

Stephen Daniels  
University of Nottingham  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0092-6335>

## Humphry Repton and the Pocketbook Picturesque

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to examine one of the most successful pocketbooks of the period, *The Polite Repository, or Pocket Companion*, illustrated by designs by Humphry Repton, of places he was commissioned to improve. The illustrations for *The Polite Repository* display the repertoire of Repton's art, the social range of properties, including aristocratic palaces, gentry manor houses, and suburban villas of merchants and professionals. One of the effects of the small, standardised format was to represent properties of vastly different size, style and status, within a common scenic genre, part of Repton's promotion of a form of polite landscape which united many social ranks. The vignettes show various features, beyond the mansions, lodges, conservatories, pavilions, grottoes, flower gardens, woodlands, lakes, riversides, and wider views of the country, such as ranges of hills and sea views. The views include some parkland animals—sheep and deer—also human figures, including residents and visitors. Many view points are from a public road, displaying Repton's art, and the properties of his clients, to passing travellers, including the many tourists from polite society who were patriotically discovering the British landscape, now that war had closed continental Europe to tourism. Repton donated the drawings for the publication, to promote his career and showcase the properties of his clients. The illustrations for *The Polite Repository* are part of Repton's project to reclaim the concept of the picturesque from his learned antagonists: Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price.

**Keywords:** Humphry Repton, pocketbooks, landscape gardening, the picturesque

### Pocketbooks and Polite Society

Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey* is well known for its commentary on the landscape tastes of its period. This includes Henry Tilney's lecture

on the rigorous rules of the picturesque, on an excursion from Bath, which led the novel's heroine Catherine Morland, to reject "the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape," the frantic trips to gothic attractions, the folly Blaize Castle and mansion Northanger Abbey, and, at the end of the book, the milder, more settled, scene in Woodston, Gloucestershire where Catherine would make her married home, "the unpretending comfort of a well-connected Parsonage," "something like Fullerton [her home in Wiltshire] but better," "the windows reaching to the ground, and the view from them pleasant over green meadows [with] a sweet little cottage among the trees—apple trees too!" In these scenes Austen displays her knowledge of the varieties of picturesque tastes, from the touristic to the domestic, and their moral implications, for men and women, drawing on works by authors like William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and the subject of this paper, the landscape gardener Humphry Repton.<sup>1</sup>

A significant incident occurs early in *Northanger Abbey* when Catherine is departing from Fullerton for Bath, and the temptations of the resort city for a teenage girl from a respectable rectory in the neighbouring county of Wiltshire. While "unsuspicious of danger to her daughter" from the designs of aristocratic men, her mother is concerned that she take some prudent measures to protect herself, a warm coat, to wrap herself up when she came home from the assembly rooms at night, and that she should "keep some account of the money you spend—I will give you this little book for the purpose" (*Northanger Abbey* 17).

The "little book" was one of the so called pocketbooks popular in polite society of the period and increasingly marketed at women. Pocketbooks combined a series of functions, including account ledger, diary, almanac, advice pages (on such topics as recipes and fashions) and literary and pictorial souvenir (passages of verse, engravings of scenery). Among the accounting was not only money paid and received, but also visits made and received, and books loaned and borrowed. Pocket books were often bound (in paper, silk and leather) to create pocket-like sections, a wallet fixed by a ribbon or clasp, to hold small items like notes, letters, tickets and money, if the term pocket mainly referred to where the book was kept. Pockets were detachable bag-like accessories which were tied under a dress (and reached through an opening in an overdress). If pocketbooks were a personal, private medium, they were, like

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the 1995 Penguin Classics edition of *Northanger Abbey*. London 1995, p. 17, pp. 185–6. This edition has introduction and editorial notes by Marilyn Butler which addresses issues of picturesque landscape. The novel was first published posthumously in 1818, if prepared for publication a decade earlier.

new women's magazines, part of a commercial conduct literature, designed to both encourage women to take part in the consumer culture of the day, including touring, visiting and shopping, and to encourage their owners to go about it, to conduct themselves, in a prudent, economical way. As a novel *Northanger Abbey* bears some of the structure of a pocket book, a day to day diary in which various visits are made and scenes encountered, although some of the excursions organized by the company conflict with the kind of careful conduct that Catherine's mother wished to instil.<sup>2</sup>

### Repton and *The Polite Repository*

In a competitive market for pocketbooks, one the most successful was titled *The Polite Repository, or Pocket Companion*. Priced at 4 shillings, this was distinguished by its illustrations, a frontispiece for each year, and small (5.7 cm X 2.9 cm) vignettes for each month of the diary. Initially these were of scenes from mythology, history and popular literature in English (including Thomson's *The Seasons*, Milton's *L'Allegro* and Crabbe's *The Village*) as well as historic sites and beauty spots. Then, for the next twenty years, they were illustrated by designs by Humphry Repton, of places he was commissioned to improve. Repton donated the drawings for the publication, to promote his career and showcase the properties of his clients. While sometimes based on the larger watercolours Repton produced in his famous Red Books of designs, and had engraved for his major treatises, they are a distinctive, miniature art form in themselves, vignettes which exhibit both detail and tonality, a co-production of Repton as draughtsman and the engraver John Peltro. In the absence of Red Books, and other drawings and plans, the vignettes are often the only evidence pointing to a Repton commission. While a few appear to be mainly historic sites or popular beauty spots, all are places with which Repton claimed a major association (Temple 161–173).

