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### Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture*. A Review by James C. McKusick

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### Recommended Citation

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**Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture***

(The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)  
342 \$55.00

A Review by James C. McKusick  
*University of Montana*

In *Clandestine Marriage*, Theresa Kelley argues that botany provided a uniquely transgressive discourse that questioned and destabilized conventional ways of seeing and knowing the natural world. For poets and scientists of the Romantic era, “strange plants invited an attraction to material and figurative differences that pushed against epistemic mastery” (1). Standing at the intersection of literature and science, botany invited grand, systematizing gestures and yet confronted such gestures with the very limits of their possibility.

Truly encyclopedic in scope, *Clandestine Marriage* traces the efflorescence of botanical discourse in the long Romantic period, from the foundation of the Linnaean system of classification in *Systema Naturae* (1735) through the first publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859). Kelley offers a comprehensive historical view of botany as a distinct nexus of interaction between literature and science, showing how the characteristic certainties of Enlightenment science broke down under the pressure of newly-discovered plant specimens from distant parts of the world, new ways of understanding the taxonomic relationships among various plant species, and new modes of presenting botanical information within the epistemic framework of the philosophy of science.

The title, *Clandestine Marriage*, stems from the disruptive twenty-fourth class of Carl Linnaeus’s sexual system of classification, the *cryptogamia*, composed of plants whose hidden sexual organs made them impossible to classify. This final, anomalous category became a landing-place for all of those mysterious species whose mode of reproduction could not be determined, and it served as a kind of loose thread that was eventually used to unravel the entire neat edifice of Linnaean taxonomy during the Romantic period. Chapters 2 and 3 describe how the science of taxonomy was gradually disrupted during this period. Whereas the Linnaean system of classification relies upon a single trait (the number of pistils and stamens), the Natural System, which gained increasing prominence in Europe after 1789, “proposes to find resemblances in nature that direct the construction of plant families and higher taxa” (20). The Linnaean nomenclature (using Latin names for genus and species) survives, but the gradual breakdown of its underlying rationale during the Romantic era meant that the entire enterprise of botany existed in a hotly contested intellectual arena, in a phase known to historians of science as a paradigm shift, one that would not reach even a tentative resolution until 1859, through Charles Darwin’s synthesizing concept of biological evolution. In Kelley’s view, “the history of this taxonomic effort witnesses what

Romantic era botanists began to recognize: that botanical nature persistently defied their best efforts” (18).

Such a contested intellectual arena offered marvelously rich possibilities to the discourse of poetry and the rising genre of the novel. Chapter 4 examines the remarkable accomplishments of Romantic women writers and botanists who employed the study of plants in the service of their own political and spiritual emancipation. Kelley points out that women in the Romantic era “wrote about botany more than any other branch of natural history and they fully expected that their authority to do so would be challenged” (103). But by persisting in their venture into this traditionally masculine realm of intellectual inquiry, such writers as Anna Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft broke down barriers that had hitherto prevented women from exploring the far-flung possibilities of scientific inquiry. That the subject-matter of botanical discourse involved the organs of sexual reproduction was among the most scandalous aspects of this discursive invasion by women writers of the Romantic era.

Chapter 5, on the poetry of John Clare, is to this reviewer the most valuable part of the book. Kelley explores the “botanical poetics” (127) of Clare’s engagement with the natural world, focusing with clarity and persistence upon the “singularities of voice and name” (129) that underlie his evocation of plants in their native habitats. The uniquely powerful ethos of Clare’s poetry emerges from its bearing witness to a landscape that labors under an imminent threat of destruction from the emerging practices of agro-industrialization. Kelley grounds her analysis of Clare’s poetics in Heidegger’s concept of situatedness (*Befindlichkeit*). Clare’s poems characteristically evoke his “position as common lands are enclosed and he is thrown against his will into the task of crafting his sense of place by identifying and marking coordinates, be they people, birds, plants, or trees” (134). As the diverse living webs around him were faced with the prospect of extinction, Clare came to realize that his poems could offer native plants a place of sanctuary by preserving their common names and the stories of their origin. Clare sought to preserve the precise taxonomic details and life stories of local trees, flowers, and mosses in his poetry because he understood that these plants “would have to have an afterlife of other than a material kind” (151).

Chapter 6 investigates the exchange of botanical knowledge between Britain and the far-flung corners of its colonial empire. British botanists evinced an absolute delight in the “formal and taxonomic diversity” (163) of plants they encountered during their travels in India, even as the bewil-

dering array of shapes, scents, and colors threatened to destabilize their received understanding of botanical categories. Moreover, by employing Indian artists to paint their plant specimens, “the British gave back, as in a painted Indian mirror, the preeminent aesthetic representation of a scientific achievement” (163). Through an extensive selection of full-color engravings, Kelley demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the exchange between British botanists and Indian artists in the field of botanical illustration.

In Chapters 7 and 8, Kelley elucidates the philosophies of science espoused by Hegel and Goethe, who held contrasting views on the nature of plant life. Whereas Hegel regarded the rich profusion of plant species as an inherently ordered progression toward the triumph of Spirit, Goethe tended to emphasize the inherently chaotic and transformative aspects of living things, arguing that plant species exemplify an unending process of metamorphosis. By offering the contrastive

possibilities of teleology or transformation, Hegel and Goethe set the terms of debate and framed the possibilities of botanical figuration for an entire generation of English poets. Kelley is highly insightful in her reading of Percy Shelley’s poetry, particularly *The Triumph of Life*, which envisions “the possibility that life is not material, not mechanical, a possibility that tunnels under the possibility of organic form and takes it over” (215).

*Clandestine Marriage* is the first book-length study of botany in the Romantic era. It offers a fascinating view of botany as a transgressive discourse that crossed epistemic boundaries of all sorts—between literature and science, masculine and feminine roles, British colonists and Indian artists. By challenging the conventional worldview of Linnaean taxonomy, the study of botany in the Romantic era stimulated the breakdown of traditional categories and compelled the invention of new ways of seeing and knowing the natural world.

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