

# *Introduction*

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People cannot survive without plants. We rely on them for food, shelter, clothes, tools – as much now as we ever did before modernity. Our relationship with plants predated the emergence of written language: that history is archaeological. But as long as we have had the words to write we have written about plants: that writing is the subject of this book. The history of literature about plants is long, rich, and varied: the task of accounting for it would demand many volumes. Nonetheless, this collection is ambitious in scope. Its sections cover historical periods of Greek, Latin, Norse, and Anglophone plant literatures; prominent modern plant genres, and the plant writing of most global regions. The scholars who took on the difficult task of accounting for a region's plant literature have done so with elegance, many of them focusing on the long history of literature about a single plant species whose place in the region's culture deserves attention for its sustained national, religious, or ethnic importance.

Plants are so present in our lives – urban or rural – they often go unseen. It is through art and writing that we attend to them. And yet, writing on plants often speaks primarily about our understanding of ourselves. Plants are central to our awareness and yet distinct from human life: in art, the space between us and them comes to life. The growing field of interdisciplinary plant studies has explored the question of our difference from plants but even that question has a long history, to which this volume attends. Michael Marder has observed that human beings have at their disposal a 'wide array of possible approaches to the world of vegetation' and often 'we overlook trees, bushes, shrubs, and flowers in our everyday dealings, to the extent that these plants form the inconspicuous backdrop of our lives'. Because of this inconspicuousness, 'we take plants for granted'. And yet, 'the absolute familiarity of plants coincides with their sheer strangeness, the incapacity of humans to recognize elements of ourselves in the form of vegetal being, and, hence, the uncanny – strangely familiar – nature of our relation to them'.<sup>1</sup> To make nature familiar, to make it

strange – humans never tire of this particular game. It is a game we play through art and literature.

The chapters in this volume explore some of the most abiding human concerns about plants: the extent to which we resemble them or they us; our use of plants to negotiate geo-political conflict; the ethical dimension of our plant sensibilities and the possible sensitive nature of plants; the moral dimension of our desire to engage aesthetically with plants; and the ways in which human–plant relations have been used to make and unmake national and ethnic identities. A number of chapters examine the ways we have used plants to navigate modernity's cultural and intellectual shift from theological engagement with the created world to the discourses of modern science – and more recent attempts to rectify lost knowledge traditions in the face of empiricism and positivism. Literature about plants has been especially attentive to recovering a lost vision of plant life – whether in the pre-modern Anglophone world or among Indigenous communities still fighting to hold onto their long-standing belief in plant sentience. In some modern novels, the loss of this knowledge takes the form of plant horror. As Leslie Wylie argues, in *La vorágine*, the description of plants as 'sentient, communicative beings has powerful consequences for our understandings of the relationship between human and non-human nature. Rubber trees in Rivera's novel are not presented as the inert matter of global commodity chains, but as mutilated beings, who, alongside their enslaved human tappers, for the same master shed different juices: rubber and blood.'

Plant horror asks us to see our relationship with plants at the same moment as we recognise the sudden and unnerving loss of that relationship. As a literary strategy, it is not so very different from the theological work of tree poems from 'The Dream of the Rood' to more recent depictions of the crucifix as a 'living' tree that perceives its role in the divine narrative of the Crucifixion. Michael D. J. Bintley provides insight into the history of this trope in Old Norse and Old English poetry, but we can see it at work in Shakespeare and in the devotional poetry of each succeeding age. The capacity for plants to take on a role as agents of the divine mind can be traced in the theological traditions of all religions. Some of these traditions use their attention to the divine/natural question in order to interrogate its implications for human consciousness or sensual awareness. For Xiaofei Tian the lotus in Chinese literature is 'paradoxically' an embodiment of sensual desires that do not interfere with its capacity as an 'appropriate embodiment of Buddhist teachings: the true nature of the phenomenal world is emptiness' while material form is 'illusory and unreal'

and yet, ‘one may understand the principle of emptiness and obtain spiritual enlightenment through experiencing and penetrating the sensuous appearances of physical reality’. These seeming paradoxes, so productive of mystical experience, often focus on plants because they belong to the created world – and have a divine life – but their role in that world is different from our own. The uncertain nature of our difference from plants has proved very productive for mystical thought.

The literary genres section of this handbook offers chapters that consider not only the kinds of plant writing but the ways in which we have used plants to think about literary form itself. Jessica Rosenberg’s chapter on early modern printed herbals reveals a genre at once encyclopaedic and aesthetic, a genre that opens up questions about modernity’s understanding of texts and their uses. We now assume that some texts are ‘useful’ and those that are not are pleasurable, peripheral, even wasteful. The same could be said about the way we categorise plants. Holly Corfield-Carr looks with the eyes of a poet at formal definitions that render poetry cognate with plants species. And for Robert N. Watson it is precisely the manner by which seventeenth-century poets described the human–plant relationship that distinguished them as metaphysical or cavalier. This distinction is formal but it relies also on the period’s increasingly polarised political and theological allegiances.

We offer this handbook in the hope that it, in Giulia Pacini’s words, ‘speaks to the splendour of a literary tradition in which plant-writing has long allowed authors to ponder fundamental questions about the nature of life and death, the mystery of liveliness, and the relationship between the human and the nonhuman’.

## Notes

- 1 M. Marder, *Plant Thinking* (Columbia University Press, 2013) 3–4.