The illustrations for *The Polite Repository* display the repertoire of Repton's art, the social range of properties, including aristocratic palaces, gentry manor houses, and suburban villas of merchants and professionals. Indeed, one of the effects of the small, standardised format was to represent

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<sup>2</sup> Sandro Jung, "Illustrated Pocket Diaries and the Commodification of Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Life* (2013), pp. 53–84. Stephen Colclough, "Pocket Books and Portable Writing: The Pocket Memorandum Book in Eighteenth-Century England and Wales," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 45 (2015), pp. 159–177. Barbara Burman, "Pocketing the Difference: Gender and Pockets in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Gender and History* 14 (2002), pp. 447–469.

properties of vastly different size, style and status, within a common scenic genre, part of Repton's promotion of a form of polite landscape which united many social ranks. The vignettes show various features, beyond the mansions, lodges, conservatories, pavilions, grottoes, flower gardens, woodlands, lakes, riversides, and wider views of the country, such as ranges of hills and sea views. The views include some parkland animals—sheep and deer—also human figures, including residents and visitors. Many view points are from a public road, displaying Repton's art, and the properties of his clients, to passing travellers, including the many tourists from polite society who were patriotically discovering the British landscape, now that war had closed continental Europe to tourism (Daniels, *Humphry Repton* 7–8).

Blaize Castle, a short ride from Bristol, the gothic folly which featured in one of the excursions in *Northanger Abbey*, illustrated the month of December 1797 (fig. 1). The new century 1800, opens with a scene for January of Repton's own house and garden, in Hare Street, Essex (fig. 2). It shows a fashionably improved villa, with domed central canopy, verandah trellis work and striped canvas awnings, fronted by a lawn, flower beds and trees, and with the figures of Repton's family. Located by the main road to London from the eastern counties, the place was visible to many passing travellers.

Clients' families were pleased to see their properties illustrated (fig. 3). "Pray have you seen the Polite Repository for this Year?" wrote Frances Fitzherbert to a friend in July 1807, of her Yorkshire home, "as Mr Repton has honoured Langold with a place in it" (Eyres and Lynch 137–138). Elizabeth Abbot, the wife of a client in Sussex, was grateful for the gift of Repton's watercolour drawing for the engraving of their cascade (fig. 4, Batty 71). After the end of each year's edition of *The Polite Repository* purchasers could cut out and collect Repton's vignettes as souvenirs, and use them as models for their own drawings. A decorative display of 43 proof impressions, perhaps assembled by Repton himself, or his family, was made to show the range of properties he improved, "scenery improving under his direction" (Daniels, *Humphry Repton* 8–9).

In *An Inquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* (1806) Repton proudly reported on his work for *The Polite Repository*, 234 views over eighteen years, "from each of which, I am informed, 7000 impressions have been made. . . . 1,638,000 impressions are in circulation" (Repton, *An Inquiry* 121). The declaration was part of his 'paper war' with the connoisseurs of the Picturesque, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, two high minded literary men, gentlemen amateurs who maintained that landscape improvement was not a commercial matter, let alone one with women in mind, and was best advised by men like themselves, both country squires and

cosmopolitan connoisseurs, with a detailed knowledge of their own estates, as well as classical learning, and how these places might be framed by the kind of landscape art they collected and commissioned.

Many of the public exchanges between Repton, Price and Knight seem conducted at cross purposes, but this particular claim of Repton's, about the measure of his popularity, seems to have bewildered Knight. His response in a revised edition of his *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* was that the views in *The Polite Repository* were "non-descripts," meaning not just that they were dull (the modern meaning) but they were (in the more ancient meaning) "not depicted," not "painter's landscapes," so artless according to his picturesque criteria (Knight 219n). Quite apart from Knight overlooking pictorial accomplishments of Repton he did not himself possess, as a watercolourist, and the artistry of the engravings, the comment marks a distinction that Repton himself was keen to make, that he drew landscapes to be lived in, worked on, and moved through, not just looked at as if they were paintings, and the illustrations for *The Polite Repository* are part of Repton's project to reclaim the concept of the picturesque from his learned antagonists.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Oak Tree, the Palace Garden and the Parsonage**

I will focus now on three illustrations, for one year 1808, and how they compress larger meanings and implications, many worlds, and sometimes reveal more than meets the eye. This was a critical year in Repton's career. Every picture tells a story, if we have to look beyond them, to other sources, to unfold the narrative.

The frontispiece for the year is *A View of the Ruins of Fairlop Oak in Essex, taken during the fair held annually on the first Friday in July* (fig. 5). Sited in a clearing in Hainault Forest, ten miles from London, Fairlop Oak was a grand landmark tree, 11 metres in girth, its branches extending 100 metres in circumference, reputed to be well over a thousand years old, and celebrated in many recent works on picturesque woodland, notably William Gilpin's *Remarks on Forest Scenery*. It was sited in a glade in Hainault Forest, and its nickname "Monarch of the Forest" reflected the fact that the forest itself was a royal domain. While the Crown had the privilege to the timber of the forest, local villages had rights to gather fallen dead wood and more informally lop branches, along with other grazing rights for their animals. As Repton's view shows, the forest had become busier, and more attractive to outsiders, with a major annual fair for crowds from London and its environs,

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<sup>3</sup> On the wider picturesque controversy, see Daniels, *Humphry Repton*, pp. 103–148.