Anka Ryall

The World According to Marianne North, a Nineteenth-Century Female Linnaean

It is something of a stretch to call the nineteenth-century British world-traveller and botanical painter Marianne North (1830–90) a Linnaean.[1] She had no formal training as a botanist, and there is no acknowledgment of Linnaeus as a source of influence in her two-volume memoir, *Recollections of a Happy Life*, which was published in 1892, two years after her death. Yet, like other nineteenth-century amateur botanists of either sex she belongs to the tradition from Linnaeus in the important sense that it was his binomial system and its dependence on a few, easily observable features which made it possible – "Yes, even for Women themselves," as Linnaeus put it – to become a proficient botanist without formal instruction.[2] What distinguished Marianne North from the majority of contemporary amateurs, however, was her life-long dedication and the unsurpassed magnitude of her endeavours. On her many journeys around the world to paint the local

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[1] I want to thank Astrid Surmatz, whose invitation to speak at the symposium 'Linnaean Travel: Transgressions and Narrative' at the University of Amsterdam on 3 October 2007 encouraged me to see Marianne North in a new light. Much of my argument, however, is based on a chapter in my study of women's travel writing, *Odyssevs i skjørt: Kvinners erobring av reiselitteraturen*, Oslo, 2004.

[2] Lisbeth Koerner, 'Carl Linnaeus in his Time and Place,' in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary, Cambridge, 1996, p. 148.

flora in its natural environments – at the behest of Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew – she collected thousands of plants, discovering, in the process, five species later named for her. One might say that, like Linnaeus himself, she became a largely self-taught professional.

In November, 1883, North opened a letter to George James Allman, a botanist and former president of the Linnean Society in London, with a sketch depicting North at work, perched precariously on top of an enormous boulder in order to paint the fruits of a tall palm tree (fig. 1). Like the sketch, the letter itself provides a witty image of her uncommon and passionate zeal:

> Dear Dr. Allman
>
> I know Mrs. Allman will forgive my sending you the above sketch of myself in [the] Seychelles instead of sending it to her. I feel that you will better enter into the delight of the situation. How I got up and how I got down is still a mystery to me – but I know that if a cramp had seized me, you would have seen little more of your friend, for the boulder went sheer down some 30 feet or more on all sides![3]

North's choice of addressee for this letter indicates both her sense of belonging to a community of botanists and her recognition of the extent to which her activities were outside the frame of common female experiences. This dislocation, together with her dislocation – as a woman and amateur – from the botanical establishment and – as an artist – from the norms of botanical illustration, will be the focus of this article. But I will begin by explaining my title, which should be taken quite literally.

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3 The letter, like the paintings and portrait reproduced in this article, belongs to the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew outside London.

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Praslin 4th Nov 1883
Seychelles
[1883]

Dear Dr. Allman   address care of Ireland Fraser & Co
Mauritius,

I know Mrs Allman will forgive my sending you the above sketch of [illegible] in Seychelles instead of sending it to her. I feel that you will better enter into the delight of the situation. How I got up & how I got down is still a mystery to me - but I know that if a cramp had seized me, you would have seen little more of your friend. for the boulder went sheer down some 30 feet or more on

Fig. 1: Letter to George James Allman, November 1883.

A Temple of Nature

Like Linnaeus, but in her own unique way, Marianne North wanted to transplant the flora of the world to her own country. With that in mind she used her own money (she never married and was left independently wealthy after the death of her father in 1869) to build a gallery at Kew Gardens for the permanent display of her hundreds of botanical paintings. She hired a friend, the architectural historian James Fergusson, and worked closely with him on the design of the building, which was inspired by a Greek temple. She also arranged all the pictures herself and got another friend, the well-known botanist William Botting Helmsley, to write the exhibition catalogue. The gallery, which is still at Kew and has remained almost unchanged since the 1880s, consists of two halls lit from above by windows just below the ceilings. Above a panel made up of 246 different types of wood that North had collected on her travels, the walls are completely covered by a total of 832 intensively coloured oil paintings of different size, hung so closely together that they almost seem like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

