

**From Tonic to Toxin: Medicinal Plants in the Literature of the Long
Nineteenth Century**

by

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Abstract

My dissertation, *From Tonic to Toxin: Medicinal Plants in the Literature of the Long Nineteenth Century*, explores the reclassification of herbs in nineteenth-century British literature and culture from potent allies to mere weeds, or worse, deadly poisons. This shift in the professional understanding of plants is gendered in British culture, as plants begin during the Romantic period as tools for the masculine trade of apothecaries like Keats but end the century as dangerous weapons deployed by female poisoners. In chapters which range from the John Keats's poetry, to the detective fiction of L.T. Meade, I study a shift in professional knowledge of medicinal herbs which constructs an increasingly stratified and gendered system of knowledge from 1819 to 1903. In my work, I explore how the "disappearance" of medicinal herbs in modernity impacts the "foliation" of literature and the gendering of traditional plant knowledge in literary texts. Informed by ecocriticism and influenced by the burgeoning field of Critical Plant Studies, my work responds to current perspectives in the literary and cultural studies of plants by examining how representations of plants impact their ecology in the nineteenth century. Rather than study medicinal plants as a backdrop to human life, I view them as vibrant things in and of themselves in texts by Keats, Robert Browning, George Eliot, and L.T. Meade. I examine then the ecological stakes of shifts in the representation of plants from Romanticism to the Victorian period, as the prestige associated with plants and even plant literacy falls, along with the rise of the industrialized medical and pharmaceutical complex in modernity. Following these authors over the long nineteenth century, my dissertation starts with John Keats, whose poems are densely populated with potent and agentic plant bodies, shifts to Robert Browning who takes a historical figure who was closely aligned with plants and removes both plant agency and plant bodies in his defoliated Paracelsus, examines the queer connotations of George Eliot's *Silas Marner* as plants are actively moved into positions of set dressing in the novel, and ends with L.T. Meade's "The Sorceress of the Strand" series, which sees plant agency return as terrifying sources of poison and toxicity.

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Introduction

At the start of the nineteenth century, domestic herbs were allies to healthcare, used by apothecaries and lay people alike to heal and maintain health. By the end of the century, however, healthcare was becoming increasingly medicalized and industrialized. Medicinal herbs were excluded from the realm of scientific knowledge and from the vibrant public life that science and medicine had during the later nineteenth century. This shift caused what can be described as a cultural “defoliation,” a loss of traditional plant knowledge in the general population. Consequently, plants that were once seen as tools to prolong life, became viewed as less potent than lab created biomedicine. Because medicinal plants were also traditionally associated with women’s knowledge and women’s healthcare, they were shunted aside, considered inferior or even unwholesome. Interest in imported plants doubly displaced local herbs and the hothouse, not the meadow, became a place of cultivating knowledge. Local herbs then fell out of use and cultivation. This loss was not just cultural, but ecological. Herbs became “wild” both metaphorically and literally, sometimes even forced out by invasive alien species. This dissertation explores the participation of literature itself in this process from Keats to L.T. Meade, exploring both how narrative naturalizes the disappearance of local herbs, influencing not just the culture, but the landscape of England itself, but also how the herbs themselves resist this defoliation, reading the plants present as agentic figures which construct their own narrative within literature.

The defoliation of potent herbs from literature and culture can be readily seen in literature. For example, Keats’ poetry reminds us that early in the nineteenth century, medicinal plants were a crucial part of modern medicine, playing both a material and rhetorical role in healing. Keats’ extensive plant vocabulary is the culmination of centuries of plant use and

reminds us that in England, plants were a large part of day to day life as they had been since Roman times. Then, medicine was “essentially herbal” and medicinal gardening was “a manifestation of civilization” (Sanecki 9). Literary, cultural, and medical knowledge of plants was collected into herbals, tomes which contained all of a society’s knowledge on plants. By the time of the Anglo-Saxons, the early tenth century, herbals were used widely enough that they were able to copy classical herbals into their own vernacular, adding their own “experience and observation” in the process (12). Herbals continued to be passed on through generations, with any new knowledge being added as it was discovered.

While herbals are “considered to be works which set out to describe the practical uses of plants in a non-scientific way,” even in the early nineteenth century they also contained the most up to date practical, medical, and botanical medicine at the time (Sanecki 47). Botanists William Turner and Henry Lyte and surgeon John Gerard (1554 -1612) are credited with some of the most important advances in herbals during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They marked a shift in Herbals from a collection of social knowledge, to a collection of specialist knowledge that can be used both by other specialists and the public. These new Herbals contained the history of plants back to the Roman empire, but also the contemporary usefulness of local herbs. They also represented a change in the visual representation of the plants therein. The plants were drawn based on actual examples of the plant itself rather than “the conventionalized aspect which had become traditional in earlier herbals through successive copying of each drawing” (Arber 55). With the influences of botany and the desire to visually represent the plants themselves, these Herbals were more about the real plants than the social understanding of the plants. Though it represents the last of the Old English Herbals, John Lindsey’s *Flora Medica* (1838) also displays the ultimate representation of the English Herbal. “Not aimed at the husbandmen and

housekeepers, but at medical students,” Lindsey’s *Flora Medica* was the culmination of what many botanists in prior centuries had envisioned herbals as (Sanecki 58). The text not only explored all contemporary knowledge on domestic herbs and their medicinal properties, but “wondered what other valuable drugs would be discovered” (58). Aligned with the contemporary knowledge of the apothecaries, Lindsey’s herbal read more like a medical textbook than a guide to cultivating and growing domestic herbs.

This, however, does not mean that the classification of and understanding of plants was nearing what it became during the scientific revolution of the nineteenth century. Many plants were classified in utilitarian ways: separating them by either their habitat or by “virtues” which “classify[ed] plants according to their uses and medicinal properties” (Arber 171). These “virtues” of the plant, though, were not always learned through what might be considered medical means. Instead, many medical practitioners and botanists believed in the “signatures” of plants invented by Paracelsus, or the idea that “medicinal plants [were] stamped, as it were, with some clear indication of their uses” (250). This meant that “parts of these plants were believed to represent parts of the body, or the condition for which they were intended” (Sanecki 65). Walnuts were believed to be good for headaches as they resembled a brain. Plants that had yellow sap were believed to cure jaundice, and those that resembled a heart were used to treat heart conditions. The combination of some markedly medicinal plants not appearing to have a “signature” and others with “signatures” not actually treating the conditions they were used for seems to have not mattered much as “the theory of signatures was repudiated by the best of the sixteenth-century herbalists” (Arber 255). The theory of “signatures” went hand in hand with herbal simpling. A simple was “the colloquial name for a useful herb” and so simpling, traveling into the countryside to look for new herbs close to home, became popular (Sanecki 52). Partially

because the average apothecary did not know the herbs himself and instead relied on “the words of the silly hearb[sic]-women” and partially because the theory of “signatures” allowed for easy classification of plants, apothecaries and herbalists took to roaming the countryside in search of new medicinal herbs (Sanecki 56).

From an ecological standpoint this is an important moment in British history. Herb gardens had always served as a symbol of society, the untamed wilderness being brought into a domestic space and cultivated. But with the spread of lists of plants, such as the Fromond List (1525ca.), which included a list of herbs to be grown with “domestic purpose,” and the rise in popularity of extensive gardens which served to delight, entertain, lend good smells, as well as feed and heal the household, the domestic spaces in England became lush with domestic plant life (Sanecki 26, 33-39). Houses contained still rooms, a space where “herbs and flowers from the garden and surrounding countryside were transformed into scented waters or medicinal tinctures” (40). *Pot pourri* became a popular pastime for ladies and nosegay plants became popular gifts. From the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century, the British household became overgrown with plant life both outside in the garden and inside in teas, pots, vases, and pot pourri jars. Britain reflected the Anglo-Saxon “implicit faith in the power of plants” to heal through medicine and affect mood and life even through smell (12). This relationship between plants and humans in which humans welcomed plants into domestic spaces changed, though, in the nineteenth century, shifting from a domestic ecology to an imported botany.

