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Strange Science

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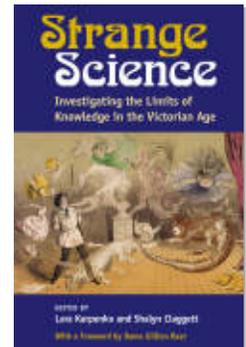
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CHAPTER 4

Killer Plants of the Late Nineteenth Century

Elizabeth Chang



How might a fictional plant consume a fictional person in the nineteenth century? An unwary traveler could stumble against a trunk oozing poisonous sap while exploring a British tropical colony. A collector of exotic plants might be ensnared in his London conservatory by a choice new acquisition. And there remained always the possibility that Martian attackers could introduce carnivorous tendrils while carrying out an invasion of earth. Such attacks appeared in all kinds of Victorian fiction resistant to realism, including the popular subgenres of scientific romance, gothic horror, and colonial adventure. The obvious follow-up question—*why* might a fictional plant consume a fictional person in the nineteenth century?—has a more complicated answer. While the urgency of the plant’s appetite matches the threatening taste for British flesh displayed by other monsters of the era, whether inanimate, animate, or reanimated, the idea that a plant could pursue an appetite at all defied distinctions between forms of organic life. As Henry Mayhew establishes in the final volume of *London Labour and the London Poor* (1862), “The essential quality of an animal is that it seeks its own living, whereas a vegetable has its living brought to it.”¹ Fiction investigating the possibility of vegetables seeking their own living—appearing in novels, short stories, and “traveller’s tales” for general audiences and avid botanists

alike—therefore explored several horrors at once: first, that the expanding nineteenth-century British natural world opened up new and unexpected plant dangers, second, a plant could be *intentionally* dangerous, and third, that a plant could have any kind of intentions at all.²

This essay, then, is one small piece of the much larger story of nineteenth-century British literature's changing engagement with the natural world. In ways that many critics have noted, the Victorian era's realist authors, evolutionary thinkers, natural theologians, photographers, children's fabulists, botanical illustrators, sensation novelists, among many more, all found particular and signature ways to write about natural conditions both well known and newly known. Further, the new varieties of prose fiction and nonfiction that these writers and artists produced drew from each other in complex ways across generic divisions. Darwin and the novelists conversed through both form and content, explorers from Mungo Park to Francis Younghusband gave inspiration to authors of adventure tales, and, closer to home, "the eminence of the detail" linked older but persistent practices of natural description to the minutiae-laden plots of provincial novels, as Amy King has shown.³ In many ways, then, literature of the Victorian era, from science writing to realist fiction, depended on key aspects of narrative—including characterization, setting, and descriptive and figurative language—to effect an important development. Readers of nineteenth-century fiction came to understand the natural world itself as a narrative, which could be comprehended and explained especially well using the elements of narrative.

Fringe fiction, of course, took this understanding to its extreme. Unhitched from conventions of realist representation, antimimetic fiction of the late nineteenth century used familiar narrative techniques to tell new stories of worlds much like the Victorian reader's own, with certain striking exceptions—the existence of vampires, perhaps, or the invention of time machines. These works sought to invoke a world beyond the constraints of natural laws, while always emphasizing an inevitable return to the world that those laws actually governed. Journeys to the center of the earth, to the jungles of South America, or to the depraved corners of London's East End all began with an affirmation of the scientific principles and rhetoric that the fiction would then fantastically invert and rearrange. Yet however far-ranging these narratives became, they shared a foundational premise with the more serious writing of the era described above: that the natural world could not always be comprehended in its individuality or its variety using old methods, and

instead required new narrative techniques to delineate its bounds. This is especially true, I contend, when we look closely at pseudoscientific stories of carnivorous plants. While the relations between human and animal monsters has been of critical interest for some time, only recently have notions of plant sentience and intentionality directed literary or philosophical investigations.⁴

These unusual narratives are worth looking at further, however, because they compel us to ask questions about what plants can do. Stories of strange plants with anthropomorphic qualities borrowed rhetorical conventions from science writing to explain how their vegetable protagonists evolved over time and acclimatized across space. But they also boldly rewrote scientific conventions to allow a tree the carnivorous impulses of a basilisk or the higher intelligence of man himself. In this chapter, I will examine genre fiction of the late nineteenth century inspired by (though hardly faithful to) the conventions of serious scientific writing in order to follow the Victorians' developing argument for the existence of a plant-based consciousness—or more precisely, an idea of consciousness that does not explicitly exclude the possibility of plants. The challenges in such presuppositions of nonexclusion are multiple. For one, writers of fiction about conscious plants had to explain how such consciousness could be determined in the first place. For another, these fictions had also to acknowledge the variables of scale and collectivity when aligning consciousness with different kinds of plant life—fungi, forests, parasitic vines—that did not match anthropomorphic definitions of individual identity. In describing the activities of “man-eating trees,” “strange orchids,” and “plants that fight,” this fiction used these problematic cultivars and their aggression against human characters to expand beyond the limits of realism. Plants, particularly because of their seeming resistance to fictional modes, literally ground fiction in organic experience, making their presence in realist fiction necessary to affirm diegetic *bona fides*. And yet to admit plants as narrative elements with any degree of agency is to defy the standard parameters by which we understand narrative fiction to operate. A plant with narrative agency radically alters notions about sentience, mobility, reproduction, and representation—not the least by blurring distinctions between character and setting.

