The Queen of Aquatics: The 1849 Display of the Victoria regia Water Lily as Imperial Theatre

Katie Maurine Jarvis
Brigham Young University

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The Queen of Aquatics: The 1849 Display of the

*Victoria regia* as Imperial Theatre

Katie Maurine Jarvis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Lindsay Adamson Livingston, Chair
Megan Sanborn Jones
Rodger D. Sorensen
Michael Lavers

Department of Theatre and Media Arts
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Victoria regia as Imperial Theatre

Katie Maurine Jarvis
Department of Theatre and Media Arts, BYU
Master of Arts

The Victoria regia was discovered in British Guiana in 1837, and for over ten years explorers and scientists tried different methods to transport viable seeds back to England. When the seeds were finally on British soil, no one could grow them successfully except Joseph Paxton, the head gardener for the Duke of Devonshire. Paxton built a special glass house at Chatsworth estate to mimic the tropical climate the Amazonian lily required, and created an innovative tank that was heated with coal and fitted with an apparatus to gently keep the water moving, replicating freshwater rivers. The “vegetable wonder,” as it came to be known, had floating leaves measuring up to 6 feet in diameter and was considered truly magnificent. To reveal the successful growth of the “queen of aquatics” to the public, Paxton dressed his seven-year-old daughter Annie in a fairy costume, dimmed the lights, and set her on the largest of the floating leaves. She stood there and created a theatrical tableau that transfixed all who saw it.

This performance, which I am calling a “botanical-theatrical event,” is the site of my examination. Drawing on ecocritical perspectives and performance studies, I argue that this presentation was coded with social and political messaging that reinforced English national identity and imperial intentions. The lily was a signifier of the exotic, while the child was a signifier of the domestic. This botanical-theatrical event was deeply significant because it embodied the social and political views of the time, acting out the British Empire being “on top” of, and supported by, the “uncivilized” world. The water lily had been taken from its natural habitat, transported across the ocean and grown in a manipulated environment. It became a specimen/spectacle. The little girl had been taken out of her natural habitat, dressed as another creature and displayed on the floating leaf. She also became a specimen/spectacle. The interaction between these two organisms in this theatrical exhibition synthesized a physical representation of Imperialism that was powerful to the people of the time because of the social and political system in which they lived.

Keywords: Victoria regia, Joseph Paxton, ecocriticism, Chatsworth, plant performance, green theater, eco-theater, botanical-theatrical event
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The Queen of Aquatics

The sun was setting at Chatsworth House on Thursday, November 8th, 1849. Joseph Paxton, head gardener for the Duke of Devonshire, had been holding vigil for days at the side of a specially designed water tank where a giant Amazonian water lily was being coaxed to grow, and his patience was about to be rewarded. As twilight deepened, a bud the size of a peach burst its prickly casing and a dazzling white flower entered the cultural spotlight, the first of its kind to blossom in England. Fully opened, it was over a foot and a half in diameter. The blossom was impressive, but not more so than the leaves of the plant. They stretched between five and six feet in diameter and floated on top of the water with tranquil stability. The botanical triumph had to be shared in all its glory, and, with the approval of the Duke, Paxton had an idea.

Paxton threw open the doors of the crystal lily house to a gathering of the Duke’s favorite social and intellectual elite, along with several journalists. As the group marveled at the aquatic plant, Paxton dimmed the lights and gingerly set his seven year old daughter, Annie, dressed in shimmering fairy attire, on the largest of the thirteen floating leaves in the tank. A makeshift scaffolding had been concealed under the water to stabilize the leaf so the fairy child wouldn’t be thrown off balance. In the dimness, bright lights were trained on the little girl. She stood on the incredible green dais with a gigantic white blossom bobbing near her feet. Those in attendance were transfixed. The lily was stunning and evoked exclamations of admiration; with the addition of the ethereal child perched delicately atop the floating marvel, the scene was absolutely sensational. Douglas Jerrold was present, and later penned these

On unbent leaf in fairy guise,
Reflected in the water,
Beloved, admired by hearts and eyes
Stands Annie, Paxton’s daughter

Accept a wish, my little maid,
Begotten at the minute,
That scenes so bright may never fade
You still the fairy in it.\(^1\)

This romantic view of the lily culminated in the incredible plant dominating popular culture, becoming a national symbol, and a few years later inspiring the architecture of the Crystal Palace which housed the largest display of imperialism and world power up to that point.

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The contextual biosphere around the *Victoria regia*, including the discovery, growth, display, and obsession with it, is what I term a “botanical-theatrical event.” The presentation of

the “royal lily,” as it was called in newspapers of the time, is a particularly rich example of a botanical-theatrical event since we have a fair amount of records as a result of its wild popularity.\(^2\) Chatsworth was a country estate, about 40 miles west of Liverpool, and almost 200 miles from London, yet in the first year after its public unveiling nearly 50,000 people went to see the lily.\(^3\) It was written about extensively in newspapers articles of the time. It was made literary in poetry. It influenced art, architecture, and fashion. Audiences both unintentionally and deliberately acknowledged the combination of tropical and domestic, vegetable and child, scientific and mystical, wild and tame as the ideal in entertainment in their social/political reality. The botanical-theatrical event of Annie Paxton on the giant Amazonian lily was one of the most powerful representations of embodied cultural and political ideologies produced during the Victorian Era. Wide admiration for this botanical-theatrical event was a result of the cultural elements, social influences, and scientific advances that made this performance possible, and those same elements made it relevant to all classes of English people.

A poem that appeared in papers a few months after the first performance of child-on-lily was inspired by the fact that the lily had not bloomed in a while but “opened another of its superb flowers on Wednesday evening.” These lines then compare the child-on-lily to the emergence of the classical goddess of love:

See the ponderous leaves expanding,
   On the mimic lake of art, --
On a leaf the fairy standing,
   Shows how Venus played her part.