As medical science leapt forward towards “patent” medicines, “herbs, especially the native and naturalized species were considered to be old fashioned” (Sanecki 70). Botany and the language of flowers became divested from the plants themselves and “the language of flowers was revived and newly sentimentalized,” leading to flowers (rather than herbs) being appreciated

for their old-fashioned sentimentality and not their social purpose (71). Herb gardens became less practical as imported flowers were shifted into hothouses and gardening became an expression of dominion over foreign species. Medical and scientific breakthroughs lead to drugs which were “isolated from plants” and “manufactured synthetically” (79). The same plants which had been used in medicine a century prior, were pushed back out of the domestic spaces in favor of synthetic remedies with the same properties as the plants. The diversity of medicinal plants in the Victorian household and in the medicine cabinet declined, as elixirs, tonics, and distillations were replaced with decorative pot pourri, or foreign species grown in a hot house. This was a step forward in medicine. Lab created remedies were alkaloids, considered on the cutting edge of science, and were not merely based on the shape of the plant. The impact this defoliation had on the plant life, though, was not considered.

The historical exclusion of plants from cultural knowledge is certainly ecologically problematic. This is particularly true in discussions of the Anthropocene. The theoretical epoch which began once humanity had a notable impact on the Earth, the Anthropocene’s start date is still being contested as the epoch has not been officially approved, yet. One proposed start date is around 1750 when the industrial boom began, thus placing the nineteenth century and the social and industrial strides of the century well within the Anthropocene (Monastersky). The term and the idea of the Anthropocene is a problematic one, though, as it ascribes the blame for current ecological conditions onto the whole of humanity while simultaneously focusing mainly on humanity and human society in ecological discussions. However, it is also the most appropriate and widely used term, and so with the shortcomings in mind, I situate my research within the initial stages of the Anthropocene. With long nineteenth-century literature being produced during the start of the Anthropocene, the question arises: how do scholars read a book about humans

and consider its relationship with plants? How, for example, do texts support or fail to support the rights of plants to exist? How can plants be studied and read when they do not have voices in the same way humanity does? Many of these questions have been explored in the field of Animal Studies, allowing for animals to be given subjectivity in both literature and society, and the tools and lessons of the field of Animal Studies have are what serves as the foundation for the developing field of Critical Plant Studies. Even so, Critical Plant Studies is moving in a direction of its own, breaking away from Animal Studies to focus on the staggering biomass that is plant life on Earth.

In studying the latter, it is possible in fact that even before British authors' plant literacy began to decline in the nineteenth century, they contributed to the devaluing of plants through their placement of the same as the backdrop of literature. The natural world that the Romantic poets immersed themselves in was often the environment in which the poet could paint his or her scene with plants which served to characterize the state of the poet's mind. This instrumentalizing of plants then may begin as early as Keats and accelerate in the Victorian period. Randy Laist, in his introduction to *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, paints a vivid picture of the history of plants in culture, as well as the current dismissal of them, saying that "when one scans contemporary culture for evidence of plant-based narratives, however, the most dramatic meta-phenomenon is the defoliation of the cultural imagination "(10). If Wordsworth and Whitman "could rely on sharing a botanical vocabulary with readers," Laist argues, then, by the Victorian era, the interest in plants was in the "semantic quality of flowers" instead of what Laist considers to be the most important: the ontological aspects (10, 14). This stands in stark contrast to contemporary society and literature in which the vocabulary of plants still exists, but as a watered down cultural mythos in which a red carnation

is an “avowal of love” and a yellow “disdain”, but valency beyond the colors themselves is lost (Kirkby 23). Rather than having their own purpose in the novel, plants and flowers in particular, became representative of women in the long nineteenth century. In marriage plots a young woman’s bloom could be discussed. In this way “the bloom of a girl, like the bloom of a plant, is a description of a potential and ephemeral sexual reproduction,” thus allowing more frank discussions of sexuality through the metaphor of plants as reflected in Amy King’s examination of flowers in nineteenth century texts such as Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (King, 35).

That heavily gendered tendency was underscored in enlightenment practices of taxonomy that spread through the gendered popularization of botany in the nineteenth century. Not only did this taxonomy objectify plants, but it sexualized them in a notable example of what might be described as ecological pornography. Carl Linnaeus, for example, used human sex organs to describe and define the reproductive structures of plants. He defined plant reproduction in the terms of human reproduction. Stamens and pistils became phallic and yonic while individual plants took on the roles of husband and wife, mother and father, and even brother and sister. While this classification allowed for some inappropriate floral liaisons, the classification was inherently heterosexual and focused on reproduction as the ultimate purpose of any sexuality. Although it is a limiting view of sexuality, Linnaeus also provided people and authors with a vocabulary which could be used to discuss girlhood as a state of bloom itself. As Amy King says in her book *Bloom*:

the dissemination of this idea by Linnaeus's system made literal what had previously been only a metaphorical association among girls, flowers, and sexual innocence, for it articulated what literature had long suspected--that blooms, or flowers, are sex organs. Sex became spoken, in a sense, because flowers, always a suitable subject for representation, were revealed as sexual (13).

King's language here directs attention to something important about Linnaean botany and society. It was not that Linnaeus changed flowers into sexual beings. Instead he "revealed" them as sexual objects.

Linnaean taxonomy, if not a form of ecoporn, clearly reveals how plants may be sexualized and gendered as heteronormative. Bart H. Welling explores this gendering and sexualizing potential of ecological images as the discursive formation of "solitary, central but remote, omniscient, all-powerful, potentially violent, pleasure-taking, commodifying, an all-seeing but simultaneously invisible male subject" who stands opposite a "marginalized, decontextualized, powerless, speechless, unknowing, endangered, pleasure-giving, commodified, consumable female object" (53). Such images of plants put the viewer, regardless of their sex, into the male sexed role of "male gaze" observer who lusts after the observed, taking on the socially male gendered role of scientific investigator as well due to the power inherent in the position as all seeing viewer. This puts the plant image beneath the viewer, taking on a vertical hierarchical female and socially feminine role as it is viewed, desired, and lusted after without its express consent. The literary construction of a nineteenth century "culture of bloom" is particularly problematic as many plants reproduce nonsexually. A woman could express and explore her own sexuality through botany and coded botanical discussions. While male dominance was still present in Linnaeus' descriptions, femininity is fore fronted as the lovely plumage of flowers became the lovely plumage of a bride on her wedding day. With this way of describing plant reproduction and coupling, women and plants became linked even closer in the social vernacular even as non-blooming plants like herbs lose their cultural capital.

During the Victorian period, herbs were displaced by the culture of bloom and shunted to the margins of society, a border around the human world but never truly a part of it even if they

were still present in necessary plant-based medicines. By casting plants as less active agents in contrast to humans who change and shape the so called “natural” world, authors like George Eliot contribute to a decline in perceptions of plant agency and potency. Identifying the literary fiats through which plants are pushed aside, then importantly, disrupts the tendencies of Victorian literature to undervalue the potency or agency of plants. Reading plants against the grain of their representation in a text like *Silas Marner*, then, reasserts their potency and presence which is often there all along as truly active players in their own existence and not inactive objects that existence happens to. When discussing the relationship between people and plants in literature, I question the vertical dichotomy in which “man” has dominion over “nature.” Restoring horizontal relationships between people and plants in a text like *Silas Marner* or identifying why a plant becomes an object of terror in L.T. Meade’s “The Sorceress of the Strand” series does important ecological work in reasserting the presence of plants in culture.

My approach then seeks to restore the quality of “becoming” or imminence to representations of plants in literature, identifying plants as lively or vibrant matter rather than inert or inactive beings in literature (Houle 93). As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argue, the concept of becoming is one that trumps resemblance as the basis for ethical consideration. Becoming is not “to progress or regress along a” taxonomic series with the series being a relationship in which “*a* resembles *b*, *b* resembles *c*” so that the terms of the equation can be refined down to a “single, eminent term” or genealogical origin which effectively describes and defines the entire series (238, 234). If becoming is not a series, then it does not seek to find a singular answer to a social or biological question. This quest to find an “eminent term” or to define biological systems by how they resemble one another is the classic way of approaching taxonomy and the relationships between entities in nature. Deleuze and Guattari say that:

Nature is conceived as an enormous *mimesis*: either in the form of a chain of beings perpetually imitating one another, progressively and regressively, and tending toward the divine higher term they all imitate by graduated resemblance[...] or in the form of a mirror imitation with nothing left to imitate because it itself is the model everything else imitates (235).