Thus all kinds of plants that appear in fiction can work as thought experiments; evidence of environmental and aesthetic conditions that ensure that conditions within the narrative either do or do not cohere with the reader's own organic surroundings. The carnivorous plant takes

this experiment further. When found in British fiction set abroad, the malevolent vegetable proposes a distributed consciousness that contravenes established relations between subject and background, but also makes it more possible to understand a hostile colonial environment as deliberately resistant and in need of broadly intrusive management or even destruction. When entering the domestic British sphere—as a commodity, treasure, stowaway, or weapon—the threatening plant’s violent subversion of the imposed relationship between cultivated and cultivator not only disrupts carefully wrought alliances between humans and plants, but also suggests a disruption or revision to the notion of cultivation itself as a temporally and materially discrete process—plants may do their own cultivating, against and apart from human purpose, in a manner that both builds on and reframes better-understood linkages between female cultivation and horticultural work.⁵

Whereas late-century interest in plants has been less attended to—with Darwin’s botanical writings, for example, overshadowed by his work on evolutionary theory—the Victorian discussion of plants in all their forms was vigorous, varied, and conceptually distinct from its predecessors, as this chapter will suggest. In particular, Victorian carnivorous plant fictions used popular narrative forms—the adventure novel, the mystery, the gothic horror text—to describe this new set of relationships between plants and the humans who grew them, consumed them, lived with them, and thought through them. This change was both responsive to and supportive of corresponding shifts in horticulture, botany, garden and landscape design, environmental science, natural history, and ecological consciousness taking place in the world beyond the page, which make the surrounding context for the specific changes discussed in this chapter.

Despite being only a slight piece of this larger context, man-eating plant fiction has important implications for the narrative possibilities open to a late-Victorian reading public poised on the edge of radical changes in both literary and environmental history. These changes cannot be separated from the high-water mark of imperial expansion also achieved at this time, nor from the colonial metropole’s engagements with the environments of distant territories within and without the empire proper. Indeed, as multiple historians have pointed out, the expansion of the British empire was inextricably combined with environmental change, and the final years of the nineteenth century marked the strongest alignment yet between imperial expansion and ecological alteration.⁶ In addition to the primary critical paradigms

shaping our reading of fin de siècle literature—of the imperial gothic, of degeneration, of professionalism, of catastrophe—we can add the fictional accommodation of varieties of nonnative biological, and particularly botanical, life.⁷

Thus it is clear that plants helped late Victorian readers think about themselves and their world, in all its political, economic, and scientific expanses. Certainly Victorian empire extended itself along botanical lines in multiple ways, and in all cases, plants were increasingly understood as mobile, malleable agents of empire that enacted significant revisions in the landscape even as human activities significantly revised plant specimens and communities as well.⁸ This apparently newfound plant mobility drives one interpretation of fictions about carnivorous plants: that they are allegories of the bad effects of British colonial rapaciousness in which the landscape, for once, can actually fight back against resource extraction and exploitation. However, as critics of the teleological history of plant exchanges have pointed out, environments have long been reshaped by exchanges taking place apart from the European botanical venture, so perhaps the rapacious colonizer is in this case as interested in justifying his own influence as he is in demonizing the native flora.⁹

So in addition to these stagings and restagings of the colonial encounter, we can also consider man-eating plant fictions as narrative recountings of a profound ontological inquiry. The killer plants in these stories represent threatening advancements in the ability of plants to connect with humans in a roughly equivalent way; something Robert Mitchell has termed in Romantic literature “cryptogamia” or “seduction of the human by . . . the strange and dark life of vegetation.”¹⁰ As opposed to conservationist impulses that have characterized many ecocritical readings of nineteenth-century literature, Mitchell suggests that such cryptogamia is at heart a new and transformative impulse—describing an interspecies love affair unachievable without permanent alteration on both sides.¹¹ Jumping ahead to the close of the nineteenth century, when Victorian botanical fictions told darker tales than Wordsworth’s daffodils or Shelley’s sensitive plants, we find that the alien nature of the plant continues to challenge the gap between vegetable and human through narrative.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will review the ways that plants were grudgingly awarded agency in Victorian fiction, not by virtue of their perceived suffering, but instead through fantasies of the suffering they could inflict. Scientific writing on insectivorous plants and cryptogamic fungi advanced in parallel with fictions of man-eating trees and

alien red weeds, with both allowing, to greater and lesser degree, the derived intentionality of the vegetable kingdom to serve as evidence of an active and directive consciousness available somehow, though in ways not necessarily evident to humans. The search for this evidence ranges through standard colonial adventures like Frank Aubrey's *The Devil Tree of El Dorado* (1897) and later results in the most challenging and interesting fiction of this kind, produced by William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, and H. G. Wells. Critical readings of these stories, I propose, can also shift the way we consider other genre authors of the end of the century, whether H. Rider Haggard or Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson or Bram Stoker, or even modernist forerunners Rudyard Kipling or Joseph Conrad. For all of these authors, and for countless others who also contributed works of antirealist romance, the major problem of fiction was how to perceive and understand the nature of another, particularly when that other may be self-replicating, divided, multiple, obscured, invisible, or otherwise fractured and dispersed. At the edge of modernism, fiction sought new ways to apprehend and explain the operations of an external subjectivity. Thinking about the possible thoughts of plants helped such writers work through difficulties of obscure and fractured consciousness by demonstrating just how obscure and how fractured such external subjectivities could be. Killer plant fictions depended on a concern (however sensationalized) for discernable traces of subjectivity across the foreign and colonized worlds and beyond the bounds of the human or animal body. To not consider the specific influence of the vegetable world in the rising genre of anti-realist fiction is to ignore a significant piece of that genre's foundation. It is also to set aside the relevance of late-century attention to plants and plant communities as a serious concern for both art, science, and the nascent interdisciplinary field of ecology.