Schomberg, on the Berbice waters,
   Saw these lovely lilies grow, --
At the shrine of Flora’s daughters


\(^3\) Holway, *The Flower*, 215.
Poetic references to western mythology were rephrased and repeated by journalists; they solidified not only the romance but also the sophistication and elevation of the glorious flower. They painted the lily as a wonder that was “going to waste” in the jungles of the Amazon before Robert Hermann Schomburgk plucked it from its natural habitat and introduced it into English circulation. The articles and poetry implied that the lily could only be fully appreciated in the highly cultivated settings where it now was presented in a duo with another, more domestic phenomenon: the idealized child.

While the flower’s significance was multiplied by its pairing with the child, the plant also stood in for the increasing reach of Victoria’s, and thus England’s, imperial influence. Ecocritical historian Tatiana Holway goes into intricate detail about the discovery, cultivation, and presentation of this plant, pointing out the cultural mania surrounding it. “The Queen of Aquatics became the perfect emblem for the monarch whose domain extended over the oceans and seas. The very mention of *Victoria regia* called forth visions of Britain’s imperial grandeur. And yet, it was more than a symbol. It was an obsession.” Holway mentions the flower’s alignment (in both name and notoriety) with the young Queen Victoria and the nation’s perception of her reign.

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5 Robert Hermann Schomburgk had his name spelled numerous ways in various Victorian publications; in the poem quoted from the *Derbyshire Currier* they spell it Schomberg, but in other articles it is seen as Schomburg, or Schomburk. Through my research I have discovered that the actual spelling of his name was most likely Schomburgk.

several times. The imagery of embodying the ruling monarch of the world power in plant form was compelling.⁷

The *Victoria regia* was embraced as an international symbol of Britain’s power even before it was presented at Chatsworth; after the botanical-theatrical event with Annie Paxton, the water lily’s symbolic reach was expanded even further. George Lawson’s contemporary description of the plant’s impact emphasizes this expansion: “The banner of England encircles the entire globe, and in every region where that banner is seen to float on the tropical breeze, there, in the silvery lake beneath it, will be also seen the Royal Victoria Water-Lily, the namesake of our illustrious British Queen - the attendant satellite of her sovereign’s power.”⁸ This claim by Lawson suggests that by transplanting the *Victoria regia* to other colonies with tropical climates, the queen would be honored and her regional influence reinforced.

Holway tells the story of Britain’s relationship with this lily meticulously and passionately, but only vaguely touches on reasons why the obsession could have occurred. She falls back on the understanding that this was the “Age of Flowers,” and the well-known Victorian “passion for plants” was the motivating force. While these are significant components of the cultural preoccupation with the flower, I disagree that a general “passion for plants” was the main rationale behind the intense communal infatuation with the performance of child-on-lily. I assert that the powerful social, political and cultural implications of the child-on-lily were the cause of the excitement surrounding it and the reenactment and recreation of it over and over

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⁷ If you want to learn more about the parallels the nobility drew between the lily and the queen I would highly recommend this book: The Duchess of Devonshire, *The Garden at Chatsworth* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 1999), 62.

⁸ George Lawson, *The Royal Water-Lily of South America and the Water-Lilies of Our Own Land: Their History and Cultivation* (Carlisle: Applewood Books, 2009), 5.
again. The performance was a three-dimensional symbol for the imperial excellence, power, and prosperity that citizens of the empire seemed to crave. To analyze the implications of this botanical-theatrical event, I will explore three significant aspects of Victorian culture: spectatorship of scientific and technological displays, public exhibitions of the “exotic,” and the influence of political ideology on cultural events. I then position the botanical-theatrical event of child-on-lily as part of the ecological “mesh” of Victorian culture and argue that the performance itself is a symbiotic part and metonym of Victorian imperial ambition.

The ecological approach to analyzing events or performances is comprised of looking at the components that contributed either directly or secondarily to the system the performance is embedded within. In the late 1990s, Bonnie Marranca used the term “ecology” to describe this kind of whole-systems approach to performative analysis in her book *Ecologies of Theatre*. Responding to Marranca,9 Theresa J. May claimed, “For theatre to matter at all, we must think of it as an ecological actor.”10 This bold approach views each production as an organism, a living entity, interacting with other organisms or entities around it. These “organisms” could be physical bodies (human, animal, or other) political entities, or environmental, social, and economic ideologies. In short, everything that could be considered “context” for a given performance or exhibition could also be classified as interacting members of the broader ecological system that allowed that performance to emerge. Ecology, as opposed to context, implies an interlocking system, where each element is inseparable from, and dependent on, others. Each element would cease to function if isolated. As I interrogate the botanical

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performance of the child-on-lily I will use this type of ecological, whole-systems approach in my analysis.

The phenomenon of child-on-lily requires an ecological examination; by its very nature it demands exploration at the largest scale, and, conversely, the smallest scale. It requires we look at the whole system; to borrow Timothy Morton’s phrase, we have to examine “the mesh,” the interconnectedness, in which this performance developed and flourished. Building on Morton’s assertion that “nothing is complete in itself,” I argue that the performance of the child-on-lily cannot be separated from a number of factors, including the biology of the plant itself, the technology that made it possible to grow and display, the social and political ideologies of the nineteenth century British Empire, and the physical implications of juxtaposing the little girl with the giant, exotic plant.

The term “performance” can be a slippery one, with many implications in differing fields. For the purposes of interacting with the presentation of the *Victoria regia*, I will be analyzing the event as a botanical-theatrical event; that is, as a performance comparable to a traditional theatrical production, albeit one reliant on a plant as an integral component and one not performed in a traditional theatre space. To this end, “to perform” will also be used in the dynamic sense, meaning the object itself signified cultural values inherently, both independent of, and interdependently contingent on, its surroundings. I am going to widely assume that performance can be intentionally curated but I will also rely on the supposition that performing can be, and often is, unintentionally done, such as a child unknowingly performing Victorian ideologies of childhood, or a plant performing the identity of the wild Amazonian jungle. Richard Schechner suggests that an event either “is” a performance or can be analyzed “as”

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performance. The differentiation between is/as performance is that an event that is a performance is intentionally crafted, and an event that is analyzed as a performance is an occurrence that is not traditionally curated to be or viewed as a performance, but can be interpreted that way, using theatrical language to describe and understand the event. The display at Chatsworth was a performance in the sense that many parts of the event, (costumes, lights, etc.) were specifically curated, but I also will be looking at the event in terms of the unintentional messaging, the inherent meaning in the exotic biology of the lily, its presence in the English countryside, the technology required to grow it, and the physical implications of the little girl standing on top of it.