North's gallery is her temple of nature. Flowers, plants, bushes and trees dominate as subjects of the paintings, but most include other elements – usually birds, insects or an identifiable landscape – indicating local habitats. The paintings are grouped by geographical location, and a panel running around the walls underneath the windows indicate in which part of the world the plants below belong. All continents, except Europe and Antarctica, are represented. A walk through the gallery is therefore like a journey in North's footsteps around her whole world. That this is how she herself wanted the gallery to be perceived, is signalled by a painting above the entrance. It shows two golden circles, painted by North herself, representing the eastern and western hemispheres of the globe. Symbolically, they are connected by her own monogram.

As Barbara Gates has noted, North's gallery at Kew was an "ingenious act of self-promotion and self-perpetuation",[4] and she herself was obviously aware of this. Her memoir culminates in a description of its opening on 7 June 1882, and she makes no attempt at disguising her sense of triumph upon its completion. One episode, in which she sums up her struggle to get the gallery ready in time, is particularly revealing. "Though the work gave me no little trouble and fatigue," she writes, "it brought me in contact with many interesting people, and sometimes mere strangers said things about it which gave me great pleasure." One of them is a gentleman who has wandered in because the door has accidentally been left open:

> He turned rather rudely to me, after getting gradually interested in the paintings – "it isn't true what they say about these being painted by one woman, is it?" I said simply that I had done them all; on which he seized me by both hands and said, "You! then it is lucky for you that you did not live two hundred years ago, or you would have been burnt for a witch."[5]

Since North not only cites this comment but also acknowledges that it has given her "great pleasure", it stands out in her memoir as an expression of pride in her own achievement. She must have been well aware that the paintings in the gallery represent a life work so grandiose that it transcends all nineteenth-century norms for female modesty.

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[4] Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World*, Chicago, 1998, p. 100.

[5] Marianne North, *Recollections of a Happy Life: Being the Autobiography of Marianne North*, 2 vols., ed., Mrs. John Addington Symonds, London, 1892, pp. 2:211–12. Further page references to this edition of *Recollections* are included in the text. A facsimile of volume one, with an introduction and notes by Susan Morgan, was published in 1993 by the University of Virginia Press.

However, as I have already indicated, the erection of the gallery was also a service performed, like the far-flung collecting efforts of Linnaeus' students, for the good of the nation.[6] North wanted to share her observations of and delight in the botanical wonders of the world with both her contemporaries and future generations. In his preface to the gallery catalogue, Sir Joseph Hooker underlined the importance of her paintings as a documentation of tropical plant species:

> On the beauty of the collection it is unnecessary to dwell, and it is not possible to overrate its interest and instructiveness in connection with the contents of the gardens, the plant-houses, and museums at Kew; visitors may, however, be glad to be reminded that very many of the views here brought together represent vividly and truthful scenes of astonishing interest and singularity, and objects that are among the wonders of the vegetable kingdom; and that these, though now accessible to travellers and familiar to readers of travel, are already disappearing, or are doomed shortly to disappear, before the axe and the forest fires, the plough and the flock, of the ever advancing settler or colonist. Such scenes can never be renewed by nature, nor when once effaced can they be pictured to the mind's eye, except by means of such records as this lady has presented to us, and to posterity.[7]

Hooker's formulation indicates that he saw North's paintings as an effort to preserve – and implicitly as a plea for conservation of – wilderness plant life. In contrast to Linnaeus, who famously at-

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[6] See Lisbeth Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation*, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, pp. 113–39.