That the first fifty years of the nineteenth century entirely reshaped the ordinary Briton's understanding of global plant life is by now a critical commonplace. From organizations like the (later Royal) Horticultural Society, periodicals like *Gardener's Magazine* and *Gardener's Chronicle*, manuals like *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* (1838), professional horticulturalists like John Lindley, and gardening experts like John and Jane Loudon and Joseph Paxton, countless amateurs learned to take seriously the study, collection, and display of plants on a broad scale.¹² Despite significant constraints of gender and class, plant appreciation and cultivation was a matter of widespread general interest and knowledge by the later nineteenth century, and authors both high- and low-

brow could deploy a range of references to plants foreign and domestic with the confidence that their readers could follow their nuances. With greater knowledge of plant names and appearances, references made to specific plants, as individual specimens, carried an epistemological heft distinguishing them from a more generally undifferentiated landscape, background, or setting. Victorian readers were taught by nonfiction and fiction alike to think seriously about their plants and the possibilities of their cultivation, in the same way that they might think about children, pets, or colonized subjects.

Of course, these are amplifications rather than inventions. Long before the publication of Charles Darwin's works *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) and *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1877), natural theology had helped readers consider the possibility that the plants they grew might have abilities or even desires unknown to their cultivator. James Tupper's *An Essay on the Probability of Sensation in Vegetables* (1811) opines that a benevolent Creator would surely "bestow upon vegetables a capacity to enjoy their own state of life,"¹³ while George Towers, writing in the *Gardener's Magazine* in 1833, suggests only half-facetiously that a "plant is, *bona fide*, an organized being, endowed with sensitive life to a greater or lesser extent."¹⁴

Darwin's volumes, however, generated controversy for the wholly serious overlap they seemed to imply between the automatic responses of plants through actions like phototropism and the intentional responses of a conscious being. This despite Darwin's defensive claim that his general use of the term "sensitive" throughout *Insectivorous Plants* was not meant to imply consciousness but merely intended to describe the excitable glands and tentacles of the insectivorous plants he described. As he explains: "Strictly speaking, the glands ought to be called irritable, as the term sensitive generally implies consciousness; but no one supposes that the Sensitive-plant is conscious, and as I have found the term convenient, I shall use it without scruple."¹⁵ As historians of science have pointed out, Darwin's language links him to earlier, discredited experimentation on photo- and gravitropism and sensitivity in plants that posited that such reactions established a chain of association between plant and animal behavior and vitalism.¹⁶ Even more troubling to fellow scientists were the assertions of Darwin's German follower Ernst Haeckel, who, under the aegis of scientific monism, concluded that since the movements of the sensitive plants are "strikingly similar to the movements of the lower animal forms: whoever ascribes consciousness to the latter cannot refuse it to such vegetal forms."¹⁷

For indeed, despite the scruples of established science, many were ready to suppose that a plant could be conscious and that consciousness and even morality could be implied from plant movement. H. Rider Haggard, a prolific and enthusiastic gardener and agricultural writer when not chronicling the adventures of Allan Quartermain (*A Farmer's Year* [1899], *Rural England* [1902], *A Gardener's Year* [1905]), describes an unusual Sundew specimen in his collection as a “vegetable butcher,” and continues:

To my mind, its unpleasant habits show in a very striking manner how real, if subtle, is the connection between the animal and the vegetable world, for here we have a plant actually feeding on the living creatures that it has caught, and, what is more, baiting its traps in order to catch them. Is there, then, so wide a gulf between it and *homo sapiens*, who does precisely the same thing and lives thereby? We think nothing of putting this law of death—Nature's hideous scheme—in motion for our own profit, but when a wretched little plant imitates our exalted example, the effect is uncanny.¹⁸

The step forward made here from plant sensitivity to plant malevolence was long anticipated, as Theresa Kelly has shown in her discussion of Erasmus Darwin's consideration of the venomous Upas tree.¹⁹ Haggard's move to the propositional sphere (“Is there, then . . .”) may seem particularly apt for a writer of fantastic fiction, but he was certainly not the only writer to wonder if the strong distinction between plant “habits” and human actions might in fact be only a perceptual construct.²⁰

The carnivorous sundew also attracted members of the aesthetic and decadent movement, a group predisposed to favor unsettling interchanges between plant and animal life.²¹ Algernon Swinburne's poem “The Sundew” (1862) similarly reflects on the ontological proximity between humans and plants: “You call it sundew; how it grows / If with its colour it have breath, / If life taste sweet to it, if death / Pain its soft petal, no man knows: / Man has no sight or sense that saith” (ll. 26–30).²² Later, Grant Allen, a science writer of some influence before his blossoming as an author of detective and New Woman fiction, drew on both Darwin and Swinburne in calling the plant “atrociously and deliberately wicked” in his 1884 article “Queer Flowers,” written for the *Cornhill Magazine*.²³ Allen frames the sundew's description in a larger reflection on the horrors of possible plant sentience, writing, “There is something too awful and appalling in this contest of the unconscious

and insentient with the living and feeling, of a lower vegetative form of life with a higher animated form,” continuing, “There seems to be a sort of fiendish impersonal cruelty about its action which sadly militates against all our pretty platitudes about the beauty and perfection of living beings.”²⁴ Allen’s distress over the sundew inverts customary directions of sympathy by doubly deploying “murderous propensities.”²⁵ The sundew itself is actively cruel in seeking out its insect prey, but the sundew’s cruelty is also metaphorically active, “militating” its way into conventional discourse and disrupting the familiar systems of figurative language. In both regards, the sundew, an “inconspicuous small weed” with “literary and scientific honours . . . heaped upon its head to an extent almost unknown in the case of any other member of the British floral commonweal” (404), goes against the standards by which fin de siècle Victorian culture has been held to recognize conscious existence: the sundew impresses not because it suffers itself, but because it causes other to do so.²⁶ Counterpoised to late-century debates over animal welfare, vivisection, and vegetarianism, discussions of plant sentience now gravitated not to sympathy but to antipathy and fear.²⁷