I will not be approaching the *Victoria regia* as a sentient participant in the performance, but rather as a living object that was placed into its role by the Duke, Joseph and Annie Paxton, and the spectators. The human performers involved in this production—Joseph Paxton, Annie Paxton, the Duke, and members of the gardening staff—are the ones responsible for the creation of the botanical-theatrical event. However, the event also communicated in ways the human agents involved in its making never could have anticipated or instigated. The event was both a performance and a display. For my purposes, I will put display at one end of the spectrum indicating a carefully curated exhibit, meant to be interacted with like a museum installation. I place performance at the other end of the spectrum, including events and actions that can be either intentional or inherent simply because of the biological or physical signification of an object or situation. In this way, the botanical-theatrical event of Annie Paxton standing on the *Victoria regia* exists in the liminal space I’ve established between performance and display, it includes elements of both, but does not exclusively belong to either group.

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I argue that the botanical-theatrical event of the child-on-lily enabled those that viewed it to conceive of themselves as part of the imperial process. Witnessing the foreign lily in its manufactured ecosystem with its whimsical passenger allowed English citizens to be part of imperial exotic conquest, and to know who they were, in a global context, as citizens of the British Empire. The child-on-lily was the embodied representation of their political and social ideologies; viewing it was not only entertaining but instructive, reassuring and accessible. The lily was impressive alone, the little girl was lovely, but it was the combination of the two physical entities in the botanical-theatrical event that evoked powerful reactions in spectators. It was powerful because the pre-established societal values were mainstays of the inherent cultural ecology in which the performance was created, and it was this positioning in the ecological “mesh” that communicated to English viewers their place in the worldwide network of imperialism and empire.

The Botanical-Theatrical Event

A botanical-theatrical event combines aspects of traditional theater, spectacle, and plant life. In order to be classified as a botanical-theatrical event, as opposed to any other grouping, a presentation or performance requires a botanical aspect in order to be whole. Removing the plant from the performance at Chatsworth would have been impossible; there would be no event without it. The *Victoria regia* wasn’t merely a contributor to the event, it was an essential component.

The particular botanical-theatrical event at Chatsworth is positioned in western history with predecessors leading up to the child-on-lily, and progenitors occurring from that era up through current times. Throughout European history, there were harvest festivals, religious
celebrations and rituals, displays of royal power, and theatrical spectacles that revolved around plants. Today, we still have botanical-theatrical events such as tulip festivals, the ceremony surrounding the Rockefeller Christmas tree in New York, outdoor theatres that choose content based on their surroundings, and theatrical productions that make specific plants literal main characters. In order to be a botanical-theatrical event there is a necessary socio-political element; in all the instances I mentioned, the various plants involved had significant implications for the people who witnessed the performances.

The methodologies that examine plants in/as/beside performance are pivotal to my exploration of the child-on-lily and the cultural implications surrounding it. Even in botanical-theatrical events, where the vegetal component is pivotal, plants have functioned as widely unnoticed in and of themselves. Plants are often invisible but indispensable. To have the strong political and social messaging that I argue it did, the performance at Chatsworth required two actors, two visible participants; one human and one botanic.

The ways in which plants function in culture are as varied as the ways in which human characters perform, but one of plants most common historical roles is that of giver-of-power. All food ingested by humans originates from plant life; even the animal protein we consume was once vegetation digested by an animal and turned into muscle fiber. Staple crops such as wheat, rice, cotton, and cash crops like tobacco, coffee, and sugar have served as the economic basis for huge civilizations. Vegetation has always been our partner in the creation of culture. Plants have shaped civilization more than any other natural resource besides perhaps fresh water.

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While humans have put certain plants in specific roles throughout history, plants are also themselves inherently theatrical through their biology.\textsuperscript{14} With biological phenomena such as attracting pollinators, distributing seeds through eruption, making themselves appealing to powerful organisms, being parasitic or predatory, plants are performing in their ecological web, which is often in conjunction with, or reaction to, human elements.\textsuperscript{15}

Living plants are made to perform: in (and as) topiaries, gardens, parks, reserves, varieties, cultivars, hybrids, genetically modified crops and even works of art. Consequently at least two aspects of the expression “performing plants” become apparent: (a) the inherent poietic performativity of the vegetal in its lifeworld and (b) the codes, roles, and milieux in which humans cast and in many instances, manipulate, script, or exploit the botanical.\textsuperscript{16}

There have been isolated ventures into exploring these significant roles through exploring performance theories and theatrical interpretations in the ecocritical realm. Plays and other performances have been created about, and in dialogue with, the natural world, but largely they are politically didactic to the point of alienation. As a result of their extreme politicization, eco-theatrical endeavors usually have small audiences, and limited reach. With the exception of \textit{Running Wild}, based on a conservationist novel by Michael Morpurgo, I have found few plays of this nature. Plays like this are still relatively uncommon, in spite of increasing numbers of festivals and efforts that focus on increasing eco-theatre production.

The environmental perspectives in most eco-theatre are not necessarily the direct opposite of anthropocentrism, but they certainly decentralize humans as the only species to have dramatic stories worth examining, and place us as co-characters with flora in the evolving

\textsuperscript{14} Patricia Viera, Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan, \textit{The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World} (Lanham: Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc), 2016, xviii.
\textsuperscript{15} Vieira, Gagliano, and Ryan, xviii.
\textsuperscript{16} Vieira, Gagliano, and Ryan, xviii.
narrative of our earth. In some instances, these perspectives even draw parallels between the systematic oppression of humans amongst themselves and the repression and sublimation of natural life forms by humans as a show of power, dominion, and mastery.