[7] Quoted in Suzanne Le-May Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds: Three Victorian Women Naturalists*, London, 2001, p. 117.

tempted to cultivate tea in Sweden, she was less interested in the possibility of growing exotic specimens in English soil than in encouraging her compatriots to admire them in their natural environments. Thus the world contained in her gallery represents, in Suzanne Le-May Sheffield's words, "a new vision for the relationship between nature and human beings".[8]

Botanical Memoirs

Recollections of a Happy Life is a detailed account of the circumstances facilitating and surrounding the creation of North's particular and personal world. With the exception of an introductory chapter and some concluding paragraphs the two-volume work has the form of a series of travel narratives from the years 1871–85, during which she painted all the pictures that crowd the walls of her gallery. Although each of these narratives charts her own movements and activities, they are primarily an account of her intense engagement with her botanical work. "Did I not paint? – and wander and wonder at everything? Every rock bore a botanical collection fit to furnish any hothouse in England," she writes enthusiastically about a trip through the mountains above Teresópolis in Brazil in 1873 (1: 187). Indeed, "wandering and wondering" could have been her motto. *Recollections* seems to have been closely based on letters and diary or field notes, and these activities are narrated with an immediacy that makes the reader both a co-traveller and an admiring co-observer.

In an article about North's Work, Antonia Losano comments on its "the strange lack of affect" and its "erasure of female subjectivity and, indeed, human subjectivity in general".[9] As textual cri-

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8 Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 118.

9 Antonia Losano, 'A Preference for Vegetables: The Travel Writings and Botanical Art of Marianne North', *Women's Studies,* vol. 26, 1997, p. 431.

ticism, however, this is off the mark. Although *Recollections* was subtitled "autobiography" by her sister, Catherine Symonds, who edited the book for publication, it is a documentation of botanical pursuits rather than an autobiographical investigation of personal development. The introductory chapter which is devoted to North's childhood, youth and particularly her close relationship as a young woman with her father, a seven-times Liberal MP from Hastings, is cursory. She does, however, attempt to explain her future career on the basis of an early interest in natural history, geography and botany, as well as in sketching and painting. The chapter ends with the death of North's father when she was 39. Their close relationship is the focus of an additional volume of the memoir, published in 1893: "For nearly forty years he had been my one friend," she writes, "and now I had to learn how to live without him, and to fill up my life with other interests as best I might." After his death she immediately travelled to the south of France to devote herself, as she explains, "to painting from nature, and try to learn from the lovely world which surrounded me there how to make that work henceforth the master of my life".[10]

With the exception of the opening chapter, the two-volume *Recollections* consists of fifteen chapters that may be read as a series of separate travel narratives: from the United States and Canada in 1871, from Jamaica in 1871–72, from Brazil in 1872–73, from Tenerife, California, Japan and Singapore in 1875–77, from Borneo and Java in 1876, from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1876–77, from India in 1877–79, from Borneo and Eastern Australia in 1880–81, from Western Australia, New Zealand and the United States in 1881, from South Africa in 1882–83, from the Seychelles in 1883 and

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[10] Marianne North, *Some Further Recollections of a Happy Life: Selected from the Journals of Marianne North, Chiefly between the Years 1859 and 1869*, ed., Mrs. John Addington Symonds, London, 1893, p. 231.

from Chile in 1884–85. The purpose of all the journeys was to paint the tropical vegetation *in situ*, or as she puts it: “on the spot in natural abundant luxuriance” (1: 39), and the narratives of every journey reflect this. Occasionally she describes brief interludes in London, where she finds the winters too cold, and many of the journeys begin and end in English ports. But often they take her around the world, and after leaving Liverpool for Tenerife via Madeira in January 1875, for example, she only returns to England from Sri Lanka via Egypt and Italy two years later.