In this way, their perceptions of contemporary conceptions of nature mean that science and knowledge on the natural world are seeking a singular term to answer a question that requires a more complex lattice of understanding. An alternative to this ultimately taxonomic perception of plants is to examine what they *do* in the tradition of the herbal rather than what they *are* in the tradition of Linnaean taxonomy. By moving away from agency being ascribed simply because of a lifeform's resemblance to humanity, ecology is able to respect life for what it is rather than how much it looks or behaves like a human.

As Houle argues, plants should be treated as agentic, not because they resemble human life and humanity, but because previous ways of thinking about plants are not good thinking. For example, animals, selectively depending on the context, have been admitted into rights because they are sentient, and sentience resembles human feeling, a cousin to the capacity for reason. This enlightenment gateway to rights, however, remains anthropocentric. She uses the example of thinking-the-animal as a logical failure that “seems to have not caused us to take up the difference” (93). Rather than seeing animals as thinking equals, humanity has come to view them as thinking inferiors, reifying the hierarchy that places humanity at the top instead of bringing the human and animal into balance with one another. She attributes this to the fact that “animality has an assured berth deep within the very structures of thinking, imagining, feeling, and desiring” (94). It is too ingrained in society at this point to be able to change thinking. Her purpose in writing is to question if we as humans can likewise “think-the-plant and avoid (re)onto-stabilizing ourselves,” thus taking advantage of contemporary mindsets towards plants

in order to prevent the calcification of thought that has happened in regard to animality (94).

Randy Laist takes this a step further and suggests that “animal studies is essentially an extension of human studies: it is relatively easy to imagine the subjectivity of animals” versus plants (11).

This suggests that it is subjectivity that defines humanity’s ability to see another living thing as alive and needing consideration

While Houle sees becoming-plant as something that is essentially beneficial to humanity, Michael Marder shifts the focus further away from humanity and onto plant-thinking for the sake of plants. Marder is seeking to rectify a history in which he says plants are not simply the margin, but have “populated the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities” (*Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* 2). In order to do this, Marder questions the being of plants: their soul, their wisdom, their agency. One of the most important shifts in thinking that must take place when considering plants primarily in discussions, is a restructuring of animal-centric definitions of life and self. Marder points out that growth in plants is “seen as purposeless because the vegetal soul does not attain to any higher capacities other than those of endless nourishment and propagation” (25). How, then, can a plant’s growth be seen as similar to a human’s if a human seeks to better their mind and to better their community with their growth? This point of view, though, underestimates the systemic role of plants on Earth. Plants serve as the lungs of the Earth and as a tangible source of life and food for most creatures on the Earth. Marder argues that the plant is not a soul filled life in the way that a human is. Instead “the plant that has no identity of its own secretly confers a plastic, malleable form upon life in its multiple instantiations and animates the grids of meaning, where other living beings operate” (53). In this way, plant life as a systemic form that spreads over the land, serves not as the backdrop for human life, but the support system

that gives life to the world, thus allowing humanity to exist. By making this ontological shift, the soul of plants becomes the soul of the Earth, which includes the soul of humanity. This awareness of the ecosystem and the role all life plays in it stands to create a more ecological understanding of human life and humanity.

Houle, too, regards plant life as necessarily viewed systematically and not individually. She considers research into plant communication as evidence of becoming-plant. Two pieces of information vital to this assessment are that “the chemical profile of a plant is often totally unique to *that individual plant*” and that the individual plant’s chemical profile “changes in different ways depending on what kind of stress it endures” (100). This suggests that not only do plants not exist as individuals incapable of communication, but that they also do not exist merely as one singular entity. The chemical signals a plant gives off can communicate a threat to other plants, a threat and therefore source of food to larger predators who would prey on the pest insects, and the ability of plants to communicate to symbiotic species when it’s safe to lay eggs, bloom, or pollinate. The problem, though, is that all of this communication is a one-way street. The plants are speaking through chemical signals, but they are not looking for a response. Rather than a conversation, it is a shout into the void that happens to be heard. However, Marder would challenge this assessment of communication. He suggests that:

our incapacity to communicate with plants the way we do with other human beings (and even with certain animals) by means of vocal interaction runs the risk of objectifying them or, at best, speaking *for* them, in their defense, if not in their place (*Plant Thinking* 186).

With this logic, expecting plant communication to hold to the same social rules of human communication only serves to limit our ability to see plants as becoming beings. This leads to the conclusion that in Critical Plant Studies, the lack of logical, philosophical, or linguistic spaces

for plant-thinking to be considered, must be taken for what it is: a new frontier in thought and not proof that plants are inherently without soul or intent.

The act of becoming brings humans and plants into a systemic equality of action and reaction, allowing the human and social reactions to plants to be reactions to the actions of the plants themselves and the actions of humanity and society to cause tangible reactions in plant life. Reading for plants materially and discursively as objects, resources, *and* agents, thus resists the objectification of plants (Killingsworth and Palmer). Doing so moreover uncovers human interdependence with them, a fact that Victorians often attempt to erode. My reading of long nineteenth-century literature will attend to three particular expressions of this: the power of plants to characterize people, the gendering of plants, and the queering of both disruptive human and plant bodies. This focus reveals a pattern of defoliation and dangerous refoliation, particularly by female hands in long nineteenth century literature. These literary acts have striking implications on vegetal life as well. If, for example, a human speaks as a plant, a shrinking violet or a climbing vine, they do not speak for the plant (Tontiplafol, 32). Their connection becomes self-reflexive even as it is often gendered and queered.

This dissertation seeks to tell the story of such strategic human-centric moves which harmed plants, biodiversity, and attendant identities such as women during the long nineteenth century. Indeed, the rise in taxonomic botany, I will show, was accompanied, ironically, by a decline in the medical importance of plants. Botany became a field unto itself and as medicine was industrialized, the two fields split. In Browning's "Paracelsus" or Eliot's *Silas Marner*, then, despite Paracelsus's historical invention of the epistemology of the doctrine of signatures, plants became considered by the characters in the text to be archaic and impotent. The long nineteenth century institutionalized a rhetorical if not actual separation between botany and medicine that

drastically impacted the cultural value of plants, now considered inferior to patent medicines. The divide between medicine and plants was so absolute that by the beginning of the twentieth century, a revival took place to bring medicinal herbs back into the social vernacular. Maud Grieve, for example, worked to bridge “the cultural divide that had developed between botany and medicine” (Carroll). Alongside Grieve, other women of the era worked to bring herbs and herbal knowledge back to the society. Between the era of herbal knowledge being viewed as masculine and intrinsic to medicine and women having to fight to revive herbal medicine, science and medical progress boomed while simultaneously scientists and medical professionals worked to distance themselves from the apothecaries and herbal medicines. This was, of course, a strategic, rhetorical move meant to benefit the scientific image of the medical profession.

Anxieties over who was qualified to treat patients and a hierarchical medical system resulted by the end of the century in a poison panic which shifted concerns, ironically, onto women and plants. My work argues that the shifting role of plants, however, are integral to this “poison panic” as evidenced by the end of the century when the work of L.T. Meade in the “Sorceress of the Strand” (1903) detective series represents medicinal plants as nothing but dangerous poisons, especially when in the hands of women. This last shift represents the end of a complex process that constructs an alarmingly gendered, anti-ecological modernity in which medicinal plants are reclassified as obsolete, or worse, the “inconspicuous backdrop” (Marder *Plant Thinking*, 3) for literature. Underneath this literary backdrop, though, are the plants themselves. In my research, then, it becomes necessary to not simply write off plants the way some of these authors seem to. While tracing the cultural and literary defoliation I will, therefore, construct a new narrative alongside the narrative of loss. This narrative is driven by the plants themselves as they express a “non-conscious intentionality” within the texts (Marder “What Is

Plant Thinking? 124). By acknowledging plant communicative potential and understanding the ways the text is becoming plant, I am able to unearth herbal voices within long nineteenth century literature and construct a vegetal narrative of plant intent. Ironically, as society devalued plants, the plants themselves seem only offer more to the culture, holding space without appropriating it for themselves as they continue to offer a vegetal counter-narrative which sometimes works against the grain of the text (Marder “Resist Like a Plant”). By tracing the literature of the long nineteenth century, this vegetal narrative begins in harmony with human narratives and ends the era in violence against humanity. Through an understanding of the social and literary shifts which devalued potent herbs and a simultaneous reading of literary vegetal agency, a more complex understanding of long nineteenth century literature can be formed in which plants cease to be inert bodies which humans acted upon but are, instead, agentic beings calling out for an eco-centric world view despite humanity’s refusal to listen to them.