A primary mode of analyzing the intersection between intra-human oppression and the anthropocentric oppression of nature is ecofeminism, which combines criticism traditionally reserved for examining women’s issues/representations in productions, literature, or works of art with ecocritical methodologies. This interdisciplinary analysis addresses the interplay between nature and culture, by describing civilization as male and natural landscapes as female. In these instances, the historical male oppression of women is correlated to the rape, control, and exploitation of the non-human environmental resources. The similarities between environmental and gender oppression extend to political display of botanical conquests as well. Through many historical eras, including our own, women have not only been something to possess, but something to display, to exhibit, and to show the power and vitality of the male in dominance. In this way, the performance of the idealized child on the wild water lily was a show of control and a showcase of discovered, “hard-sought and hard-won” exotic beauty.

The performance of Annie Paxton and the lily is so intriguing that it has been examined by several other scholars, including from an ecofeminist standpoint by Margaret Flanders Darby, who compares the discovery of the lily, the nurture and care given to its growth, and the indicative display of the lily to Victorian notions of domesticity, sexual politics, and feminine development.17 She uses a gender-specific lens when examining this performance and comes to

intriguing and eye-opening conclusions. Her work draws on the rich societal context surrounding this event, including imperialism, and argues that the flower was compelling because it demonstrated spectacular power of growth, and that organic strength was paradoxically connected to femininity. She points out that the plant’s name was that of the young empress, and for a small female child to be supported on the leaf “expressed not only women's vulnerability, but their connection to the mysteries of nature, and Annie Paxton’s standing on a leaf to demonstrate its strength thus demonstrated a triumphant domestication of nature’s power by English technological culture.”

While Darby compares the plant and associated performances to the perceptions of femininity at the time, her observation that the little girl standing on the leaf was to showcase the male scientific and technological triumph, validates the imperial-performance to male-female oppression parallel ecofeminists often draw. Darby digs into the irony of Annie Paxton, a female child, becoming a metonym for white, male oppression; effectively making her femaleness irrelevant. She was made a pawn for a bigger agenda, a vehicle for the ideologies of the most powerful nation in the world, which Annie was considered “fortunate” to be a part of, even if she was a lesser part of it.

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19 Darby, 227.
20 Darby goes on to examine the nature-female connection throughout Victorian Society. Her chapter outlines the Victorian obsession with plants to be culturally connected to women, children, concepts of innocence and beauty, focusing on the Paxton family, the water lily, and the events surrounding them as evidence for her claims.
Thus we see, plants can be a parallel for human oppression cycles, and they are clearly co-actors with humans in several distinct ways. In Michael Pollan’s Book *The Botany of Desire*, he examines four specific plants that grew to be extremely powerful because they fed the human desires for sweetness, beauty, intoxication, and control. Those influential plants are, respectively, apples, tulips, cannabis, and potatoes. In the introduction of his book, Pollan summarizes the most common stories our society tells itself about nature, our interactions with it, and our ability to see it for what it is. He lists our stories about nature in three main categories, “The old heroic story, where man is at war with Nature; the romantic version, where Man merges spiritually with Nature; and, more recently, the environmental morality tale, in which Nature pays Man back for his transgressions, usually in the coin of disaster.” What is noticeably missing from this list of narratives, and from our cultural perspectives in general, is one in which we directly look at human-botanical events as ecological and theatrical, or narratives where plants are not merely props, but also can be analyzed as set, plot, antagonist, hero, love interest, or slave. In effect, plants we politicize have domesticated us as much as we have domesticated them.

Analyzing the historical event surrounding the theatricalized display of the *Victoria regia* as a political symbol, a scientific spectacle, and exhibition of the “other,” fills the void left by the discrepancy between the enormous preeminence of the natural world in our lives and the lack of acknowledgement and representation of that influence. Examining these aspects helps us to see and engage with the ecological mesh surrounding the performance. Theresa J. May discusses obstacles to creating this type of theatrical dialogue, arguing that “theatre’s humanist origins” often prevent such acknowledgement. “Contemporary theater artists working with ecological themes,” May continues, “have been hamstrung by a theater tradition that defines drama as

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conflict between and about human beings.”

The philosophy that human relationships are the most important, or at least most interesting, topic of study is troubling. Mainly because of the question: Are relationships between humans really more important than relationships between humans and the organisms that make their existence possible? To recognize the drama in human/plant relations is helpful in reframing historical events with a more comprehensive perspective of all participants involved, both human and nonhuman. Current ecocritical methods allow a view of the theatrics surrounding, and including, the *Victoria regia* as representing what the people noticed, enjoyed, valued, and how that crafted their views of themselves and the world. Ultimately, I engage with this instance to examine how their unintentional interaction with the natural world in this botanical-theatrical event fits into the broader spectrum of ever-evolving western culture. The performance of Annie Paxton and the *Victoria regia* is an integral part of our current ecocritical performance genealogy.

Scientific Spectatorship

Victorians had a deep hunger for whatever the newest scientific innovation or technology was. They were concerned with physical facts, what was measurable, real, and impressive. Scholars like Tiffany Watt-Smith contest that many practitioners of Victorian scientific experiments combined the act of scientific observation with staged emotional gestures, effectively equating the desired experiences of scientific spectators and theatrical audiences. Large masses would flock to places of scientific display to engage with the newest discoveries.

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Often, newspapers of the time would chronicle the most popular scientific endeavors. They would publish breathtaking up-to-date reports of the victories and failures of the championed scientist-actors, and the public would devour the accounts.

The unique mixture of realism and the fantastic present in Victorian drama is what felt authentic to these audiences. Scholars like Lynn Voskuil have argued for the inseparable nature of these views in Victorian. Incredible spectacle came closest to their desired/lived experiences because it elicited an emotional response while showcasing society's technological and intellectual advances. There were ideologies and values that required both intense feeling and perceived fidelity to facts. This is solidified by Iwan Rhys Morus in his article, “Seeing and Believing Science,” where he examines how the Victorians viewed scientific spectacle, and why. He posits that there was a “peculiarly Victorian combination of entertainment and edification,” that there was no real differentiation between the two and that they were meant to be the same thing in the eye of the beholder. This equation of entertainment and edification, or edutainment as we would refer to it today, was so widespread that the lines between types of performances/exhibitions/displays were blurred.

Morus elaborates that this is precisely why spectacles like the ever-popular “phantasmagoria” were so popular. Optical illusion shows were a clear point of intersection between the scientific and the sensational. They were the specific type of understandable magic audiences were seeking for, it fulfilled their desire to be both informed factually and swept up in something fantastic.