The first long journey outside Europe narrated in *Recollections* starts with a visit to the United States and Canada during the autumn of 1871. Here North met such celebrated South American travellers as Elizabeth Agassiz, who was married to the naturalist Louis Agassiz and co-author of a book titled *A Journey in Brazil* (1868), and the painter Frederic Edwin Church, who had become famous for his spectacular and sublime landscape paintings which include plants and animal life represented with detailed scientific precision. Agassiz inspired her with accounts of “the wonders and delights of her famous Amazon expedition” (1: 49), while Church showed her his studio where she admired an unfinished painting of Chimborazo (the famous mountain in Ecuador) and several tropical studies that made her, she writes, “more than ever anxious to go and see these countries” (1: 68). In terms of North’s memoir these two are represented as the guiding lights of her later career as a traveller, painter and botanist.

After a four-month apprenticeship in North America, North struck out on her own. On Christmas Eve in 1871 she landed in Jamaica, and this is where – with an excited “In the West Indies at last!” – the memoir locates the beginning of her botanical career (1: 80). The first month in Kingston, she rents a house in an overgrown garden, the beauty, abundance and fertility of which give impetus to her life’s project. “There was a small valley at the back

of the house which was a marvel of loveliness," she writes. "I painted all day, going out at daylight and not returning until noon, after which I worked at flowers in the house" (1: 83). Soon she receives invitations to visit British families in other parts of the island, where she finds new species of plants to paint. In *Recollections*, she emphasizes that sight is only one of the senses that are satisfied in the Tropics. The air is pleasurable, the sounds almost deafening. She writes about hearing "every sort of noise and sweet sound" in the mornings, and "then after sunset the crickets and frogs strike up, and a Babel of other strange talk begins" (1: 96).

North's stay in Jamaica lasted five months. Afterwards she remained in London for only two months before setting off for Brazil in order to continue her studies of tropical flora. There she remained a year. Not long after her return to London she left on another long journey, and this became a nomadic pattern that she continued for fifteen years. A sense of restlessness and ceaseless energy pervades the accounts of almost all her journeys. The only exception is a stay in Japan during the late autumn of 1875, which she cuts short because of the cold. Only towards the end of the memoir, in the narratives of her journeys to the Seychelles and Chile, are there signs of stress and fatigue: "Doctors say my nerves broke down from insufficient food and overwork in such a climate," she explains (2: 309).

But, as the title *Recollections of a Happy Life* signals, her narrative is overwhelmingly dominated by joyful memories of the pursuit of subjects for botanical paintings all over the world. Locally she travels on foot, on horseback with or without side-saddle, in sedan chairs, ox-carts and canoes. She prefers slow means of transportation in order to be able to observe her surroundings and to stop whenever an interesting plant strikes her eye. When making her way through trackless terrain, she has only one rule: "not going willingly anywhere where I could not see my feet" (1: 251). Al-

though she often has luxurious accommodation in hotels or the residences of British colonial officials and their families, she feels more at home in simple surroundings. In Kandy (in Ceylon), she compares herself to "a sparrow who had by mistake got into an eagle's nest" when spending the night in "the huge state rooms" at Government House (1: 310), while in Bogor (on Java) she decides to spend a whole month in a small inn where she gets what she describes as "a cheerful little room with a lovely garden on one side, with such cocoa-nut, breadfruit, and bananas that it was a real joy to sit still and look at them" (1: 255).

As North's description of her room in Bogor suggests, what matters to her everywhere is the view. Her memoir abounds with descriptions of beautiful views seen from the windows of her various lodgings, and many of them have visual equivalents in her paintings. She sometimes makes close and detailed observations of plants that she can observe – and often smell – from her window; elsewhere she composes her verbal views like landscape paintings, clearly dividing them into foreground, middle distance and background. Both compositional principles coincide in her narratives of expeditions into the field, which are punctured on the one hand by close-ups of individual specimens of rare plants, on the other by panoramas that are aesthetically pleasing while also providing information about local habitats. Thus it is impossible to distinguish between North as an artist, field botanist and travel writer.