My dissertation begins, then, with a discussion of Keats’s apothecary knowledge and herbal poetry. John Keats wrote during a time in which the knowledge of domestic herbs was still a masculine form of knowledge that was socially acceptable and a point of pride. As a trained apothecary, he imparted much of his knowledge of medicinal herbs into his writing. In “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats states that he feels as if he’d drunk hemlock. Hemlock is a powerfully poisonous plant. Yet when it is titrated properly, it can be used as a sleeping aid or treatment for a cough, both common uses for it during the nineteenth century. Later in the poem he describes a meadow and includes among the listed flowers, “white hawthorn,” another plant that is poisonous naturally, but can be used like digitalis to treat heart conditions in small doses. Even the line in the poem describing a “purple-stained mouth” can be interpreted as potentially referencing medicinal herbs. Nightshade is well known for its purple berries. However,

nightshade is known as a drug, belladonna, because it was commonly drunk by women to make them appear more attractive as it is a powerful vasodilator and would cause a flush and dilated pupils. For Keats, writing was a feminine act of reproduction and pregnancy, and so these moments in which he as the writer is queered are important to the creation of the poetic self. It also is necessary to consider when reading his relationship with herbal medicine. The latter is formed in partnership with potent herbs for an apothecary like Keats, these plants represented the tools of his trade: something to be used and respected. Plants however are extended across fields in his poetry, activating the poet's mind as potent allies.

Browning's discussion of plants, however, identifies them as tools to be used and owned by humans and as such my dissertation shifts to read Robert Browning's "Paracelsus" (1835). "Paracelsus" represents this titular early herbalist as a robust quester of "sacred knowledge," but humanist knowledge only (2). Paracelsus was considered the father of modern toxicology and was a medical practitioner for whom plants and their uses were integral to his life. The real figure of Paracelsus was deeply rooted in plants and the natural world. His masculinity and social worth are never in question as the poem explores his successes and failures in this quest. He sets out to study the natural sciences for the good of his society. For Paracelsus, a masculine character in nineteenth century literature, this knowledge is a form of power. If he can bring it back to his society, he will be able to bring them power. However, despite wide knowledge of Paracelsus as an herbalist, Browning defoliates him. Paracelsus sees plants as inert things to possess or tools to use to define humanity and human suffering. Browning defoliates the historical figure of Paracelsus, shifting his thirst for knowledge away from plants, toxicology, and even alchemy, to a desire for philosophical knowledge. In the process of doing so, he

entirely changes who Paracelsus was, making him into a Victorian philosopher instead of a Renaissance medical practitioner.

This shift to philosophical knowledge, though, is never seen as anything but a noble pursuit. Even as it consumes Paracelsus to the point that he abandons his friends and loved ones, the quest for philosophical knowledge is rewarded. He is able to learn from his mistake and value love and friendship more in his later years, bettering society through emotion rather than philosophical inquest. Despite this character defoliation, though, plants are present in the poem. As Paracelsus seeks to use plants, the vegetal images in the poem tell of an ecosystem in which humanity can become immortal through the life-giving decay of the seasons. The knowledge that Paracelsus himself seeks, equality and the knowledge of God himself, is already known by the plants in this narrative. Their agency is expressed as they subtly tell a counter-narrative which, when examined, undermines Paracelsus' purposes. Had he listened to the plants; he could have saved himself a great deal of hardship. In this way, "Paracelsus" stands in stark opposition to texts with female or queered characters for whom knowledge, especially in regard to medicinal plants, is dangerous or terrifying, while simultaneously representing the Victorian defoliation of literature and life that negatively impacted plant life during the time. This poem contains plants that are written off, and yet resist obsolescence as they continue to tell a narrative of eco-centric equality.

My dissertation then shifts to examine George Eliot's representation of Silas Marner as the Village Wise Woman which demonstrates this fear factor around plants and the gendering of plant knowledge. It is well known that in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, the titular character is queered by several factors including what Jeff Nunokawa famously refers to Marner's "perverse" non-reproductive fondlings of both his golden coins and little Eppie's hair. Described as a

“pallid, undersized man” who suffers cataleptic fits and as the primary caregiver to Eppie, Marner’s masculinity can be read as an open question in the text. However, it is less well known that Marner’s equally questionable gendered herbal knowledge also serves to queer him. His gender is complicated when he displays knowledge of domestic herbs and is able to use that knowledge to heal the sick. Silas does not fit into the gendered spaces that his peers have and, therefore, becomes seen as unnatural. Turning the commonplace of the natural world on its metaphorical ear, Silas’s nature is queered in that “particular kinds of nature have been cultivated in order to produce and promote particular forms of sexual subjectivity” (Mortimer-Sandilands, 12), but Silas does not conform to his expected “nature”. While initially the herbal knowledge of an apothecary was a form of robust masculine knowledge, during the nineteenth century traditional knowledge of medicinal plants was forgotten in favor of “patent medicines,” biochemical drugs created in laboratories as well as commercial drugs created in factories whose ingredients were based on chemical formulas instead of vernacular names of plants.

The result of this cultural shift meant that knowledge and cultivation of domestic medicinal herbs declined. Most significantly for the character of Silas Marner, the reputation of herbal medicine declined as well, becoming a practice for potentially unlicensed dispensers instead of medical practitioners. For the survival of their profession it became important for medical doctors to characterize plant-based medicine as not equivalent to medical advice or even as poison (Barrett, 205), contributing to the rise of a “poison panic” (Miller, 97) in popular culture. Marner’s position both reflects and constructs the transformation of a medicinal herb into a “Wise Woman’s” “charm” (Eliot, 16) or worse, a dangerous poison. For Marner, this knowledge is feminine, learned from his mother when he was a child, and even shameful or pagan. He resists filling demand for his potions, Marner’s “stuff” (16) and even treating his own

illness through the herbs he knows to be effective. While Marner is not a woman, he is a feminized and queered character that displays the beginnings of the social movement to fear women with medical knowledge or power. Only through parenthood is Marner able to find peace in the narrative. Despite giving up his herbal medicine, though, Silas Marner continues to be tempted by plants. The herbs he once knew become fondled like his gold once was as his adopted daughter becomes a metaphorical plant which he tends to. Despite Eliot's work to naturalize a contained floral garden and the modernity of an industrialized world, plants tempt Marner like a past lover, remaining in his life and resisting modernity in the narrative as they continue to enact their agency through Marner's desires.

Finally, my dissertation turns to L.T. Meade's poisonous female villain, in *The Sorceress of the Strand*, who is a fully actualized woman at the center of the New Woman movement and the poison panic of the late nineteenth century. Madame Sara is shown to be a New Woman "by emphasizing not only her commercial success, but also her scientific and medical prowess," as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller (81) puts it. Madame Sara is, therefore, able to represent popular culture and newly commonplace social fears of what a woman could become since women were finding themselves having more social and capitalistic freedom. She is, similar to previously mentioned characters, a medical practitioner. However, instead of being a "wise woman" or an apothecary, she is a doctor and surgeon similar to the male doctors and surgeons of her contemporary time. She is also a skilled chemist and creates capitalistic success for herself by selling beauty products to women. But this skill in chemistry and medical knowledge is also what she uses to create poisons and kill victims.

Madame Sara is not a truly domestic character in the way that someone like Silas is. As Jennifer Halloran notes, "these stories establish [...] Madame Sara's femininity and

foreignness—she is half-Indian and half-Italian” (176). But her method of choice for killing is still very domestic and is based off the wild herbs of the area. In one story she kills using the poison hyoscine which is, earlier in the story, described as “unknown to European toxicologists.” Such a statement would suggest this as a foreign substance to mimic Sara’s foreignness. However, hyoscine is derived from the stinking nightshade plant, a plant common to Europe and which had been previously used as a treatment for nausea or stomach problems. The lack of knowledge of the toxicologists displays the loss of information on domestic herbs from the standard medical knowledge of the people. Through her connections with plants and with the New Woman movement, Madame Sara becomes a vegetal figure, able to be read as representative of plant agency within the stories. This affords plants the physical ability to enact agency, taking the power and agency for themselves through Madame Sara’s hands as she commits vegetal-based violence.