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Ironically, to give audiences what they wanted, these shows were produced by the so-called *unmasking* of traditional gimmicks in the name of science. Shows would begin with audience members being led into a dark room, usually a basement meant to evoke a crypt or dungeon, then would be followed by a brief but dramatic history of the deceptions used to delight ancient audiences. The narrative consisted of malicious con-artists posing as experts of the occult and stories of how they would hoodwink susceptible audiences, stealing both their money and their dignity. The showmen would then claim that they were about to use the very tricks these old swindlers would employ, but as an advanced civilization it was now known that these supposed apparitions could be explained by science and technology.

Images were then projected into the smoky air using “magic lanterns” to generate the optical illusion of spirits, ghosts, demons, and any other hair-raising thing they could imagine.\(^{26}\) Even though audiences knew these phantoms weren’t “real” they still had intense emotional reactions to these displays. Ladies fainting and gentlemen gasping in shock were not uncommon. They wanted both to be scientifically enlightened and metaphysically enchanted.

Terry Castle argues that such phantasmagoria “captured the paradox neatly,” since the magic lantern shows came to be “exercises in scientific demystification,” but the intent behind the shows was to “intensify the supernatural effect.” Castle claims that point of spectre-shows in the nineteenth century was to “mediate oddly between rational and irrational imperatives.”\(^{27}\) This is one of the reasons why the presentation of the child-on-lily became so popular. It mediated between rational and irrational imperatives, it walked the line between scientific and mystical, filling both needs of the Victorian viewers. They could observe the phenomenon as a scientific

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\(^{27}\) Castle, 32.
spectator with all its innovation and experimentation and have their desires for enchantment, and identity satiated simultaneously.

The use of theatricality in scientific display lent validity and social solidarity to scientific presentations, both in venues established for the distribution of scientific knowledge, and the theatre structures themselves. In a way, they became indistinguishable from each other. Larry Steward studies historic public perceptions of science and speaks to this social occurrence in clear and specific terms: “Performance and experimental philosophy were not exclusive domains. [This is] what is referred to as Britain’s Knowledge Economy… Experiment in the age of enlightenment was essentially a public performance; it was designed to be dramatic and entertaining.”28 This combination of distributing knowledge by, and through, theatrical spectacle, and scientific advancements enabling more spectacle to be had in the theater, was common subject matter for the most notable scientists of the day. Charles Darwin even considered the theater to be scientific observation, and experimentation. This was facilitated by the advances in new technologies that were a triumph for both the theater industry and the scientific field. Theaters were using new chemicals and machinery to stage things like “burning houses, collapsing bridges and train crashes, and explosions.”29 Since entertainment was scientific and science was becoming increasingly theatrical, the synthesis of elements that came together in the child-on-lily was perfectly timed and perfectly phrased in the visual cultural language so that observers could understand and enjoy. The performance of child-on-lily at Chatsworth was highly technological. Even the events leading up to the possibility of growing the *Victoria regia* were a showcase of technological prowess.

As mentioned earlier, when the seeds for the *Victoria regia* finally arrived in England, an intensely competitive scientific race began between the top botanic minds of the time to germinate them and grow them to maturity. This was a delicate and specific task. Sir William Hooker, The Director of The Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, tried to grow the Amazonian enigma since seeds had arrived on British soil. He managed to get it to sprout, but it never grew over two feet in diameter and never blossomed. Many thought it was impossible to grow to full size and maturity, but Joseph Paxton set his mind to the task. Unlike his colleagues at Kew Gardens, Paxton was able to create the perfect environment for the tropical plant, and technology was the key. He developed a special coal-heated water tank, filled the tank with freshwater, put a layer of nutritious mulch down on the bottom, and invented a mechanical apparatus to keep the water in constant motion to simulate river movement. Everything about the tank was designed to mimic the native habitat of the gigantic lily as closely as possible.

The tank was housed in a unique glasshouse, an innovative structure designed by Joseph Paxton that maximized natural light, with very few vertical supports to allow space for the vast container. It created the appropriate climate and humidity, and was a manufactured ecosphere that allowed not only growth but also the theatrical display of the “Queen of Aquatics.” It simulated the ecology of the Amazon, but also allowed interaction with the human-dominated ecology of Victorian Britain. In this way it was a point of ecological collision, both creating new connections between environments and demolishing established patterns of interaction.

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30 Historians discovered the main reason *Victoria regia* didn’t thrive under Hooker’s care was because the gardens at Kew were using Thames water, which was, for all intents and purposes, an open sewer at the time.

31 Holway, *The Flower of Empire*, 41.
Crowds came just as much for the technological wonder of being able to grow such a plant in England as they did for the visual delight of viewing the child-on-lily performance itself. The technology was part of the spectacle. But just as with traditional theatre of the time, not all technology in use was meant to be seen by the crowd. Certain equipment was meant to enhance the show secretly; many productions used backstage tricks to make magic onstage, and the production of child-on-lily was no exception. The little girl was small and light but the lily pad was unstable and difficult to balance on, and standing completely still for any length of time was a feat that the seven-year-old could not accomplish. A tray was ingeniously placed beneath the water under the leaf, and was held in place by a tall stool. The little girl could have stood on the
makeshift scaffolding had there been no water lily present. But it was present. It was present and the scaffolding was invisible and it was magical.\textsuperscript{32} The beautiful, tropical water giant, in its technologically brilliant biome, with the addition of its ethereal passenger, captured the hearts and minds of thousands.

Exotic Exhibitionism

Exotic plant specimens like the \textit{Victoria regia}, along with the ability to grow them, symbolized prestige and status. Exotic animals and people were used in much the same way. Status was inherently useless unless others could see it, observe it, and applaud it. Exhibition and demonstration, which I contend are both forms of theatre, became instrumental to bridging this gap, and Victorians became extremely adept at wielding the theatre of scientific exhibitionism.

