Critical, and Political* (London: printed for J Debrett, 1792), p. 258.

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