In conclusion, by reading plant agency it becomes possible to disentangle plants from human narratives and, instead, entangle human narratives in an ecological awareness which presents humanist values as dangerous to the ecosystem and harmful to humanity as well. By introducing plant voices to discussions of ecocriticism, the ecocritical community is able to expand its understanding of the Anthropocene and environment from a generally humanist one to a viewpoint which understands and reflects the interdependency of the entire ecosystem. For John Keats, common medicinal plants and their uses are casually referenced, but their powers are so agentic as to become partners in creativity. Even though Keats as an author is queered through his image of self and relationship with poetry, his scientific and botanical knowledge is seen as powerful and masculine, much as Browning’s Paracelsus’ scientific knowledge. However, by the time that George Eliot wrote, the queering of Silas Marner as a character is enough that his use

of plants to create medicine is seen as magical and dangerous. By L.T. Meade's time, in contrast, medicinal plants are considered toxic and mysterious, dangerous villains which take agency for themselves. The knowledge of domestic herbs as medicine was lost to masculine medical society. The plants became dangerous and deadly. This led to them being aligned with women as women were found more power and freedom and society (a dangerous prospect in the eyes of many men). In this way, the New Woman and the domestic herb were conflated into characters like Madame Sara, a powerful and independent woman with the ability to kill using the forgotten knowledge of the plants around her. The consequences of this narrative of plants matter not just to literary analysis, but for the survival of an ecosystem of domestic plants themselves.

Chapter 1: Vegetal Bodies in John Keats' Poetry

Romantic literature is infamous for its “Promethean masculinity” in which mortal “man” seeks to master a seemingly chaotic vibrant material world in the tradition of that classical myth. This nineteenth century ideal of masculinity, reflected famously in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, presents the educated man as empowered, expressing his power over nature in a display of masculinity¹. Because Prometheus stole the element of fire from the gods and harnessed it for human use, he became “unbound,” transcended mere matter, to become momentarily godlike, a feat the Satanic school poets, Byron and Shelley, memorialize in their Prometheus poems. In the work of the apothecary poet John Keats, however, the human world and the material world seem more intimately entangled. As a healer, for example, Keats sought less to “master,” more to partner with and sustain, the vibrant tools of his trade, plants. Marked by their maker’s understanding of plant potency as well as what we now call biodiversity, Keats’s poems shift the Satanic school’s discourse of mastery over the material world into something far more complex and arguably far more ecological, interested in a wide variety of vegetal and human bodies, both powerful and vulnerable. In poems which follow the transformative ecological cycle of birth, decay, and rebirth of plant and human bodies, or which follow the infusion of plants into people and the work of people in sustaining plant life, Keats may evade Romantic masculinity’s “culture of mastery,” to produce a more equitable, “trans-corporeal” nature which acknowledges a shared intimacy and vulnerability between a multitude of material bodies.

¹ My definition of masculinity is simple here and based off of Biblical ideas. Using the Christian concepts of man’s rights, men have dominion over both women and the Earth. In this way, masculinity becomes defined by what it is not. It is not vegetal, it is not animal, and it is not woman. Using this definition and appreciating the nineteenth century’s religious understandings of self and of gender, I do not use masculinity to discuss concepts of male dominance displays over other men, but the socially accepted and understood superiority of the male gender during the majority of the nineteenth century. This is inherently reductive, but as views of gender representing a spectrum were not prominent during Nineteenth-Century England, I will be working within the social binary that viewed male as dominant and “not-human or not-male” figures as inherently subordinate (Butler).

If, as ecocritic Stacy Alaimo writes, “human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment,’” Keats’s representations of intimacy between human beings and plants may allow readers to understand the “natural” world as “lively, emergent, inter-acting phenomena” instead of “passive, distinct resources for human use and control” (*Material Feminisms* 238, 249). Moreover, dominant culture and ideals of masculine dominion over the world become allied as nature and femininity come together in this intimate caretaking role that Keats depicts. If caring is “feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness,” then Keats’ poetry depicts a feminine caring for nature which, during the nineteenth century, went against masculine expectations (Noddings 2). The intimacy is a feminine intimacy. Certainly, this intimacy with plants fosters an understanding that “human beings are, and have always been, part of the ecosystem,” and regaining that intimacy may be one of the first steps necessary to ascertaining how the current relationship between humankind and nature can be altered for the benefit of both parties (Howe 2). To do this however, the agency of plants in Keats must be restored retroactively, simultaneously restoring plant agency while removing from Keats the expectations and boundaries imposed by nineteenth century masculinity. Similar to the concept of becoming, viewing humanity and plants as co-evolved, entangled, and both emergent alongside each other, fosters ecological thought. This allows for “corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science studies [to] meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo 3). Tracing intimacy between plants and people extends both beyond their boundaries, situating them both as agents in an ever-shifting flow of life. Much as social ideologies tend to see humanity as self-sufficient and self-sustaining, “human health is undeniably affected by the health of the environment” (92), the ecosystem itself suffers first in this human-centric attitude. “‘The animal’ has played the lead and proximate role for marking,

conceptually, what differentiates “the human” being from every other being,” thus humanity has placed itself at the top of a self-created ecological understanding with animals serving as opposition through which to define humanity’s superiority and plants falling to the bottom of the hierarchy in the role of non-sentient, barely living set-dressing for the “natural” world (Houle 37). This hierarchy has not benefitted animal life, nor has it benefitted plant life. Understanding the full capacity of plants, their ability to communicate with one another, their responses to stimuli that take on almost linguistic patterns, the massive environmental toll of perceived human superiority has been hugely detrimental to vegetal bodies with their own forms of consciousness (Houle 44). John Keats’ placement of humanity and plants on a horizontal plane, as equally agentic within his work serves to confound anti-ecological boundaries. Keats sees beyond the boundaries of skin to understand humans as impacting and being impacted upon by plants and he treats plants as powerful, sometimes even revered, figures from which humanity can learn and grow. Reflective of not just his contemporary society’s reliance on herbal bodies, but of a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem, reading plants in Keats poems may show us how to halt the “defoliation of culture” Randy Laist decries in his work in critical plant studies, helping us to regain plant literacy which aids biodiversity even now.

This chapter then reads two poems which in particular engage vegetal, male, and female bodies, drawing them together in a type of intimacy which resists the anti-ecological hierarchies of Promethean masculinity. At the same time, Keats’s interest in the potency of plants far exceeds their use as both symbols and triggers for human memory or artistic inspiration as associated with the Lake School of Wordsworth or Coleridge. These too view plants as “passive resources” for the artist. Ultimately, Keats’s collusion with vegetal bodies is stronger than

Coleridge's use of opium to induce visions or Wordsworth's evocative daffodils because it acknowledges the more-than-human life of plants.

Keats's poems "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Isabella: or the Pot of Basil," often stress the material lives of bodies, creating an ontological intimacy between species and alerting us to an unexpected vegetative agency which is both disturbing and potentially ecological. In "Isabella: or the Pot of Basil," for example, the grieving heroine spreads soil and basil seeds over her murdered lover, Lorenzo's, head and waters the strange assemblage with her tears. Human flesh itself becomes "green," a beloved "Sweet Basil" plant, fertilized and watered by the human body and beloved as a green body by Isabella. The intimacy between human and vegetative bodies in the poem grows as the basil does, reminding the reader that all flesh is grass. We imagine Isabella tasting the plant, its sweetness comforting the grieving girl and reuniting her corporeally with her lover's body. This kind of material, horizontal relationship between people and plants erodes the boundary between them, revealing one species' close relation to the other. When her pot of basil is stolen, Isabella dies. While she lives, the plant lives, both "in peace" as Isabella "hung over her sweet Basil evermore/ And moisten'd it with tears unto the core." In such poems, particularly his later works, Keats's knowledge of medicinal plants and the human body allow them to converge in sometimes idyllic, sometimes disturbing ways, revealing people and plants coexisting as equally alive in defiance of Enlightenment thought which argues that plant matter is "inert," and that "man" is its master. Matthew Hall traces such a view of plants as "inert, passive entit[ies], available for subduing and dominating" back to Aristotle, marking the human-centric view as existing as a part of culture even as philosophers and botanically minded individuals advocate for changing social norms (38). Rather than following the trends of many

writers of his time, Keats's work represents the ecological thought of interdependence, human vulnerability, and even vegetative agency as well as mutualism between people and plants.