Paul Greenhalgh talks about the Victorian enthusiasm for displays and exhibitions as being connected to their Imperial national identity.\textsuperscript{33} He goes even further to say that showing foreign acquisitions was vitally important to the British, even more so than for their European rivals. Greenhalgh claims that British exhibition and display of wealth, “were more thoroughly conceived,” and, “the range of messages they carried were [more] extensive and subtly constructed.”\textsuperscript{34} These displays were an integral part of the British Empire’s image, a vital part of how they conceived of themselves as a nation, as \textit{the} superior nation.

With this extreme emphasis on scientific imperial exhibitions, is it any wonder that exhibitions became more and more theatrical? The obsession with the child-on-lily was not

\textsuperscript{32} Holway, \textit{The Flower of Empire}, 222.
\textsuperscript{34} Greenhalgh, 63.
conceived in a vacuum. Sarah Baartman, a woman from the Khoikhoi tribe known as “the Venus Hottentot,” was taken from her home in Africa and exhibited on tour. The attraction? Her alterity. Crowds would pay to walk into the space where she stood practically naked, to observe her large buttocks for themselves. Sarah had been brought to England to display, the claim to “scientific curiosity” thinly veiling and normalizing the cruel reality of the freak show. Sadiah Qureshi articulates this phenomenon in her article about the display of Sara Baartman, both during her life and after her death. Qureshi notes,

> Flora, fauna and people were all commodities to be collected. The agricultural relevance of botanical knowledge fuelled nationalist interest in plants, whilst animals caged in menageries provided the public with entertainment and evidence of imperial success….Sara Baartman arrived on England’s shores within this traffic of animals, plants and people destined for display as objects representing colonial expansion and as a means of economic gain; she served as both an imperial success and a prized specimen.35

The display of Sarah Baartman happened decades before the performance of child-on-lily, setting the stage for the exhibition of the “other,” whether the exhibitions were human, animal, or botanical imports. Exotic animals had been brought to England as plunder of war or as status symbols for hundreds of years. Zoos and menageries had always been the privilege of the prosperous. New and specifically relevant to the nineteenth century were public botanical gardens, or vegetal zoos. They were places where imperial display and scientific progress were effortlessly combined. They gained significant popularity and public interest in the years leading up to, and during, Victoria’s reign.

Victorian theatre audiences made up the same demographic that attended scientific displays, and the events were often even priced similarly. Victorians wanted their entertainment

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to include intimacy and invention, technology and emotion, spectacle and science. These paradoxical demands gratified their need for the factual, the thrilling, and the technologically cutting edge. The combined interest in science, technology, and theatricality is what allowed the extreme cultural interest surrounding the performance of child-on-lily.

One historian remarks that Joseph Paxton “turned the tableau into a coup de theatre,” complete with the technological wonders that accompanied sensational theatre of the time, and it drew thousands to “gaze and sigh,” as the performance was repeated again and again.36 The exhibition had all the right ingredients: half science, half theatre, wholly spectacular, and entirely imperial.

The nearly 9,000 newspaper articles that were published about the Victoria regia between the years 1840-1890 speak to the child-on-lily’s popularity. The stories appeared everywhere from renowned London papers to remote areas of the British Empire. Giving the lily titles such as “The Vegetable Wonder,” “Luxuriant Flower,” and “Queen of Lilies,” they described the plant as “resplendent,” and “marvelous.” Accounts in the newspapers often praised those who found, “captured,” and grew the plant, and included poetic and highly detailed effusions, like the ones found in this excerpt from a poem published in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph:

Victoria regia! fitly thy rare claim
To peerless honour science hath allowed;
For thou art worthy of thy royal name;
Nor, in the world-wide range of claimants proud,
Blooms one so meet to stand by Flora’s throne,
As thou, rare stranger, from the torrid zone.

Well might the traveler stand in fix’d amaze
When first, in that clear, blazing tropic noon,
Thy marvellous size and beauty caught his gaze,
On fair Guiana forest-hid lagoon;
For not even Hope had ventured to portray,

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36 Holway, Flower of Empire, 223.
The *signal triumph* of that New Year’s Day.

Such was thy native state: how brief a time
*Sufficed to bring thee, as a treasure rare,*
*To unfold thy splendors in a temperate clime,*
*Nurs’d by our English florists’ curious care:*
Wealth lavished to secure in thy behoof,
Large tank, warm rippled water, crystal roof.37

Public accounts romanticized the discovery of the queenly plant, linking the origin story to the presentation, pointing out the magnificence of having such a tropical treasure available at home. Even poetic descriptions, like the ones in the poem above, referenced the technical and scientific prowess required to obtain the lily and grow it in the far-removed sovereign nation. The constructed environment was as much a part of the performance as the child and lily. The manufactured ecosphere was not only necessary for life and growth of the magnificent plant at the heart of the botanical-theatrical event but it provided a set, a stage, a space in which to present the entire display. Richard Schechner discusses ecological and theatrical environments as “active players” in creating meaning with other performance elements.38

The 6th Duke of Devonshire remarked that, “all the world comes to look at the lily,” while Paxton himself said, “Nothing I believe has caused so much stir in the fashionable world and also the world of gardening.”39 The use of theatricality lent validity and social solidarity to scientific presentations, both in venues established for the distribution of scientific knowledge and in the theatre structures themselves. In certain ways scientific displays and theatrical productions became indistinguishable from each other. Historical researcher of botanical gardens

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37 “To the Victoria Regia, Florentius,” *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, September 13, 1862. Emphasis added. This selection is part of a much longer poem, which is fascinating and is helpful in understanding the true cultural craze surrounding the lily at this time.
Ray Desmond stated, “Experiment was essentially a public performance; it was designed to be dramatic and entertaining.”\textsuperscript{40} The aim of theatrical scientific display was increased audience understanding of the subject matter through engaging with the spectacular. Behavioral scientists were first to enact this kind of theatrical display, but soon most disciplines, including botany, were engaging with these practices.

The obsession with plants, especially beautiful plants, in the Victorian Era is well known, but the particular enthusiasm for this lily, with this child on it, was more intense than the latest effusion over new delphiniums at Kew, or which flowers were best for evening wear. The enamored public reaction spread quickly, the popularity and beauty of the lily, along with the iconic little girl born up out of the water on its crimson-rimmed leaves, became a symbol. These two performers became attached both physically, through the connection of tiny shoe to giant leaf, and symbolically through the marriage of their respective, individual meanings to synthesize a new significance, a social and cultural code that required both performers to represent.