Outside the Frame of Domestic Femininity

The journeys in *Recollections* are all defined as work. Regardless where North is travelling, she maintains a strict working regime. Time is her enemy because she never has enough of it. "It was impossible to paint fast enough, but we can all work hard at what we like best," is a typical comment (2: 219). In the midday heat, while

others take siesta, she continues working in the shade or indoors. Nor does she let the inaccessibility of many of the plants she wants to paint stop her. On the Seychelles, for example, she remembers scaling "walls of mud and granite" by holding on to plants "so full of long thorns that my hands were bleeding and torn before we reached the top" (2: 306). In Brazil, likewise, she is attacked by armies of insects while she is painting, but concludes that "even this plague was worth bearing for the sake of the many wonders and enjoyments of the life I was leading in that quiet forest-nook" (1: 159). As Losano notes, this "rhetoric of work and professionalism" not only sets North apart from her female predecessors, but "writes against the nineteenth-century notions of women's role in botanical science".[11] Like the letter she addressed to Dr. Allman rather than to his wife, who presumably would not have understood her unfeminine zeal, it locates her activities within a masculine Linnaean tradition.

Because the work, as North describes it both in her memoir and in private letters, is all-consuming, it also functions as a pretext for avoiding the social duties regulating middle-class women's lives, personified on the journeys by well-meaning hosts and travel companions. "I am such an old vagabond that I own to being delighted to be perfectly free again," she writes in a letter from India, "staying with no one, having no fixed dates for going anywhere, and not even a servant to dog my footsteps – I sat on the bench at the top of the hill and waited for the clouds to roll their way upwards and thought with glee – there is no reason except hunger which need drive me down to the lake again – for hours to come – it was so grand there."[12] In *Recollections*, though she frequently refers to her-

[11] Losano, 'A Preference for Vegetables', p. 426.

[12] Letter to Arthur Burnell, 27 July 1878, quoted in Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 94.

self on her travels as "free", she tends to downplay the liberation that botanical fieldwork obviously represented and emphasize her daily work routines. But an account of how she abruptly leaves a lunch party during a stay in Sarawak on Borneo in 1880 is revealing: "Vegetables suited me better. The bushes of petræa were a perfect wonder of bloom, covered with blue sapphire-stars on the blue-grey bracts" (2: 99). As a self-identified botanist, the only kind of human company she occasionally claims to long for is "some intelligent botanical companion to answer my many questions" (1: 151).

Work is consistently synonymous with pleasure in North's memoir. The following description of the view from her house in Kingston – which is also portrayed in some of her paintings from Jamaica – may stand as a representative example of her many descriptions of tropical botany:

> From my veranda or sitting-room I could see up and down the steep valley covered with trees and woods. [. . .] The richest foliage closed quite up to the little terrace on which the house stood; bananas, rose apples (with their white tassel flowers and pretty pink young shoots and leaves), the gigantic breadfruit, trumpet-trees (with great white-lined leaves), star-apples (with brown and gold plush lining to their shiny leaves), the mahogany-trees (with their pretty terminal cones), mangoes, custard apples, and endless others, besides a few dates and cocoanuts. A tangle of all sorts of gay things underneath, golden-flowered allamandas, bigonias, and ipomæas over everything, heliotropes, lemon-verbenas, and geraniums from the long neglected garden running wild like weeds: over all a giant cotton-tree quite 200 feet high was within sight, standing up like a ghost in its winter nakedness against the forest of evergreen trees, only coloured by the quantities of orchids, wild pines, and other parasites which

> had lodged themselves in its soft bark and branches. [. . .] The mango-trees were just then covered with pink and yellow flowers, and the daturas, with their long white bells, bordered every stream. I was in a state of ecstacy, and hardly knew what to paint first. (1: 82–83)

Regardless whether the reader recognizes the trees and plants mentioned here, North's breathless inventory gives a lively impression of the overwhelming diversity of tropical plant life. It shows that she, even in her writing, has an eye for shapes, colours and details, as well as a botanist's ability – although she tends to avoid scientific terminology – to identify all the species she observes.