Indeed, writing before the decline of plant literacy, Keats's understanding of plants is marked by his knowledge of the intersections between human and plant culture. Attending school at Guy's Hospital from 1815 to 1816 when he received his apothecary's license, John Keats's training included both theoretical and practical knowledge of herbs; he had to "know [the herbs'] chemical properties and reactions in order to compound them," and he also had to have field knowledge which enabled him to find the herbs he needed for his compounds in the wild (Goellnicht 84). From a syllabus-based advertisement for the school at Guy's Hospital, Donald C. Goellnicht compiles a list of classes that Keats would have had to have taken during his time of study there. Among the list of chemistry and practical medicine courses is a course in *materia medica* and a course in medical botany which included "excursions outside" (Goellnicht, 24). These required courses include a class that focuses on the *materia medica*, a Latin term rooted in the compiling of herbal medicine and treatments based off of clinical observation, and one on botany taught by William Salisbury who took students into the fields where "specimens were gathered and named, and afterwards the students met with Salisbury at the nearby inn to discuss the medicinal uses of each specimen" (Goellnicht 33). This act of foraging for specimens to discuss efficiently sums up many of the defining factors of the herbal medicine of the era that is reflected in Keats' poetry. The plants being discussed and studied, while their specific species are not known, are neither exotic nor foreign specimens as they were found relatively nearby in the foraging lectures that Salisbury took students on. They are plants so close to home that the students did not even need a special trip to find them. It was possible to walk around nearby green spaces and collect plants that were then the source of the medical lecture.

With John Gerard's *The Herball* serving as the final widespread herbal before the early twentieth century, Keats and his contemporaries would have continued to use Gerard's collection even though it was fairly old by then. This is helped by the fact that most of the botanical information contained in Gerard's herbal was collected from other older herbals and was largely unchanged even up to the early twentieth century when Maude Grieve created her *Modern Herbal*. Between classic herbals, contemporary botanical studies, and *materia medica* that was based off of clinical experience, apothecaries of Keats' time had a good working knowledge of how to treat common ailments with herbs. Likewise, a plant like "deadly nightshade" also had medicinal uses. One of the most popular and widespread herbals even during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was that of John Gerard. Compiled and translated by Dr. Priest and, after Priest's death, John Gerard, the collection was considered "to be a Bible to English herbalists" and was updated and used as a cornerstone herbal text by herbalists even in the nineteenth century (Sanecki 51). Gerard's herbal, while suggesting that the plant be banished from gardens to protect children from the tempting, purple berries, acknowledges that "it easeth the intollerable pains of the head-ache" and also will "cause sleepe," despite the deadly nature of the berries (Gerard 341). Both of these sources, central to early nineteenth century herbal medicine, display an understanding that a plant, even a very dangerous one like *atropa belladonna*, deadly nightshade, can still serve a medical purpose. Discorides *De Materia Media*, the original *materia medica* from 70A.D. that was built upon and served as the foundation for *materia medica* education in the nineteenth century lists *atropa belladonna* as very poisonous but, in small doses, good for dropsy, an effective sleep aid, and the roots, when made into a tea, are something that "takes away dullness of the sight" (Discorides 620).

It is this multi-faceted approach to plants that defines the herbal images of Keats' poetry. He appreciates not only the beauty or the superficial use of the plant, but also the deeper purposes that an apothecary would know. As a companion to the apothecary, herbal texts, large collections describing medicinal plants and their appearance, cultivation, and practical uses, were texts "designed for the common people" but used by the layperson and professional alike (Sanecki 47). Plant lore then is widely shared amongst Keats readership who were treated by herbs obtained from home or from medical professionals. The names and information about the plants themselves was public and private information. An ill person taking medicine could familiarize themselves with the herbs they were taking, learning about the benefits of the medicine as well as the potential risks of high doses. This knowledge covered the volatility of some plants and demystified medicine, supporting an open flow of knowledge between folk remedies and prescribed medication.

Likewise, as an apothecary, Keats was trained to gather many herbs without hindering their growth, knowing that if they are cut before flowering the plant will flourish and spread. Gerard's *Herball* noting when to harvest each plant in order to have peak potency but without harming the plant itself and the next season's growth. Such training fostered an appreciation for the whole bodies of plants over their blooms. Such an appreciation displays not only the training that Keats received, but the lasting impression that medicinal herbs left on him. Herborizing was a welcome relief from the pressures and grim realities of his medical training and Keats continued it for his entire life. In letters to his brother, Thomas Keats, John Keats describes a walking tour of Scotland and the beauty of plants, a path "wooded on each side, and green overhead, full of Foxgloves" that he had the pleasure of exploring (Keats, "25-27 June 1818"). He also writes in his letters about regular walks that he takes that lead him past "some meadows

and at last a country alley of gardens” (Keats, “17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27 September 1819”). On these walks the closeness and presence of the vegetal world is not, from what Keats says, the sole purpose of the walks. Instead, these walks represent the way in which respect for plants is wholly integrated into Keats’ life.

If at one time he went out to collect specimens, catalogue, and define vegetal life, he also later seems to go on these walks for the emotional communion with plants that he engages in. In letters to his sister Fanny, he discusses planting bulbs in and watching flowers bloom and the pleasure that it brings him that is “almost as fine as barley sugar drops are to a schoolboy’s tongue” (Keats “13 April 1819”). This joy of experience is reflective of why Keats’ writing stands out as promoting and depicting a relationship between man and vegetation that is horizontal and for the benefit of both parties. Keats’ letters depict a walking poet, something not uncommon during this era. This was a time when plants and medicinal herbs were a part of every-day life. But the presence of herbal bodies, while beneficial to the proliferation of domestic plant species, does not inherently mean equality between man and plant. Even if it is mutually beneficial, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century treatment of herbs does not necessitate a horizontal relationship between man and plant. The evidence of Keats’ different relationship with plants and the difference that his walking had in his life is evident in his poetry. His poetry is more than the poems of an untrained walking poet.

For John Keats, this horizontal relationship is a part of the ontology of his life. As lecture notes that Keats took during his time studying at Guy’s hospital show, plants were on Keats’ mind even when that was not the subject at hand. Notes on anatomy and the manipulation of a jaw stop mid-sentence, while the sides of the notes are decorated with multiple doodles of flowers, a wild growing pansy species standing out as the most detailed of the drawings (Evans).

His mind wandered from the lecture on the human body and into vegetal life. In many poems, the sight of green leaves and flowers is a great pleasure, and he, in turn, lifts up potent vegetal life in his poems, placing herbal bodies into a position of equality with Keats as the speaker of his poems. Plants filled his education and in his training, he learned how to walk in nature not as a dominating force but as a partner. This connection to nature and respect for vegetal bodies is seen in his writing. By closely examining the vegetal presence in “Ode to a Nightingale,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” “Ode on Melancholy,” “Endymion,” and “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil” this emotional tie to both plants and medicine becomes clear. Through the depiction of a vibrant natural world, foliated with potent herbal sources of medicine, Keats represents an idealized early nineteenth century world in which mankind and plants live in a horizontal relationship that foregrounds the potency of vegetal power as well as the benefits such a partnership brings to humanity.

The Herbal Body of the Poet-Physician

The power of plants in Keats’s poetry is immediately apparent in “Ode to a Nightingale” where the speaker seeks a dangerous intimacy with other bodies. Rather than desiring to own or control vegetal bodies, Keats wants to partner with them and to learn new states of being from them, desiring an intimate connection rather than mastery. Feeling as if he had drunk “hemlock” or “some dull opiate” (Keats 2, 3), Keats sets the green tone of this poem and its exploration of material boundaries. Wishing for a flower-like “purple-stained mouth;/ that I might drink and leave the world unseen” (Keats 18-19), Keats calls for medicinal culture: “a beaker full of the warm South” (15). The potent plant drink seems to act alongside Keats when he seems to wish for death saying, “that I might drink, and leave the world unseen” (Keats 18-19). In this poem,

man and plants are partners. I propose that even Keats's notorious death wish, his desire here to "leave the world unseen" is ecological. Contemporary discussion of the Anthropocene tends to focus on the idea of an ecological footprint, the impact each individual has on the world during their lifetime. Plants, though, leave the world unseen. They do not leave a footprint when they die, they simply return their nutrients and seeds to the ecosystem. Keats levels his own humanity to the body of a plant, the speaker's mouth itself becoming a purple flower; he seems to desire, in this poem, to simply become one with nature in his death.