Even in Samuel Butler’s satire of colonial adventure fiction *Erewhon* (1872), plant consciousness is memorably detailed through the “low cunning” of a potato in a dark cellar. Appearing within its intertext “Book of the Machines,” the description of the potato’s advances accommodates both a mockery of the Erewhonian professor of botany’s squeamish attention to vegetable rights and a surprisingly activist assertion of plant volition. Of the cunning potato, Butler writes: “He [the potato] knows perfectly well what he wants and how to get it. He sees the light coming from the cellar window and sends his shoots crawling straight thereto . . . we can imagine him saying, ‘I will have a tuber here and a tuber there, and I will suck whatsoever advantage I can from all my surroundings.’ . . . The potato says these things by doing them, which is the best of languages. What is consciousness if this is not consciousness?”²⁸ Though Butler uses this example largely as an opportunity for comedy at the expense of the Erewhonians, such satire does not negate his equally radical expansion of consciousness’s proof-case. Nor, despite the obviously false imposition of a personal pronoun and personifying form, does Butler intend us to not accept the consequences for agency that the potato’s advancing tubers propose, for such ideas resonate across his work. Philip Armstrong has pointed out that the language of the Erewhonian professor of botany is borrowed in part from Butler’s own lecture “The Subdivision of the Organic World into Animal and Vegetable,” and

Gillian Beer has shown that Butler's "pleasure in imagining the eagerness of other life forms" is reflected in his nonfiction studies.²⁹ *Life and Habit* (1878), for example, proposes that personal identity in humans rests upon the same self-generating volition that allows "the lichen . . . [to] grow upon the granite rock by first saying to itself, 'I think I can do it.'"³⁰ As Butler investigates, personhood is equally a continuously evolving condition linking one life stage with the next and at the same time a singular and momentary expression of consciousness; in much the same way, even as carnivorous plant stories showed the consequences of natural selection advancing at terrible speed toward a horrifying end, they also illuminated an asynchronous notion of plant intentionality apprehended only in the moment.

This was as true when plant predators were used as a blunt instrument of horror as much as when they were held to offer a nuanced exploration of vegetable consciousness. Low-quality adventure stories, aimed at readers unaccustomed to considering Allen's and Butler's philosophical and moral concerns, framed the problem of discerning plant intentions as a matter of self-preservation amid an uncontrolled and fecund environment. The young Arthur Conan Doyle's 1879 story "An American's Tale," Phil Robinson's "The Man-Eating Tree" (1881), Frank Aubrey's *The Devil Tree of El Dorado* (1897), and Fred White's "Purple Terror" (1899) all present vicious trees (or, in Doyle's case, tree-sized murderous flytraps) in locations both lush and indeterminate. Doyle's flytraps grow in a frontier alternately identified as Arizona and Montana where "Grass as hung over a chap's head as he rode through it, and trees so thick that you couldn't catch a glimpse of blue sky for leagues and leagues, and orchids like umbrellas!"³¹ Roraima, the great plateau that conceals both Aubrey's devil tree and the long-lived tribe that keeps the tree's secrets, contains "flora and fauna [that] flourish unchecked in the utmost luxuriance of tropical savage life," where, bafflingly enough to the British narrator, "one of the greatest marvels and mysteries of the earth lies on the outskirts of one of our colonies, and we leave the mystery unsolved, the marvel uncared for."³² Will Scarlett, the enterprising amateur botanist and central character of White's story, first experiences the "Purple Terror" in a military expedition across Cuba, where his "geographical and botanical knowledge were going to prove of considerable service to a grateful country when said grateful country should have passed beyond the rudimentary stages of colonization."³³ Cheryl Blake Price has shown in her work on man-eating trees that these stories reflect both "ecophobic reactions to the colonial environment" and "anxiety that the colonial

wilderness . . . was disappearing through the mechanisms of colonialism,” and there are many further implications for the consideration of animate organic landscape in these fictions that go beyond my particular focus on plant consciousness.³⁴

So even as these landscapes are established as visually and horticulturally unintelligible or unknown, their organic elements are also constantly evolving into new forms. Robinson’s narrator, recounting a brush with a man-eating tree in central Africa, begins not with the exciting plot details of the attack, but with an extended philosophical reflection on the necessary correspondence between plant and animal worlds, concluding:

The vegetable world, however, has its revenges. You may keep the guinea pig in a hutch, but how will you pet the basilisk? The little sensitive plant in your garden amuses your children . . . but how could you transplant a vegetable that seizes the running deer, strikes down the passing bird, and once taking hold of him, sucks the carcass of man himself, till his matter becomes as vague as his mind, and all his animate capabilities cannot escape him from the terrible embrace of—God help him!—an inanimate tree?³⁵

Kelly Hurley, exploring fin de siècle gothic, has proposed that Aubrey, Doyle, and Robinson are of a piece with William Hope Hodgson and H. G. Wells in imagining evolutionary monstrosities, animal and vegetable, that generally attack the priority of the specific human form: “The viscosity of the predatory natural world may be said to represent the suchness of matter, as it gains sentience and rises up to swallow the bounded human world,” she suggests.³⁶ Hurley’s reading is borne out by Robinson’s insistence that “the sensual instincts of beast and vegetable are manifestly analogous—the world must be as percipient as sentient throughout” and, equally, by his claim that “given the necessity of . . . urgent self-interest, every animal or vegetable could eventually revolutionize its nature.”³⁷ But Robinson’s identification of the particularly terrible revenges of the vegetable world links his evolutionary fantasy not just to any kind of monster but to monsters emerging from practices of Victorian plant enthusiasms’ global plant exchange specifically. The fear is not that the petted plant specimens in the kitchen garden will evolve *into* sentience, but that they possess sentience already.