However, a few sentences have been omitted from the passage I have just quoted. After all, North is describing a cultivated landscape, and everywhere between the trees she also observes the huts of former African slaves, as well as paths zigzagging in all directions around her house. Her impression is that the local population is large, but dispersed. She also notes that the blacks seem friendly, and that they are – as she puts it – "in character with the landscape" (1: 83). Hence, she consciously or unconsciously takes part in contemporary debates about the place of humans in nature, and even her paintings reflect this participation.

In North's landscape paintings, the humans are generally represented as small and insignificant compared to their environment. A good example is her painting of an Indian tulip tree (*Thespesia populnea*) (fig. 2). Here the foreground is dominated by a branch with enormous yellow and orange-pink hibiscus-like flowers and dark-green heart-shaped leaves. The branch functions as a close-up of the trees in the middle distance of the picture. In the background we see palms that almost conceal the pagodas of Mandura. Between the two trees in the middle distance there are several small figures both representing the local population and providing an in-

dication of the great size of the trees. The painting gives a great deal of information, not only about a particular species, but also about a specific geographical location. But the most striking aspect of the composition is how the leaves and flowers fill two thirds of the picture surface. They are much larger than the people and depicted with an expressive vitality making the line of figures at the bottom of the picture seem static and lifeless. Even more obviously than in her description of the view from her veranda in Jamaica, the humans are here subordinated to the landscape.

Outside the Frame of Botanical Illustration

As mentioned, Marianne North was a self-taught botanist. In this respect, little separates her from her female contemporaries. While study of plant life was regarded as a suitable pastime for girls and women in Victorian Britain, females very rarely received any formal training in botany or other natural sciences. They learnt about plants by collecting, pressing, studying and systematizing them on the basis of the Linnaean classifications. In particular, women were encouraged to draw and paint flowers. Most confined themselves to filling private albums with watercolours of flowers and plants based on sketches made from nature, but some published botanical illustrations in journals and books.[13] Even if such pictures could have obvious aesthetical qualities, they had low status as art because of their primary botanical purpose. Likewise, the production of botanical illustrations did not have status as science even if it demanded detailed botanical knowledge.[14]

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13 See Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760 to 1860*, Baltimore, 1996, pp. 173–82.

14 Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 112.

Fig. 2. Indian tulip tree (*Thespesia populnea*).

North's knowledge about botany was clearly based on participation in naturalist networks, as well as on extensive reading and her own observations. According to her memoir, she always took the opportunity during her journeys to visit colonial botanic gardens in order to consult experts on the local flora. She also had close personal contact with Sir William Jackson Hooker, the founder and first director of the botanic gardens in Kew, and afterwards with his son and successor, Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker. Himself an active traveller and plant geographer, Joseph Hooker encouraged North to collect and send rare plants to Kew for classification on her travels. Many travellers participated in this effort at collecting plants, particularly from the colonies, and it was considered an important aspect of the charting of the British empire.[15] For North and other women such specimen-collecting also meant access to the predominantly masculine world of botanical science. But, as I have already suggested, North's main contribution to contemporary botany was her focus on the connection between individual trees, plants or flowers and their environments. Her memoir also shows that she was a field botanist in the sense of continually testing her own observations against received knowledge. In Borneo, for example, she makes a point of correcting the information she has been given about the mangosteen tree: "The mangosteen was one of the curious trees people told me never had flower," she explains. "But I watched and hunted day by day till I found one, afterwards seeing whole trees full of blossoms, with rich crimson bracts and yellow petals, quite as pretty as the lovely fruit" (1: 240).