The perceived ontological lines between man and plant that define man as superior continue to blur and be erased as the poem progresses and the greenery of the land becomes peppered with distinct plants, each with their own medicinal uses. The nightingale is a bird from "beeche green" that makes the speaker long for a drink that tastes of "country green" as he sits at night surrounded by "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (Keats 9, 13, 40). Keats, longing for the nightingale's perceived freedom from old age and death, imagines himself surrounded by a verdant landscape with grass, trees, "white hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine" (Keats 46). Hawthorne was used to treat "fluxes of blood" and the powder taken as a tea was considered "good against the stone," meaning it helped with cardiac issues and kidney stones (Gerard 1328). Eglantine, too, is another name for the sweet briar rose which was used as a medicinal rose mostly for the astringency of the petals (Gerard 1263). The plants here however offer a different kind of medicine to Keats's speaker; they overcome him like the more than human song of the nightingale. This green backdrop to Keats' poem is not a lifeless set dressing of greenery. Once again Keats seems to anticipate contemporary ecological discourse surrounding the importance of plant literacy to biodiversity and hence, ecology. His poem is filled with unique and living plants that carry with them a power in medicine but also power in

their numbers within this poem. In this way the poem becomes almost didactic, informing the reader of diverse plant species and providing them an idea of what a diverse ecology looks like, an act that fosters plant literacy which leads to greater environmental awareness.

By the end of the poem, Keats seems to lose himself in the landscape and choose the natural over the human world. As the nightingale's song fades, the poem follows the fading song "past the near meadows, over the stream still, / Up the hill-side" and into "the next valley-glades" (Keats 76-78). While Keats says that the music of the nightingale has "fled," the poem seems to follow the sound out into the natural world, going past over, and up with the music as it echoes through the landscape (80). Keats, too, has not been left behind by the song of the nightingale as he asks, "do I wake or sleep?" (80). He has been bodily pulled away by the song of the nightingale. He has been intoxicated by it and lost himself in the verdant natural world so that he no longer knows if he is awake or dreaming. In "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats seems to immerse his entire consciousness in the greenery of the natural world, drawn in by the song of the nightingale. Like Keats himself did as a student apothecary, the poem winds through the nearby fields, naming and observing the vegetation as the poem moves towards its conclusion in which life and death, wakefulness and sleep, and health and harm seem to be mixed together in a deeply pleasurable uncertainty.

In "Ode to a Nightingale," the humanity and physical existence of Keats body and mind become blurred and seem to dissolve into the natural world. For ecocritic Stacy Alaimo, such an understanding of "trans-corporeality," the idea that "human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'" is crucial to ecological thought (Alaimo, *Material Feminism* 238). It allows for an interaction with nature that views the "natural" world as "lively, emergent, inter-acting phenomena" instead of "passive, distinct

resources for human use and control” (249). Keats does this through his dual representation of a vulnerable human body and his presentation of plants as potent and powerful entities in the poem. His naming of plants as well as the prevalence of medicinal herbs highlights the power each of these vegetal bodies holds. While written at the start of the modernization of the medical field, herbal medicine was still culturally relevant to Keats and his contemporaries. The poem is not a didactic lesson in what power plants have as medicines. Instead it is an act of negative capability in which Keats becomes lost in the trans-corporeality of being, his poet body becoming vegetal so that the song of the nightingale and his words as a poet become indistinguishable, leading poet and reader alike into blissful uncertainty in which mind and body are lost in the greenery of the world, affected by the potent plants but also seemingly spared from death by his eternal “entanglement” with green plants. By desiring to become vegetal and, thus, be spared from death itself, Keats represents humans as merely one small part in a greater ecosystem. The ecosystem was present before his birth and it will outlive him, so only by becoming a part of it can he truly live on forever. While this does seem to elevate plants above humanity, that kind of hierarchal construction goes against the interplay of man and nature of this image. Instead, Keats seems to be depicting the ever-present greenery of the natural system, a system in which individual plant bodies live, reproduce, and die to create a constant vegetal life, is timeless and undying, unlike his individual human existence. By seeing humans and plants as having an equal relationship, Keats finds a desire to become plant and enter into their system in which the whole is undying, and the individual is simply a part of the whole.

There is no toxicity in this relationship as there is after medicine and consumption became industrialized, and yet the plants in “Ode to a Nightingale” that could be argued as toxic, when traced, reveal the immense power of plants to overwhelm individual human life as well as

the erosion of boundaries between humans and plants. The drowsy sense of hemlock that starts out the poem can be traced through Keats' medical training as a well-known herb, revealing his lifelong connections with illness and death as well as his lifelong passion of medicine. It reveals a line of healing and survival that helps to drive home the end of the poem: a moment of serenity in nature and a moment of freedom from death. Hemlock, a plant easily considered toxic, reflects a trans-corporeal peace that the poem is mired in even as Keats seems to struggle with life and death. Keats' poem represents, then, a horizontal relationship between human and plant in which both parties seem aware of their state of becoming and welcome the open border between human body and plant body.

This struggle between joy and melancholy in "Ode to Melancholy" continues to find intimacies between states of being as well as between bodies, the bee and the human speaker who both find the taste of joy leads to its end, both ultimately becoming Melancholy's "trophy." Because the poem focuses on the entanglement of joy and melancholy, Keats warns that potent herbs like wolf's bane will curtail an understanding of these pleasures. He begins the herbal presence in this poem by warning against making wine from wolfsbane which John Gerard's Herbal describes as "counted to be very dangerous and deadly" (Gerard 968). The image of the poisonous wine stands out, though, because Keats does not simply mention ingesting wolfsbane. He goes through a more detailed description of how the wine would be made, suggesting that the reader not "twist / Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted" (Keats 1-2). Keats provides an image of the mechanical twisting and extraction that would be necessary to collect the poisonous juices from the wolfsbane plant's roots that are dense, bulbous, and similar "to a nut" in their appearance and texture (Gerard 968). This twisting, and extraction compares to eating a grape that is somehow representative of joy. Neither should one consume nightshade the "ruby grape of Proserpine"

(Keats 4). In the ode's final stanza, Keats suggest that melancholy cannot actually be seen by anyone except those who "can purse Joy's grape against his palate fine" (Keats 28). In this image, the grape of Joy contains, at its center, the true sadness of melancholy, which is not a terrible thing to experience by Keats' telling of it. In fact, although Keats warns against consuming poison, he still advocates the consumption of sadness, repeating that plant-based grape image to represent the core of sadness that is melancholy. In this way plants are not just deadly poisons or food to eat. Rather they lead the sufferer to a place of honor, the ultimate leveling, becoming one of Melancholy's beloved "trophies."

The path to this honor is through the natural world, according to Keats. He suggests that melancholy and the blooming world go hand in, so glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, [...] Or on the wealth of globed peonies" (Keats 15, 17). Similar to Keats seeking out the undying greenery of nature when he is plagued by thoughts of death in "Ode to a Nightingale," he is advocating for immersing oneself in vegetal beauty in order to escape sadness in "Ode on Melancholy." The vocabulary he uses surrounding these common flowers is one of excess and a richness that borders on the sublime. Keats suggest that the reader should "glut thy sorrow" on roses. Glut means consuming an excess or abundance of a thing, but it is also closely related to the idea of gluttony, a concept commonly understood as a sin. Therefore, this image can be read as Keats suggesting that sorrow intake a gluttonous number of roses, an abundance that is so excessive to be almost sinful. Or, if roses are not available, sorrow can also feed on a "wealth of globed peonies" (Keats 17). Like the consumption of poison being warned against, Keats is speaking again to consumption, this time advocating for the metaphorical consumption of floral bodies in order to quiet pure sorrow and understand the entanglement of joy and sorrow.

