

Jennifer Munroe, “My Innocent Diversion of Gardening’: Mary Somerset’s Plants.” *Renaissance Studies* 25.1 (2011): 111-123

This article seeks to demonstrate how the work of Mary Somerset, first Duchess of Beaumont, “blurs the line between ‘gardening’ and the twin fields of horticulture and botany” (111), and to place Somerset in a proper context as a serious documenter and collector of plants. Jennifer Munroe argues that Somerset’s work “was an endeavour that crossed over into what we might see as more than just plant collecting and is indicative of scientific thinking about plants as well” (111).

Munroe argues throughout her article that Somerset has been consigned to the footnotes of botanical history despite being accepted as an authority by her peers. Beaumont was in regular correspondence with Sir Hans Sloane, James Petiver, William Sherard, Robert Southwell, and Jacob Bobart, all fellows of the Royal Society (113). This does, as Munroe suggests, imply that, “despite her marginalisation from the annals of science, Somerset was clearly part of the inner circle” (114). It seems that Somerset did not seek the publication of her copious notes and observations; she did, however, arrange for her twelve-volume herbarium to be bound to preserve it. She also seems to have taken measures to ensure that the information in these volumes was as accurate as possible, asking Sloane to check them before they were bound, writing to him on one occasion to thank him for giving her feedback and saying:

I will have loose papers put into the booke wth those names, I think belong to them if you will bee troubl’d wth them, to see the faults before they are in the booke, to send it to you, it being pittie to have them after so much charge to bee false nam’d w^{ch} may easily done by mee, most of them being rais’d by seed w^{ch} came wthout names. (119)

The letter not only thanks Sloane for the trouble he has gone to in checking her volumes, but also offers a reason for any misnaming of specimens. Somerset took great care over not just the content of the volumes but also in how they were to be bound, as letters from her amanuensis make clear (120). In due course, Somerset was to bequeath the twelve manuscript volumes to Sloane and they still remain in the Sloane holdings at the Natural History Museum (119).

Somerset’s interest in gardening and collecting plants meant that her main interest in her husband’s seat of Badminton seems to have been in planning an ambitious garden. This Munroe argues, “demonstrates that she [Somerset] was invested in making a bold architectural statement with the plants she grew that would be as memorable as the architecture of the house her husband maintained” (112). Indeed, household accounts suggest that by 1690 Beaumont had spent almost £30,000 on the gardens. What differentiates Somerset from other privileged women with an interest in plants, Munroe argues convincingly, is the systematic way in which Somerset recorded her findings. Her notes further show that she had an interest in the performance of plants beyond how they did at Badminton.

Munroe suggests that one of the reasons Somerset’s place in the history of botany has been minimised is her humility. As the title of this essay shows, Somerset referred to her “innocent diversion of gardening” in a letter to Sir Robert Southwell in

1694 (111), and this, for Munroe, is “surprisingly humble” (111) and belies the significance of the work Somerset undertook. Munroe similarly feels that the response to Sloane, cited above, is also “a humble stance” (119). However, the tone that Somerset adopts in her correspondence is typical of the polite discourse of many women writing in the period, and does not really suggest that she is in any doubt about the significance of her work. Indeed, in the extract offered from her letter to Sloane, Somerset makes it clear that the reason she might have misnamed some plants is not because of carelessness on her part, but rather that they were sent to her, possibly by Sloane and another eminent contemporary collector, inadequately labelled. It is the case, as Munroe suggests, that, by compiling such a careful and detailed herbarium, Somerset did, in fact, declare “her horticultural endeavour as more than just an informal pastime” (123). One of the intentions of this article is to raise the profile of Mary Somerset, first Duchess of Beaumont as a botanist, and this is evidently necessary, for it is clear that Somerset’s contribution to the emergent science needs to be acknowledged more broadly.

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