Inherent Imperialism

The moment where Annie was able to step onto the \textit{Victoria regia} leaf had been years in the making. The events leading up to the lily’s growth and display at Chatsworth included the investment of thousands of British pounds, teams of geographers and scientists, many ocean voyages, manipulation of indigenous peoples, deep jungle exploration, and significant advances in technology.

\textsuperscript{40} Stewart, \textit{The Circulation of Knowledge}, 24.
Social shifts during Industrialization in the Victorian era caused radical changes in the English populace’s view of themselves, their nation, the world, and natural resources. Masses of the rural poor moved into crowded, urban housing looking for work in factories and sweatshops. Nature became a delineated construct, a luxury, a fantasy, and a right. Flowers became not only ornamental, but linguistic. Floriography was a discreet way to send messages back and forth. You could inform someone of your secret love or deep hatred with the right bouquet. Oscar Wilde famously asked his supporters and friends to wear green carnations, after he both indicated, and denied, they were a symbol of homosexuality. Flowers were the Victorian equivalent of the modern emoticons, layering complex and subtle emotion on the indicated meaning.

Parks and gardens were also reimagined during this time. The Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew were a literal hot house for public opinion and class conflict. Newspapers published hundreds of articles detailing the public interactions with the garden, some documenting the protests surrounding opening hours and administration and others outlining Kew’s landscaping choices and voicing views about the aesthetic qualities of plants chosen. One article from 1859 makes this obsession plain, claiming that “the flower gardens at Kew were the great social question round London all this summer.” If the great social questions of London revolved around flowers, the immense popularity of the *Victoria regia* in the performance with Annie Paxton seems to be perfectly aligned with public interests.

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Public gardens were significant spaces for performing social protest, claiming social rights, and implementing social reform. Historian Donal P. McCracken states that the making of parks and gardens for pleasure and “edutainment” was increased by the growing awareness of the “wider world.” He claims the general public was fascinated with the treasures of other lands, and that through the expansion of the empire and the conquest of other nations and the importing of their most valuable and interesting treasures “brought home to Europeans the diversity of the world’s cultures and climates and of its fauna and flora.” The concept of bringing exotic treasures home for the powerful cultural messaging of owning the exotic was a large contributor to the interest surrounding the *Victoria regia*.

Kew Gardens was a significant member of the empire’s worldwide ecological web. The botanical gardens were an investment in national interests, and the gardens presented spectacular botanical achievements for the public pleasure. When Queen Victoria gifted Kew to the nation in 1840, the *pas de deux* between scientific experimentation and public entertainment on the stage of the garden began in earnest. The development of the gardens during this time, and the public action surrounding them have prompted modern scholars to draw specific connections between the expansion of Kew and the “flowering of Victoriana,” or the solidification of Victorian identity and culture.

The botanical gardens were a hub for imperial expansion during this time. Scientists were able to examine and distribute world-changing plants such as rubber, coffee, tobacco, cocoa and

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45 Donal P. McCracken, *Gardens of Empire* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1997),
cotton. If crops were deemed profitable they were sent to colonial locations throughout the empire. Locations were determined based on which climates would be suitable for the crops and where human labor was easily available. The Royal Gardens at Kew also functioned as the nerve-center for a much larger network of botanical gardens worldwide. At one time the British Empire had over 100 colonial botanic gardens, and they were “as much a part of British imperialism as were the feats of the Royal Navy.” Exotic floral exhibitions embodied not just a collection of plants, but an entire structure whereby the British government ruled the world. Plants were power. All classes were exposed to this coded meaning, either through intellectually elite implication, or through the visual material spectacle of the garden’s wonders.

It was this garden that made the *Victoria regia* water lily truly accessible to the wider public. When Joseph Paxton built the crystal house for the lily, he not only built a one-of-a-kind glasshouse, but the most innovative growing tank seen in the western world. Sir William Hooker built a similar structure, the Victoria House, in 1851, but the new glasshouse was built specifically to house the Royal Water Lily. It is still home to a living specimen of *Victoria regia*, now known as *Victoria amazonica*, to this day. I went there and saw it again a few months ago and marveled at the size, the heft, the beauty and the “otherness” of it. I must admit I was tempted to seize a small child next to me in a stroller and place him on it, just to recreate history. I refrained, with effort, but my imagination filled the void left by good behavior. In my mind’s eye I saw Annie Paxton, Victorian pixie-child, gingerly perched on the largest of the floating leaves.

The theatrical exhibit of child-on-lily subtly satisfied Victorian yearnings for place, identity, and role in the empire and in the world. The lily was a signifier of the exotic, the child a

signifier of the domestic. This botanical presentation acted out the British Empire’s superior status, boosted by the “uncivilized” world and its resources. The water lily had been taken from its natural habitat, transported across the ocean, grown in a manipulated environment and forced to perform a role. It became a specimen/spectacle. The little girl had been taken out of her natural habitat, dressed as a magical creature, displayed on the floating leaf and taught to perform her role. She became a specimen/spectacle as well. The interaction between these two organisms in this theatrical exhibition synthesized a culturally rich portrayal of imperialism.

The performance at Chatsworth was powerful because it was a living, breathing representation. The costumes, the lighting, and most importantly the actors involved were a physical manifestation of an empire that was powerful enough to reach into heart of the uncultivated world, pluck out the exotic treasures found there and bring them back to the motherland. It was both performance of, and proof of, power.

Nineteenth century British theatre is a rabbit hole with many delightful twists and turns, landing in categories such as: animals on stage, realism, melodrama, child actors, spectacular effects, society comedies, and pantomimes. These were exciting and experimental times. There were daring water rescues by brave canine companions, large casts filled with only young children as actors and dancers, women shown on stage with complex thoughts and feelings, shocking explosions, crashes and fires, and the incredibly influential invention of the mighty

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limelight. Victorians were accustomed to seeing miraculous things, they were common spectators of the fantastic facilitated by the scientific. All they saw in either scientific display or theatrical presentation was linked to the subtle ideologies of the empire having access to “the best” of everything.