Equally, the desires of Will Scarlett, who is lured to the “Purple Terror” both by his lust for new plants and by his lust for a beautiful woman, make him vulnerable to attack in ways unique to the horticulturally

enraptured Victorian era. When he viewed the flowers of the murderous parasitical vine, “All Scarlett’s scientific enthusiasm was aroused. It is not given to every man to present a new orchid to the horticultural world. And this one would dwarf the finest plant hitherto discovered.”³⁸ While White’s story only proposes such an exchange—the orchids remain rooted in their Caribbean setting—it was also a common feature in tales of murderous plants used to describe the effects of a specimen returned to a domestic locale. These acts of botanical exchange were not unique to the era, but the vast increase in the scale of the collections and the reach of the botanical collectors placed ever greater pressure on narrative and nomenclature to preserve geographical distinction between native and nonnative species. As John Rieder points out, such “fantasies of appropriation,” cloaked as “zoological and ethnological acquisitiveness,” unite the emerging genre of science fiction with the earlier prose of travel narrative under the logic of colonialism; given the overwhelming evidence of Victorian emotional attachment to their plants, we must also add to these appropriations the fantasy of botanical acquisition.³⁹

As Lynn Voskuil shows elsewhere in this volume in her reading of H. G. Wells’s “The Flowering of the Strange Orchid” (1904), such acquisitiveness left domestic collectors ripe for dissection by both the horror storyteller and the satirist. Another, less well-studied direction for modernist horror examines what happens to questions of vegetable sentience and malevolence when the antagonist is not an easily anthropomorphized tree, but instead a diffuse collection of fungal spores. Examples of late nineteenth-century fungus horrors include John Uri Lloyd’s *Eti-dorhpa* (1895) and William Hope Hodgson’s influential 1907 short story “The Voice in the Night,” first published in the popular and influential pulp magazine *Blue Book*. Hodgson, a former member of the merchant marine whose works of horror were frequently set a sea, tells the story of an ill-fated pair of lovers who encounter an island where a “vile fungus . . . was growing riot. In places it rose into horrible, fantastic mounds, which seemed almost to quiver, as with a quiet life, when the wind blew across them. Here and there, it took on the forms of vast fingers, and in others it just spread out flat and smooth and treacherous . . . [t]he whole quaking vilely at times.”⁴⁰ The gradual realization that the fungus is growing unstopably, not just across the island but through and around their bodies, is followed by a sudden and insurmountable compulsion to eat the growth. This desire continues even after encountering “an extraordinarily shaped mass of fungus . . . swaying uneasily, as though it possessed life of its own” with “a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a distorted

human creature,” which, upon grim consideration, is understood to in fact be a sailor previously marooned on this same island. In understanding and nobly accepting their future fate, the couple’s narration spares the tale’s shipboard listeners, who already perceive the fiancé of the pair as no more than a “great, gray nodding sponge.”⁴¹ The story’s horror, then, comes not from the fear of dying on the fungus island, but of continuing to live there—albeit in a greatly transformed fashion. Fantasies of unification between plant and human continue to chill precisely because they place the resulting hybrid at the far outer limits of not only narrative, but consciousness itself.

Hodgson returned to the genre of the malevolent sea-plant in his later short story “The Derelict,” but it was “The Voice in the Night” that proved most influential to later fungal fictions, including Philip M. Fisher’s “Fungus Isle” (1923). Fungi, and in particular cryptogamic fungi, had already been a subject of interest and repulsion throughout the second half of the century, especially because their spore-based reproduction resisted so strongly conventional structures of metaphor.⁴² It seemed impossible to distinguish parasitic fungi from their hosts, let alone identify the singular personhood of the fungus itself. Yet larger plant forms could also form a distributed consciousness with expansive and uncertain bounds. One of the most effective of all murderous plant fictions, Algernon Blackwood’s 1907 short story “The Willows,” describes the near-sacrifice of two travelers on the Danube to an island of psychically manipulative willows. In the narrator’s horrified realization of the evil at work, plants are made mobile and humans fixed in place: “Creeping with silent feet over the shifting sands, drawing imperceptibly nearer by soft unhurried movements, the willows had come closer during the night. . . . There was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity.”⁴³ The psychological shock of managing a marooning in a place where the characters face hostile vegetation—“We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented. . . . We were the first human influences on this island and we were not wanted. *The willows were against us*”—paralyzes the narrator into a helpless inability to save himself from his fate.⁴⁴ Though the two protagonists do eventually escape, spared by the sacrificial murder (apparently by willow) of an anonymous peasant, the effect of an environment apparently “on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows,” shows at what cost the human world is defended against a botanical villainy far more ontologically complex than Aubrey’s devil

tree.⁴⁵ “The Willows,” one of the earliest and most widely read of Blackwood’s stories, clearly illustrates his lifelong interest in spiritual, mystical and psychic extremes, but also obviously depends upon his finely observed notions of the elements of landscape and plants in particular to achieve its effective horrors. There is no longer any question that plants possess both a metaphorical and actual agency; inquiry is instead redirected to the inadequacy of metaphor to defend the individual human psyche against the incursions of the natural world.

