

Katherine Mansfield Society

Essay Series

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‘A Second Flowering’

When Julian Fellowes included a reference to Elizabeth von Arnim's book *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898) in an episode of the ITV television drama *Downton Abbey* in 2011, questions were raised in the press. Who was this writer, evidently so popular at the beginning of the twentieth century? What was the significance of the book's inclusion as a potential love token from Matthew Crawley's butler, Joseph Molesley, to head housemaid, Anna Smith? We might add a few more questions to this list. Was the novel really the 'potboiler' suggested by Sarah O'Brien, Lady Grantham's maid? And if so, did the choice of book suggest an unsuspected, and *risqué*, aspect to the personality of the previously timorous Molesley? Was the progress of *Downton Abbey* mapped somehow on to the narrative of von Arnim's first book?

The scope for speculation was wide and, for those of us who have long had a literary passion for von Arnim's comedic writing (I have located various editions of her novels on the London Library shelves), there was delight that her fiction was again impinging on the popular imagination. It was rather disappointing, therefore, when Fellowes explained in the *Independent* in November 2011, that the fleeting inclusion of von Arnim's novel in *Downton* was not to establish a literary resonance with his own country house drama, but because he knew of the book's huge popularity at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Rather than a potboiler, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* is a light-hearted and stylish social satire written by the antipodean, Mary Annette Beauchamp (1866-1941), under the *nom-du-plume* 'Elizabeth'. The elder cousin of Katherine Mansfield, von Arnim had become a German countess in 1891 when she married Count Henning von Arnim-Schlagenthin. Later, she became a society wit and a member of the British literary intelligentsia (to use the term loosely). Her friends included Augustine Birrell, George Bernard Shaw, Ethel Smyth, Vernon Lee and Max Beerbohm. She was the sometime lover of H.G. Wells (as were many literary women) and, after Henning died, she became the wife of Francis, Earl Russell, the elder brother of the philosopher, Bertrand. By the time of von Arnim's death in 1941, she had written more than 22 books, 2 of which have subsequently been adapted for film: *Mr Skeffington* (1940), starring Bette Davis, in 1944,

and *The Enchanted April* (1922), starring Joan Plowright and Miranda Richardson, in 1992.

Von Arnim had no intimation of her impending literary fame when she sent the manuscript of *Elizabeth and her German Garden* from Nassenheide, Pomerania, to Macmillan publishers in March 1898. In fact, she feared the book might be worthless and was adamant that, if it were published, the author must remain anonymous, especially since her husband, Henning (who appears in the novel as the ‘Man of Wrath’), would possibly have found it intolerable for it to be known that his wife was writing commercial fiction. This was not because the financial benefits were unwelcome – especially since Henning’s agricultural experiments on the Nassenheide estate were costly – but because public acknowledgement of his wife’s success was inconceivable for a man of his class at such a time. So, having rejected several pseudonyms, von Arnim’s first book appeared under the simple title *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, and it was phenomenally successful. Eleven editions were printed before the end of 1898; it earned over £10,000 in its first year of publication and had been reprinted 21 times by May 1899.

The book prompted fan mail and started a trend for writing on similar themes, described in 1900 by Mrs Stephen Batson, in the *Nineteenth Century*, as the ‘Vogue of the Garden Book’. *Our Lady of the Beeches*, published in 1907 by Baroness von Hutten, was one of these, as was Anna Lea Merritt’s *An Artist’s Garden* (1908). Von Arnim’s female narrator in her book may have declared, in an uncomfortable pun, that ‘a garden is by no means ... a fruitful topic’ for conversation, but the reading public clearly thought otherwise. And while several critics applauded, Rebecca West, Vice-President of the London Library from 1967 to 1983, retrospectively regarded von Arnim’s first novel with ‘alarm’, a judgment probably complicated by the fact that West and von Arnim became simultaneous rivals for the affections of H.G. Wells in the early 1900s. West argued in 1921, in the *New Statesman*, that von Arnim’s first novel had ‘set ... tiresome women ... smirking coyly about their gardens as if they were having a remarkably satisfying affair with their delphiniums’.

Von Arnim's book opens with the narrator's statement, 'I love my garden', and is a first-person, free-associative tale written as a daily journal in an amusing and nonchalant style. The novel relies on the vivid pictorial descriptions of the glorious, and largely uninhabited, Prussian countryside for its effects, and its central focus is the romantic engagement of the narrator, Elizabeth – an avid reader of Henry David Thoreau and William Wordsworth – with a garden set amid perfumed pine forests, where sleigh rides to the frozen Baltic provide opportunities for adventure. The newly created (trial and error) garden is a source of intense pleasure, so much so that Elizabeth dates the beginning of her 'real life' to the point when she arrives in this, her personal Pomeranian 'kingdom'.

The beauty of this isolated place is heightened for Elizabeth by her previously interminable experiences in a flat in 'town' (for which we read Berlin), where persistent ill health meant doctors became 'bad habits' that the family found it increasingly difficult to shake off. In addition, the 'horrors' of city life were exacerbated by the necessity of carrying out social duties 'wreathed in the orthodox smiles' of a supportive wife. Consequently, the German garden becomes a refuge from wider social intrusion while simultaneously providing the opportunity to think and write in relative isolation. Throughout the book Elizabeth is portrayed as a nostalgic romantic, defining herself in artistic and languorous opposition to the brisk German women who are her nearest neighbours. Capable of spending days, and even an entire 'solitary summer', in contemplation, Elizabeth repeatedly takes up 'a volume of poetry', wanders 'out to where the king cups grow' and forgets the 'existence of everything' but the natural world and her journal. Not for Elizabeth the energetic, organized life of the perplexing German *hausfrau* who (as the local 'pattern' of the perfect German country lady) is a recognised, hands-on, authority on the 'mysteries of sausage-making, the care of calves and the slaughtering of swine'.