Iwan Morus researches Victorian scientific culture and he argues that because of the “emergence of a new historiography of visual culture,” we now understand that “looking at something is not a culturally neutral act,” and suggests that interrogation of daily seeing practices such as “going to an exhibition, or watching a show” are most helpful because they are an integral part of the learned cultural behaviors and ideologies surrounding looking. When the Victorians went to these types of scientific spectacles, or theatrical exhibitions they were, “being taught how to see science,” and to see themselves as a part of the society that produced such wonders.

Citizens of the Queen’s Empire were expected to engage with scientific content and philosophies in the appropriate way. Imperial presentations were “a way of producing spectacular effects that demonstrated both the workings of nature and the power of the showman to control nature.” The showman acted as both a participant in the performance and a symbol of the relationship between civilization and nature. This is particularly significant when we consider what material circumstances made these kinds of displays possible. The Industrial Revolution, colonial expansion, monetization of scientific invention, and the establishment of imperialism were the forces at work behind any exhibition of the technological and exotic. Morus also speaks

to this when he says, “[All] forms of scientific showmanship were occasions for Victorians to celebrate the superiority of their industrial [and imperial] culture.”

The physical enacting of cultural ideologies inherent in the child on lily is what made it so irresistible and infectious to the public. The child on the lily embodied the conceptual grandeur of the British Empire in a mystical, accessible, and even adorable way. The ideas would have been both clear to the observer, yet nearly undetectable, due to societal saturation. What became clear when re-enactment after re-enactment drew enormous crowds of spectators was that the performance was more significant to the masses than the flower alone. To misquote Shakespeare, “the dis-play was the thing.” The reality of the little girl and exotic plant interacting with each other, the living visual before them, the sensations of heat and humidity on the skin, the dimmed lights, the unseen but significant scaffolding supporting the lily underneath the water, the innovative technology that made the performance possible were all parts of the whole - all the right ingredients. In fact, the context, the ecological system, surrounding this performance was similar to the scaffolding under the water. The web connecting performance to technology, competition, colonialism, politics, money, the need to juxtapose the “other,” and the owning of the exotic as the ultimate luxury. It was all wrapped up in the performance, informing it, giving it weight and meaning. The drama of imperialism was manifest in the scientific spectacle.

51 Morus, Seeing and Believing Science, 110.
52 Word play off the original text, “The play’s the thing,” said by Hamlet, in his determination to prove that his uncle murdered his father, making the play, the embodied representation, the critical ingredient in his plot for exposure and revenge.
Conclusion

Two years after the child-on-lily phenomenon, Joseph Paxton was selected to be the architect for the building to house the first World’s Fair in London. The event came to be known as the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the building Joseph Paxton designed after the *Victoria regia* would go down in history as The Crystal Palace. The Crystal Palace was made of a lattice of steel with glass panels in between. It was structurally inspired by the underside of the Royal Water Lily, which Paxton referred to as a “natural feat of engineering.” The lily had a system of ridges and thick veins, which supported the flat, dish-like top of the water lily, enabling it to hold relatively large amounts of weight on its surface (i.e.: a seven-year-old child and later even adults) with stabilizing equipment. Paxton had used the lily as architectural inspiration once before when building the lily house at Chatsworth. The glass structure had been a success, and had fewer vertical supports than other models, allowing maximum tank size for growing the flower.

When it came to housing the Great Exhibition, over 200 plans by well-known architects were submitted; most of them had been rejected because they were too “unpleasant” for a well-loved public park, and all of the other plans required several ancient and beloved trees to be cut down to make way for the building. Joseph Paxton drew his idea on a piece of blotting paper and solved all these issues. The public loved the look of the Crystal Palace, it was built in only six months, it was meant to be taken apart and removed after the festivities were over, and it housed the precious trees without harm, encasing them in, effectually, a giant conservatory meant for their continued growth. The building was enormous, covering eighteen square acres and comprised of 293,655 panes of glass, 330 huge iron columns, and 24 miles of gutters. It was truly

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53 Holway, *The Flower of Empire*, 231.
a show of Britain's prestige and world-dominance, all inspired by the royal lily, the “Vegetable Wonder” herself. Even Dickens said the Crystal Palace arose from the *Victoria regia* “as consequently as oaks grow from acorns.”

Figure 3: A young man holds an enormous *Victoria regia* pad up; it is larger than the man. The plant is credited with having inspired Sir Joseph Paxton to construct Crystal Palace. (Photo by © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images)

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Figure 4: Drawing of exterior of the Crystal Palace

Figure 5: Full drawing of crystal palace and landscape in Hyde Park, London, 1851.
Beautiful and imposing, the structure was a byproduct of a craze that, by the time of the World’s Fair, was long-established: a craze fueled by a little girl standing on a giant lily pad with lights and an audience.

The ecological aspects that made the performance of child-on-lily possible and popular turned out to be just as fascinating as the performance itself. The ecosystem of Imperial Britain was actually a parasitic system pulling resources through its arms all over the world, bringing them home in the form of exotic exhibitions, scientific technology, and theatrical display. The plant itself executed its own biological role, flowering and flourishing in a constructed environment, in a foreign land. It also functioned the role that was demanded of it by society, scientists, and aristocrats alike. It co-acted the imperial play scripted for it, with its dainty human partner.

The white English child—innocent, lovely, and dressed as a magical creature—was set on top of this fiercely beautiful, wild, and exotic plant, in effect taming it, domesticating it, making the alien Amazon, with sharp spines and flowers larger than a man’s head a child’s plaything; a pedestal on which she stood quite safely and demurely for the entertainment and edification of the masses. It synthesized many attitudes and cultural values into one cohesive social and political representation.

With the lights, costume, audience, director, script, and repeat performances by popular demand, the plant-based production of child-on-lily is on par with any great play. The plant-based theatrics of this era deserve more scrutiny from historians and scholars, but in this case the theatrical nature, and cultural significance, of the event can’t be denied. The child-on-lily is not only something to look back at and learn from, it is a jumping off point for the legitimacy and
validation of plant-based theatre as a means of cultural exploration in historical research, contemporary analysis, and future practice.
Bibliography