Even as a painter North was more or less self-taught. In her memoir she only mentions some lessons in flower painting, from which, as she puts it, "I got the few ideas I possess of arrangement

[15] See Janet Browne, 'Biogeography and Empire', in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 305-21.

of colour and of grouping" (1: 26). Like most other nineteenth-century amateurs she started as a watercolourist, but when at the age of 35 she learnt to paint in oils, she put the watercolours aside for good. Not without self-irony she calls oil painting "a vice like dram-drinking, almost impossible to leave off once it gets possession of one".[16] Her use of oils for botanical studies represented a definitive break with both conventional amateur art and the tradition of botanical illustrations. In the latter, botanical specimens were usually represented with painstaking accuracy alone on a page against a white background in order to facilitate their identification. Heavy oil paints were considered unsuitable for because they made precision difficult.[17] Preferring oils, North signals a wish to privilege expression over accuracy in her botanical painting.

For the purpose of systematic botany, the ideal was to depict representative specimens rather than individual plants.[18] North, by contrast, emphasized the individuality of the plants she painted and placed them in appropriate settings, usually together with other plants, and often with appropriate insects and birds. On the one hand, her understanding of plants was based on field observations revealing patterns of connections and interdependence; on the other, her paintings are expressive and draw on conventions associated with landscape art rather than with botanically accurate plant illustrations. Although she insisted that her paintings had a botanical purpose, her perspective was that of an artist. As Suzanne Le-May Sheffield has argued, her contribution to both art and botany was innovative in its defiance of "the boundaries of artistic and bo-

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[16] Quoted in Brenda Moon, "Marianne North 1830–90", in *A Vision of Eden: The Life and Work of Marianne North*, London, 1980, p. 235.

[17] Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 112.

[18] Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 113.

tanical conventions".[19]

A good example of North's botanical art is her close-up of *Brugmansia arborea* (also known as angel's trumpet) painted in Brazil (fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Brugmansia arborea (also known as angel's trumpet).

19 Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 114.

Here the white flower on the left is depicted while it is opening itself for the humming bird, while that to the right seems to be reaching for the water. Even the perforated green leaves with their signs of insect activity underline the development and individuality of the plant as a living organism. In other words, the representation is based less on general or generalized knowledge about the species than on observations on a particular day of one unique specimen. Moreover, like most of North's close-ups of plants, the individual depicted here refuses to be contained by the picture frame. This endows it with a sense of power and vitality that is more Darwinian than Linnaean. North was personally acquainted with Charles Darwin and shared his admiration for struggling nature, and all her interpretations of botany – in her memoir as well as in her paintings – are clearly informed by his theory of natural selection.

Outside the Frame of Female Modesty

The expressions of strong feelings in *Recollections* are almost always inspired by botanical observations. Riding in Cata Branca in Brazil, for example, North observes some rare plants between the rocks. She is particularly fascinated by one, which she from horseback identifies as *Macrosiphonia longiflora*, a plant with delicate white flowers "like a giant white primrose of rice-paper with a throat three inches long; it was mounted on a slender stalk, and had leaves of white plush like our mullein, and a most delicious scent of cloves. Another was a gorgeous orange thistle with velvety purple leaves. I was getting wild with my longing to dismount and examine these" (1: 152). She finds it equally difficult to contain her emotions when in Singapore she comes across "real pitcher-plants (*Nepenthes*) winding themselves amongst the tropical bracken. It was the first time I had seen them growing wild, and I screamed with delight" (1: 233).

As Sheffield notes, North always tried to depict plants in full

bloom for botanical purposes, and the result is that she "also captures a heightened sense of the abundance, fertility and sensuality of the natural world".[20] In fact, her paintings of bulging pitcher-plants, glistening and full of collected liquid, bring to life the sexuality of plants in a way that might have astounded Linnaeus and certainly would have delighted his British follower, Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles and author of a the notorious "The Loves of Plants" (1791), an erotic poem which rhapsodizes and sexualizes the natural world.

Whether North's intention was to depict plant sexuality in her paintings is doubtful. It is also a matter of speculation to what extent – in spite of the common analogies between plants and women – she projected her own sexuality into her paintings. In her memoir, as I have already pointed out, she portrays herself primarily as an engaged observer and claims to dislike turning the spotlight on herself. The anecdote about the gentleman who is overwhelmed when wandering by chance into her gallery is an exception to the more self-effacing stance of the rest of the text. Indeed, the distinction her memoir preserves between the world of flowers and her own life is an indication of the problems the Linnaean gendering of plants posed for North as a respectable unmarried woman.