There are nevertheless occasional frustrations to be overcome, however creative and languid the narrator. For one thing, Elizabeth's aristocratic status and gender mean she is

never allowed to dig the garden, even if she spends her 'pin money' on 'artificial manure', a pastime eccentric enough to bewilder the servants. Gardeners, therefore, become essential to Elizabeth's happiness, though most eventually fall from favour. Marked by their inexperience, some make elementary errors when stubbornly refusing to take orders from a woman. One goes 'mad' and is sent to an asylum, although the inclusion of his insanity is a literary device on the part of von Arnim, since all the doctors 'had against him', her narrator explains, was that 'he would write books'. Whatever the idiosyncrasies of her fictional gardeners, von Arnim's Elizabeth remains undeterred in transforming the neglected German garden, even if this is achieved vicariously. Gathering a cosmopolitan collection of gardening books, she searches endlessly through a whole series of manuals whilst looking for a sympathetic gardener who can recreate the informal English design (typified by Gertrude Jekyll, Norah Lindsay and William Robinson) that she desires. Most of the botanical knowledge in the book springs from von Arnim's own experience; as Katherine Mansfield pointed out, her 'Cousin Elizabeth' had a genuine 'love of flowers' and this was her 'great charm'. But von Arnim's first book is not simple autobiography.

In fact, to those who would dismiss *Elizabeth and her German Garden* on this basis, we have the evidence of E.M. Forster who, in 1904, preceded Hugh Walpole as tutor to von Arnim's children. In Forster's impressions of Nassenheide, published in 1959 in the *Listener*, he remarks: 'The German Garden itself ... did not make much impression.' In truth, he couldn't find it. The house, he argues, 'appeared to be surrounded by paddocks and shrubberies' while 'in the summer', he notes, 'some flowers – mainly pansies, tulips, roses [appeared] ... and there were endless lupins ... the Count was drilling for agricultural purposes'. But, Forster adds, 'there was nothing of a show'. Essentially, von Arnim's depiction of the lush garden is, at best, highly fabricated, and this book is more akin to convincing fiction than to autobiography. Even so, Gertrude Jekyll was so persuaded by von Arnim's horticultural representation that in her book *Children and Gardens* (1908), she mentioned von Arnim. Including a photograph of a woman in front of a thatched cottage, Jekyll added a caption that read: 'The pretty lady in this picture is a German Princess. She has brought out her work to the old play-house.' This 'pretty lady'

was Elizabeth von Arnim, and Ellen Willmott, an influential member of the Royal Horticultural Society and the recipient of the first Victoria Medal of Honour, had travelled to Pomerania to meet Elizabeth and take her photograph.

As we can see, von Arnim's first book had far more influence than its author ever expected, and this was because the book was both deceptive and timely. For example, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* includes a subtle portrait of Anglo-German tensions as they arose in the wake of German unification in 1871 when the arms race began. The book explores this context through the minutiae of everyday experience and small-scale personal encounters, while succeeding as a witty, irreverent work that carries its message in an accessible and unthreatening manner.

Elizabeth and her German Garden is also alert to the preoccupations of an emerging group of professional women gardeners at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its publication coincided, for instance, with the foundation of the first agricultural school for women in Reading in 1898, and also with the first issue of the *English Women's Agricultural Times*. Moreover, the book typifies a world of privilege and aesthetic aspiration, and reflects ideas that were represented at the time in newly emerging magazines, including *Country Life*, which first appeared in 1897 under the guidance of Edward Hudson. Not that von Arnim's book simply replicates and augments these aesthetic preoccupations in a jolly country house novel that happens to be set in rural Prussia. Rather, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* deliberately challenges a series of political and gendered assumptions that qualify the notion of an idealised late Victorian world and the position of an upper-class woman within it. In this sense, at least, von Arnim's novel is an interesting counterpoint to *Downton Abbey*.

The book set the tone for von Arnim's later work and, as her fiction became ever more accomplished, even Rebecca West was able to be positive about it. In 1921, for example, she argued that von Arnim's novel, *Vera*, was 'distinctly a triumph', and 'one of the most successful attempts at the macabre in English'. Barbara Pym explained, in 1978, that she had particularly 'enjoyed the works' of von Arnim while reading English as an

undergraduate at Oxford in the 1930s. Her novels, including *Elizabeth and her German Garden*, had been ‘a revelation in their wit and delicate irony’, Pym declared in the 2011 Virago edition of her book, *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings* (1987), suggesting that Elizabeth’s novels were ‘models’ for her own richly comic fiction.

In the 1980s Virago began reprinting several of von Arnim’s novels as ‘modern classics’. In 2011 *The Enchanted April* appeared as a Virago limited edition with a cover featuring Angie Lewin’s textile design for Liberty. The London Library holds early copies of von Arnim’s work, too, including her novels that have yet to be republished. For those who love humour and gardens, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* and its sequel, *The Solitary Summer* (1899), are essential reading.

Hugh Walpole rightly pointed out, in his obituary of von Arnim in the *Daily Sketch* in 1941, that ‘English Literature is not so crammed with wits that it can spare Elizabeth’. Now, at last, we’re recognising that such a wit can no longer remain lost.