If Blackwood’s macabre modernism still stands as the best example of plant malevolence in the twentieth century, H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* remains remarkable for its nineteenth-century naturalization of the most alien of vegetable attackers. Wells does not foreground the dual nature (animal and vegetable) of the Martian invaders in his novel, and in fact we do not learn of the “red weed,” the plant that gives Mars its characteristic color and threatens to choke England in the process of doing the same, until we are far into Book 2, “The Earth under the Martians.” Even then the narrator’s introduction is presented as an allusion within a more general discussion of the differences between life on Mars and terrestrial life. He records:

At any rate, the seeds which the Martians (intentionally or accidentally) brought with them gave rise in all cases to red-coloured growths. Only that known popularly as the Red Weed, however, gained any footing in competition with terrestrial forms. The Red Creeper was quite a transitory growth, and few people have seen it growing. For a time, however, the Red Weed grew with astonishing vigour and luxuriance. It spread up the sides of the pit by the third or fourth day of our imprisonment, and its cactus-like branches formed a carmine fringe to the edges of triangular window. And afterwards I found it broadcast throughout the country, and especially wherever there was a stream of water present.⁴⁶

This passage is notable especially for its dislocations of scale between, on the one hand, the broad horticulturally omniscient description given of the red weed’s “vigor and luxuriance,” elsewhere called “titanic” and “gigantic and of unparalleled fecundity,” and, on the other, the first-person narrator’s limited knowledge about the weed, which initially matches exactly his limited visual perspective, trapped in a bombed house with a terrified curate and with only that triangular window framed in red weed to observe the horrifying progress of the Martian invaders.⁴⁷

Similarly, he tethers his account of the weed to the deflating temporal reversals of the passage, with the offhand use of the word “afterwards” spoiling prematurely the inevitability of the invasion’s failure. In introducing the weed at this point, the narrator has already cut away from a vivid description of the arrival of the fifth Martian cylinder to “add in this place certain further details which, although they were not all evident to us at the time, will enable the reader who is unacquainted with them to form a clearer picture of these offensive creatures.”⁴⁸ The narrator’s reluctance to comply with the rules of his own narrative condition and tell the story as it occurred here corresponds with novel’s far more mysterious model of narrative agency: that of the Martians themselves, both the creatures operating the tripods and the swiftly growing fronds of the red weed.

As the narrator repeatedly reminds us, the British subjects involved never really know why the Martians come to Earth but must instead endlessly speculate about what the Martians’ known actions say about their probable intent. But despite the lack of human understanding of Martian volition, there are multiple intentional actors here. The tripod operators are of course viciously active, but we also see that red weed is itself exercising a form of mobility that appears to be intentional. This apparent intentionality on the part of this invasive plant is, in fact, of critical importance given the most central concerns of the novel. In *War of the Worlds*, this weaker sort of derived intentionality is the only one admissible either when thinking about narrative agency or when inferring the presence of a threatening and otherwise inaccessible alien consciousness. The British waterways that carry the red weed and the mechanical tripods that transport the Martian creatures are both prostheses for the alien invaders, amplifying and making more legible the movements that assert directive consciousness.

Though the creatures in tripods accept more readily than the red weed the impositions of anthropomorphism, Wells does not functionally distinguish between the two. This supports the idea that Wells implicitly advances throughout his work—that plants in general, and this plant in particular, represent an outer limit to the range of human interest in the alien.⁴⁹ Indeed, the distinction between the two kinds of Martians is largely irrelevant: the young Martians “bud off” their parents, like “young lilybulbs” or “young animals in the fresh-water polyp”; the older Martians, lacking entrails (or any organs besides brains and hands) are, plantlike, sustained by fresh blood obtained “directly by means of a little pipette into the recipient canal,” and, in short, act very much like a super-

intelligent version of the red weed itself.⁵⁰ That Wells is, throughout his fiction, concerned with the distinctions between jungles and gardens is of a piece with his particular interest in weeds—the alien of plants, and the best example of the alien nature of plants. This is, of course, because “weed” is exclusively a derived and relative term—it carries meaning only in relation to some other class of things that are not weeds—and so to recognize a weed is to recognize an arbitrary distinction of purpose that the weed by its lively vigor aims to resist.

That the novel uses the Martians to critique, via reverse colonization, the follies of British imperialism is, of course, a touchstone of its reception and its era, as Stephen Arata and others have shown.⁵¹ And clearly the novel can and should be read, in part, as an account of a galactic version of an acclimatization society that has gone terribly wrong.⁵² It also serves as an example of global circulation that divorces the native and natural and deprives the horticultural specimen of its proper local environment. As this novel seeks to demonstrate, even plants that do not survive by attacking unwitting travelers have intentions that the observer cannot register except by effect, and even then only if that effect happens to be that of causing grievous harm. Human hands—implied constants in the actions of broadcasting, acclimatizing, and transplanting—falsely imply human agency in the development of global environments, but Wells means to pick apart the mental constructs that support that false narrative of exclusively human influence on the surrounding world. At the dawn of what we now call the environmental movement, this novel offers the idea of the functionally sentient plant as an example of the way in which environments and plants can, in fact, broadcast themselves, through a directive consciousness that can both be understood to exist and yet be defiantly and totally inaccessible to our figures and narrative forms. When Wells’s narrator recounts a walk through the ruined landscape as “all about me the red weed clambered among the ruins, writhing to get above me in the dimness,” his insistently foregrounded imposition of intent onto the plant hints at the countless other impositions and violent figurative replacements that British fictions have done to their fictional vegetable worlds.⁵³