One way of interpreting North's emphasis on her role as observer is to see it as an attempt to maintain the appearance of female modesty while engaging in practices that might easily be viewed as unfeminine. Fear of censure may thus explain her obvious discomfort when in one of the book's episodes she is not only an object of observation, but is subsumed (like the blacks in her view from her house in Kingston) in the natural world. The episode deals with a visit to the famous photographer Julia Margaret Cameron in Kalu-

[20] Sheffield, *Revealing New Worlds*, p. 122.

tara on the west-coast of Ceylon in 1876–77, during which North allows herself be photographed. Recounting the experience in her memoir she compares it to torture:

> She dressed me up in flowing draperies of cashmere wool, let down my hair, and made me stand with spiky cocoa-nut branches running into my head, the noonday sun's rays dodging my eyes between the leaves as the slight breeze moved them, and told me to look perfectly natural (with the thermometer standing at 90°). Then she tried me with a background of breadfruit leaves and fruit, nailed flat against a window-shutter, and told *them* to look natural, but both failed; and though she wasted twelve plates, and an enormous amount of trouble, it was all in vain, she could only get a perfectly uninteresting and commonplace person on her glasses, which refused to flatter. (1: 315)

While Julia Cameron is known for her idealized and theatrical portraits, Marianne North must be described as a realist. The implication that she herself, like the breadfruit leaves she has been placed among, cannot "look perfectly natural" when being nailed down, might therefore be interpreted as a criticism of Cameron's artifice.[21] I would like to suggest, however, that it is not the artifice itself that bothers North, but the paradoxical result that it makes her look natural by aligning her with the surrounding plants. By its very "refus[al] to flatter" the best-known of Cameron's four carefully staged portraits of North, which was reproduced in the first volume of *Recollections*, shows a woman who has been liberated from the trappings Victorian modesty, not only from a passive tightly corseted domestic life, but from everything represented by such external signs of respectable middle-class femininity (fig. 4).

[21] Losano, 'A Preference for Vegetables,' p. 437.

Fig. 4. Marianne North as seen by Julia Margaret Cameron.

Sunburnt, with her hair in braids and dressed in a loose, flowing garment, she is instead absorbed by the tropical nature that she loved. Imagining North as she herself imagined nature, the portrait reveals her uniqueness and suggests that she is an escape artist who in her singular nomadic life, her paintings, her botanical practices and her opinions explode narrow categories in order to live "a happy life" outside them.

In her preface to *Recollections*, Catherine Symonds remarks that her sister was no botanist in the strict sense of the term: "her feeling for plants in their beautiful living personality was more like that which we all have for human friends" (1: vi). Practically every page of the memoir reflects these feelings, which possibly provide an indirect explanation of North's discomfort with Cameron's portrait. She may have been disturbed by the portrait's suggestion of a close connection between the life of plants (a connection, as Astrid Surmatz points out in her article,[22] which was literalized by Linnaeus in his rendering of the Andromeda myth) and her own life as a woman. Since Linnaeus, plant sexuality had been an accepted fact, and might she not have felt, when placed in the company of plants, as a plant among other plants, that she was sexualized herself? In other words, the analogy suggested by the portrait represents the one transgression of social norms that she as an unmarried nineteenth-century female Linnaean clearly was not prepared to acknowledge publicly.

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[22] Surmatz, Astrid: 'Konfrontationen med det andra och genderdiskursen i valda beskrivningar av samerna under 1600- och 1700-talet', in Kusmenko, Jurij (Ed.): *The Sámi and the Scandinavians. Aspects of more than 2000 Years of Contact.* Hamburg 2004 [= Schriften zur Kulturwissenschaft 55], pp. 113-28.