INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH | SCHOOL OF ADVANCED STUDY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

HISTORY OF GARDENS AND DESIGNED LANDSCAPES SEMINAR

Autumn Programme 2026

Gardens of Pleasure



Stephen Bending

University of Southampton

Thursday 19 November 2026
6.00pm GMT

Hybrid session:

• Meeting Wolfson NB02, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU

• Broadcast on Zoom

Pleasure Gardens and the Problems of Pleasure: Versailles to Monticello

The pleasure of pleasure gardens may seem self-evident, but from Ovid's claim that no pleasure can be complete (because anxiety is always mingled with the joy) to Byron's declaration that 'pleasure's a sin and sometimes sin's a pleasure', the experience of pleasure has always been a problem. On both sides of the Atlantic, this paper argues, the problems of pleasure – too much, not enough, the wrong kind, the wrong place – confronted individuals both with the immediacy of the senses and with a sense of oneself in the world. Nowhere was that more the case than in the site so insistently marked out as the place in which pleasure might be found, the pleasure gardens of Europe and North America that developed between the

Image: Bagnigge Wells, London: two alluring, fashionably-dressed women, one plucking rosebuds. Mezzotint, 1780. Source: Wellcome Collection.

appearance of Louis XIV's Versailles in the 1660s, and the fall into ruin of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello at the end of the 1820s. Moving between British, French and North American gardens, it will be shown how design sets the stage but cannot control the experience: this focus on reception helps us to understand how garden visitors interpret, imagine, and at time resist the pleasures that design attempts to orchestrate; but it also helps us to see how the problems of pleasure reveal shared emotional cultures across national borders and temporal divides.

Stephen Bending is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture, and Head of the English Department at the University of Southampton. A General Editor of the Routledge Chawton House Library series of early women's writing, he is the co-editor of *Moving Landscapes: Gardens and Gardening in the Transatlantic World, 1670-1830* (Huntington Library Quarterly, 84:3, (2021), and the author of *Green Retreats: Women, Gardens, and Eighteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). His new book, entitled *Pleasure Gardens and the Problems of Pleasure* will be published by the Paul Mellon Centre in the Spring of 2027.

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