Adela Pinch has recently pointed out, in her study of the priority of other people’s thoughts to readers and writers of the nineteenth century, that “we have grown accustomed to thinking of Victorian Britain as a realm of science, but it was also a realm of metaphysical speculation.”⁵⁴ When thinking about the thoughts of plants, Victorian writers and readers found a double redirection: in one sense, plants grew narra-

tively more vigorous as they gained agency and direction commensurate with animals and even monstrous or villainous humans, while in another sense, plants grew inaccessible to narrative and rhetorical figures as they became weighted with specific and situated forms of geographical and scientific knowledge. Environmental dramas restaging the natural world, like these strange science fictions of malevolent plants, show just some of the many paths to modernism's challenge of the clean narrative distinction between self and other. But they also suggest ecological fiction's persistent challenge: to imagine how the organic world imagines the human is also to confront the limits of the possibilities of imagination.

Notes

1. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 4, *Those That Will Not Work* (London: Charles Griffin, 1862), 2.

2. Recent literary studies of killer plants include Cheryl Blake Price's "Vegetable Monsters: Man-Eating Trees in *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 41, no. 2 (2013): 311–27, and T. S. Miller, "Lives of the Monster Plants: The Revenge of the Vegetable in the Age of Animal Studies," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 3 (2012): 460–79. Also very useful to this study have been Price's Internet archive of man-eating plant fictions, "Bibliographic Resources on 'Man Eaters' in Victorian Literature," *Cheryl Blake Price Academic Website*, accessed November 15, 2011, <http://www.cherylblakeprice.com/my-research/bibliographic-resources-on-man-eaters-in-victorian-literature/>, and the popular collections edited by Chad Arment, *Flora Curiosa: Cryptobotany, Mysterious Fungi, Sentient Trees, and Deadly Plants in Classic Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Landisville, PA: Coachwhip Publications, 2008) and *Botanica Delira: More Stories of Strange, Undiscovered, and Murderous Vegetation* (Landisville, Pa: Coachwhip Publications, 2010). See also two indexes of early science fiction: Everett Franklin Bleiler and Richard Bleiler, *Science-Fiction, the Early Years: A Full Description of More Than 3,000 Science-Fiction Stories from Earliest Times to the Appearance of the Genre Magazines in 1930* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990) and Brian M. Stableford's *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

3. Amy M. King, "Reorienting the Scientific Frontier: Victorian Tide Pools and Literary Realism," *Victorian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2005): 158. On exchanges with Darwin, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature, and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On the intersections of travel literature and scientific exploration, see Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee, and Peter Kitson, *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era: Bodies of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Paul Smethurst, *Travel Writing and the Natural World, 1768–1840* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Peter Raby, *Bright Paradise: Victorian Scientific Travellers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

4. Among philosophers of botany, see Sylvie Pouteau, "Beyond 'Second Animals': Making Sense of Plant Ethics," *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 27, no. 1 (2014): 1–25; Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 2011); and John Charles Ryan, "Passive Flora? Reconsidering Nature's Agency through Human-Plant Studies (HPS)," *Societies* 2, no. 3 (2012): 101–21.

5. On these, see Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Deidre Shauna Lynch, "'Young Ladies Are Delicate Plants': Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism," *ELH* 77, no. 3 (2010): 689–729.

6. See William Beinart's companion to the *Oxford History of the British Empire: Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) as well as the following key histories: Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Harry Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Lucile Brockway, *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); Ray Desmond, *The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew* (Kew: Kew Publications / Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 2007); John M. MacKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Donal P. McCracken, *Gardens of Empire: Botanical Institutions of the Victorian British Empire* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997); and David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

7. For these paradigms, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Cara Murray, "Catastrophe and Development in the Adventure Romance," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 53, no. 2 (2010): 150–69.

8. For more on such transfers, see Eric Pawson, "Plants, Mobilities and Landscapes: Environmental Histories of Botanical Exchange," *Geography Compass* 2, no. 5 (2008): 1464–77; Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); and William Beinart and Karen Middleton, "Plant Transfers in Historical Perspective: A Review Article," *Environment and History* 10, no. 1 (2004): 3–29.

9. As Rangan, Carney, and Denham have argued, both narratives of "ecological imperialism," focusing on the destruction wreaked on both colonizing and colonized environments by introduced species, and narratives of "ecological nationalism," concentrating on the economic development of modern states enabled by plant exchange, equally depend on an "inherent Eurocentrism" that "tends to obscure the fact that plant transfers have been an integral part of human history, extending over several millennia through the quotidian interactions of provisioning and exchange between peoples in every part of the world." See Haripriya Rangan, Judith Carney, and Tim Denham, "Environmental History of Botanical Exchanges in the Indian Ocean World," *Environment and History* 18, no. 3 (2012): 312.

