“[I]f only the first four stanzas survived, we might now be lamenting the lost Jane Austen of the fifteenth century,” C. S. Lewis remarked of the author of The Assembly of Ladies, a late fifteenth-century narrative poem. Implied, of course, was his judgment that the author was unable to sustain the quality of her opening lines; on the other hand, he has conceded the lines themselves to be exceptional. Indeed, later in the same paragraph he acknowledges that “the detail of the poem shows powers akin to genius,” but its perceived failure in allegorical treatment leads him to say that as an allegory, “it is as silly a poem as a man could find in a year’s reading.” Significantly, Lewis thought the author to be a woman. This is a matter of no small consequence: most scholars of the succeeding decades balked at the theory of a female author despite the fact that the narrator refers to herself as the author of “this booke,” that the poem survives in three manuscript compilations several of whose lengthy poems deal largely with women’s experience, involve women narrators, address a female audience, female eloquence, female choice, and a significant portion of whose contents appear in a related manuscript thought to be a woman’s anthology, many of whose lyrics were copied and possibly composed by women of prominent Derbyshire families. (It is a comment on our contemporary cultural disposition that while we have accepted Chaucer’s fictional persona as legitimizing his authorship of the Canterbury Tales and we have no quarrel with Will’s fictional persona in Piers Plowman as pointing to William Langland, we still fret over and cavil at assigning female authorship to a fictional persona who pointedly states that she “made this book”). Its early history of commentary and criticism has made this poem one of the most underrated and misunderstood texts among those medieval works thought to
be written either for women or by a woman (illustrating thereby the con-
sequences of giving priority to dominant [masculinist] discourses that
determine genre expectations and narrative legitimacy).  

The fact was (and is) that this verse narrative is very much a woman’s
book with a woman’s agenda. Indeed, it is remarkable as the first poetic
narrative attempt by an English female author not only to comment
on women’s public reality but also to recover women’s experience by
challenging the most popular representation of women’s private love
relationships with men, the medieval garden, the classic locus of courtly
(and spiritual) love. The challenge is playful, even mischievous, and clev-
erly subversive, with an undercurrent of a social and political critique.
Making the garden her site of rebellion is a brilliant move because gar-
dens never quite lost their early association with the “fall” of humankind,
and more particularly their association with female temptation, female
deception, and, especially, female untoward desire for knowledge. The
opening line raises the challenge immediately. Instead of using the clas-

cic trope of the “fresh season” to set the courtly love scene, the narrator
opens with “In Septembre, at fallyng of the leef,/ The fressh season was
al to-gydre done/ And of the corn was gadred in the sheef;” (ll. 1–3).

The use of autumn as a setting is itself striking. Surviving English courtly
love narratives do not feature it, although love lyrics do. What purpose
would the poet have in adopting the trope of harvest, the dying of the
year, the same well-noted season when the Pearl poet’s narrator despair-
ingly throws himself on the grave of his dead daughter, and the same
season when Gawain sadly leaves Arthur’s court and begins his journey
to meet his death? She certainly knew that the rhetorical trope of “fresh
season” or “spring” was, famously, the metaphor that holds Nature and
Love as inextricably bound together as though the appearance of one was
the condition for the other. Her intention was, I think, to underscore the
temporality of love, to insist that love is as naturally yoked with death
as it is with new life and spring; indeed, that the vocabulary of one is
interchangeable with the vocabulary of the other. In the midst of sing-
ing about a heady new love medieval love lyrics fairly burst to deplore
love’s troubling relationship with nature and death. Love is: “Like bud
that blooms and withers soon;/ Like passing day that ends in rain.” Or
again, “Spring’s about with love again,/ With blossom and with birds’
refrain” “Worms beneath the ground make love;/ Women flaunt their
pride above—/ The spring becomes them well.” And lest we miss the
aesthetic effect of her invoking a season of faltering energies as a frame for
the theme of love, she directly begins a dismantling of the “emblematic
epistemology” of pleasure gardens; i.e., the garden as a complex semi-
otic system, whose plants, architecture, rivers, and arbors move beyond