10. Robert Mitchell, "Cryptogamia," *European Romantic Review* 21, no. 5 (2010): 632.
11. Here Mitchell is in conversation with such field-defining works as Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and other works of so-called green romanticism that advocate not for transformation but for preservation.
12. On these, see Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760–1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and writings on amateur naturalist societies including Anne Secord, "Corresponding Interests: Artisans and Gentlemen in Nineteenth-Century Natural History," *British Journal for the History of Science* 27, no. 4 (1994): 383–408.
13. James Perchard Tupper, *An Essay on the Probability of Sensation in Vegetables: With Additional Observations on Instinct, Sensation, Irritability, &c* (London: White, Cochrane, 1811), 80–81.
14. G T [George Towers], "Fertility Induced by Spur-Pruning," *Gardener's Magazine* 9 (1833): 319.
15. Charles Darwin, *Insectivorous Plants* (London: John Murray, 1875), 19.
16. On this history, see Craig W. Whippo and Roger P. Hangarter, "The 'Sensational' Power of Movement in Plants: A Darwinian System for Studying the Evolution of Behavior," *American Journal of Botany* 96, no. 12 (2009): 2115–27; as well as Soraya De Chadarevian, "Laboratory Science versus Country-House Experiments: The Controversy between Julius Sachs and Charles Darwin," *British Journal for the History of Science* 29, no. 1 (1996): 17–41. Chadarevian points out that the review of Darwin's *The Power of Movement in Plants* in the *Times* suggests broad popular interest in Darwin's long-standing botanical inquiries accompanying his fame as an evolutionary theorist (21).
17. Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905), 177.
18. Henry Rider Haggard, *A Gardener's Year* (London: Longmans, Green, 1905), 243.
19. Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 86–87.
20. It has been pointed out that a full definition of the conditions of botanical carnivory has never been achieved; see Mark W. Chase et al., "Murderous Plants: Victorian Gothic, Darwin and Modern Insights into Vegetable Carnivory," *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society* 161, no. 4 (2009): 329–56.
21. On this, see Barbara Larson, "Evolution and Victorian Art," in *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, ed. Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 121–48.
22. For more on Swinburne's poem and its relations to Darwin's text, see Jonathan Smith, "Une Fleur du Mal? Swinburne's 'The Sundew' and Darwin's 'Insectivorous Plants,'" *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 1 (2003): 131–50.
23. Grant Allen, "Queer Flowers," *Cornhill Magazine* 3, no. 16 (1884): 404. Just prior to the appearance of this article, Allen had published two noted botanical studies: *The Colours of Flowers* (London: Macmillan, 1882) and *Flowers and Their Pedigrees* (London: Longmans, 1883).
24. Allen, "Queer Flowers," 403, 404.
25. *Ibid.*, 404.

26. Ibid.
27. On these debates, see Jed Mayer, "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Laboratory Animals," *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 3 (2008): 399–417, among many others.
28. Samuel Butler, *Erewhon; or, Over the Range*, ed. Hans-Peter Breuer and Daniel F. Howard (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses), 184.
29. Gillian Beer, "Butler, Memory and the Future," in *Samuel Butler, Victorian against the Grain: A Critical Overview*, ed. James G. Paradis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 47; Philip Armstrong, "Samuel Butler's Sheep," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 4 (2012): 450.
30. Samuel Butler, *Life and Habit* (London: Trübner, 1878), 82. No modern edition of this text exists; the 1981 Wildwood House edition is a reprint of the 1910 text.
31. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The American's Tale," in *The Best Science Fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle*, ed. Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 4.
32. Frank Aubrey, *The Devil-Tree of El Dorado: A Novel* (New York: New Amsterdam Book Co., 1897), 273. For more on Roraima as a site for adventure narrative, see also R. G. Forman, "Room for Romance: Playing with Adventure in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*," *Genre* 43, nos. 1–2 (2010): 27–59.
33. Fred White, "The Purple Terror," *Strand Magazine* 18, no. 105 (1899): 243.
34. Price, "Vegetable Monsters," 327.
35. Phil Robinson, "The Man-Eating Tree," in *Under the Sun* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1882), 299.
36. Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.
37. Robinson, "The Man-Eating Tree," 297.
38. White, "The Purple Terror," 245.
39. John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 56.
40. William Hope Hodgson, "A Voice in the Night," in *Men of Deep Waters* (London: Holden & Hardingham, 1921), 178.
41. Ibid., 182, 184.
42. On one female botanist and social reformer's debates with Darwin over such fungi, see Tina Gianquitto, "Botanical Smuts and Hermaphrodites: Lydia Becker, Darwin's Botany, and Education Reform," *Isis* 104, no. 2 (2013): 250–77.
43. Algernon Blackwood, "The Willows," in *The Listener and Other Stories* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1907), 160.
44. Ibid., 147.
45. Ibid., 145.
46. H. G. Wells, *A Critical Edition of the War of the Worlds: H. G. Wells' Scientific Romance*, introduction and notes by David Y. Hughes and Harry M. Geduld, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 151–52.
47. Ibid., 166.
48. Ibid., 150.
49. On this see Emily Alder, "'Buildings of the New Age': Dwellings and the Natural Environment in the Futuristic Fiction of H. G. Wells and William Hope Hodgson," in *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Steven McLean (Aldershot: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 114–129.

50. Wells, *War of the Worlds*, 150.

51. Arata notes, “H. G. Wells located the germ of his *War of the Worlds* in a discussion with his brother Frank over the extermination of the indigenous Tasmanian population under British rule,” in “The Occidental Tourist: ‘Dracula’ and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990): 623.

52. For more on the red weed as invasive plant species, see Christina Alt, “Prickly Pears and Martian Weeds: Ecological Invasion Narratives in History and Fiction,” in *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 137–48. See also Matthew Chew’s brief summary of the late-nineteenth-century meteoric rise and sudden collapse of the canal-choking Canada waterweed (*Elodea*) in Britain; he concludes, “What can be made of such capriciousness? Fiction. *Elodea* doubtless inspired the ‘red weed’ that accompanied H. G. Wells’ Martians to England in *The War of the Worlds*,” “The Monster of Tamarisk: How Scientists Made a Plant into a Problem,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 42, no. 2 (2009): 235.

53. Wells, *War of the Worlds*, 183.

54. Adela Pinch, *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6–7.