The final thought that Keats leaves the poem on is one of the necessities of this botanical consumption, even though it leads to his own powerlessness. Keats says that melancholy resides within joy and that melancholy is only appreciated and viewed by those who “can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (Keats 28). But for those who are able to do so, “his soul shalt taste the sadness of her might, / And be among her cloudy trophies hung” (29-30). Once again this is a moment in which man seems to be brought low, made into a trophy, but the imposing of hierarchy goes against the images of the poem. Joy is not above melancholy, instead melancholy serves as the core of joy, a part of it and not a truly separate entity. Therefore, man being reduced to a trophy must be understood in the greater context of the poem and society. Trophies of both animals and plants were a staple of nineteenth century naturalism. John J. Audubon, a respected naturalist whose life-like paintings of birds were and are respected pieces of naturalist art, only achieved his images by killing dozens upon dozens of a species and then stringing them up on a wire mesh to pose them in life-like ways. In his journals of his time in Labrador in 1833, Audubon describes his search for an arctic puffin specimen saying, “I took a stand, loaded and shot twenty-seven times, and killed twenty-seven birds” (Audubon 426). Audubon exerted violent control over the natural world in order to create artistic trophies of birds, and in this poem, Keats reverses the relationship and allows the eating of the grape of joy to transform man into a trophy for melancholy. Rather than simply putting plant life above human life, this image is a leveling image in that man must now experience what plants cut for bouquets and animals stuffed for display had already been experiencing. For Keats, this leveling through man being made a trophy is an ideal choice. By choosing this, by not consuming the poisonous grapes but, instead, by surrounding himself in vegetal beauty and consuming “Joy’s grape,” man is able to fully appreciate joy and understand the melancholy therein (Keats 28). The ode, then, becomes

almost didactic, instructing the reader on what an ideal life should have, human and vegetal equality.

Keats's famous epic poem "Endymion" continues this narrative of vegetal understanding and adulation. A dense poem of numerous images, the loose, flowing narrative tells the story of Endymion and his quest to understand and cultivate his love for the goddess Diana in winding snippets of poetic stories. In this poem Keats seems to be "concerned with gathering textual flowers and poetically reproducing them" (Bewell 74). Keats begins to foliate his poem from the very start. The famous first line of the poem, "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," is followed by the line "it will never pass into nothingness" (1). Like the narrative of "Ode to a Nightingale," "Endymion" seems to be quickly concerned with longevity and the ability to find ageless. Once again, this agelessness is found in nature, being kept in a "bower" with a "flowery band" being worn like a restraint to "bind" the narrator to the Earth (1). Keats' understanding of human interconnectedness with the natural world is becoming more literal here, plants being depicted as a kind of a wreath, but one that binds a human to the planet. It is this binding that allows the narrator to find "some shape of beauty" even in the darkness of life (1). In the narrative which winds from place to place, plants and green images permeate every story and seem to reflect the system of growth, decay, and regrowth that plants undergo every year as Winter kills off greenery which regrows each Spring

One of the most famous verdant scene in the poem comes in the ode to sorrow which depicts a bower in which Sorrow's bower is described, the cool melancholy of the scene being broken by the arrival of Bacchus and his followers. In the ode to Sorrow, the bower of sorrow is described as a place where "a lover would not tread/ a cowslip on the head, / though he should dance from eve till peep of day" (136). In this place which contains the joy of a lover and is a

place of sorrow, the human joy and vegetal life are able to coexist peacefully. Though the lover dancing literally every night from sun down to sun up, he never steps on the cowslip flowers, Cowslips, a variety of primrose, are standing proud in this space in which there is not “any drooping flower” (136). This is a space of sorrow. It would make sense for the lover to mourn and for the flowers to droop. But this space is not one of destruction, the greenery of the land seeming to prevent sorrow from being a negative emotion. The flowers do not droop, and the lover still dances, supporting an ode to sorrow which ends with the singer treating sorrow like a child, caring for it thoughtfully. The verdant nature of this space seems to create a bridge between humanity and sorrow, the undrooping flowers the only other presence aside from sorrow and humanity as human and plant bodies coexist happily in the bower.

The peaceful coexistence of plants and humanity seems to reach its zenith as Endymion dies at the end of the poem. After seeking the love of Diana, Endymion does not end the poem in the space of his beloved Diana, but in a green space with his sister as company. Endymion explains that when he dies, he will pass into Diana’s “holy groves” and then “did rest his head upon a mossy hillock green” (167). Though he does not instantly die, he does become “as a corpse” (167). In this moment, the eternal nature of vegetal life, just as was shown in “Ode to a Nightingale” is evident. The heaven that Endymion moves towards is “groves,” a green space that he looks forward to. In going there, he rests his body on a green hill and becomes he corpse he is in process of becoming as he dies. The “hillock green” is a peaceful place wherein Endymion, after a poem of activity and searching, can find peace. Like the beauty at the start of the poem and Sorrow’s bower, plants are a place of peace and comfort in “Endymion,” their presence in the poem marking spaces of timeless happiness. In these green spaces death is not an

end but is a continuation of happiness, and beauty never fades but simply continues to grow and flourish in a vegetal world, once again mimicking the annual life cycles of many plants.

“Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “Endymion” have another form of instruction present within them, as well. Keats’ repeated use of named and diverse plant species, as well as his urging of readers to lose themselves in the natural world fosters botanical education which has been shown to improve attitudes towards conservation and promote ecological awareness. In a 2010 study of school children, it was found that an “outdoor programme focused exclusively on plants had significant impact on participants’ attitudes towards and knowledge of plants” (Fanoviová and Prokop 547). This study examined not even the content of educational programs, but simply the exposure to the outdoors and the impact it had on attitudes towards plants and a desire to retain information about them. Like a teacher, Keats advocates in “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “Endymion” that the reader immerse themselves in the natural world. He lists off multiple named and common domestic species of plants in each poem, providing specimens that the nineteenth-century British reader could potentially find if they ventured out for walks in nature. Today, however, reading Keats’s transformation of common plants into the sublime has ecological potential. Recognizing his plant literacy promotes biodiversity even now. Because “local knowledge is made to disappear by simply not seeing it,” knowledge of how to care for, support, and maintain local ecosystems can be lost simply by not discussing it and not involving plant knowledge in culture (Shiva 2). Recognizing Keats’ conceptualizing of a horizontal relationship between mankind and plants and their embedding in a wider ecosystem is powerful information aided and abetted by his work’s active pursuit of a social attitude which understands and respects the same.

The Female Body and the Herbal Poet

Keats's representation of the potency of plants over and within the human challenges traditional Promethean masculinity in which men master their environment. Feminist new materialist Stacy Alaimo, for example, points out that being linked to the realm of the "natural" has weaponized Nature against women, people of color, and the queer community while women and other minority groups are simultaneously "denigrated because of their supposed 'proximity' to nature" (Alaimo, *Material Feminism* 239). Non-masculine bodies become viewed as less than masculine bodies through no fault of their own. It is simply in their nature to be weak. Certainly, in Romantic masculinism, women are less than men because they are "mired in 'nature' and thus outside the domain of human transcendence, rationality, subjectivity, and agency" which the male artist deploys (239). Whereas feminist theory has historically worked, then, to separate women from the natural world, trying to categorize them as a part of the male domain of culture, Alaimo suggest that feminism needs a "counter-biology" to push back against previous ideas of biological determinism (241). This "counter-biology" understands that no matter one's race, gender, or sexual identification, humanity is beholden to the same biology as the rest of the material or "natural" world and, therefore, beholden to the sexless, constant renewal of our cells which are, on a fundamental level, not significantly different than the rest of carbon-based life on Earth. This idea, rather than removing woman from materiality itself enters her into the latter which Alaimo defines as a markedly trans-corporeal space without division between the realms of human and purportedly inert matter such as plants. Keats anticipates this more horizontal view of gendered human/plant relations in poems like "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

Keats, whose "letters identify poetic process with pregnancy or, in another metaphor of female production, with spinning and weaving," did not write without awareness of femininity

(Wolfson 216). In fact, due to his feminization of the process of writing poetry, his poems are sometimes read as inherently queer, feminizing his male body through the pregnancy and birth of his poems. Because “not only Keats’s contemporaries but also later generations have characterized him as ‘feminine’,” it becomes possible to allow assumption that, despite the political realities for women during the era, John Keats saw women as fully human and he did not fear femininity but, in fact, embraced feminine metaphors for his creative process, continuing on in his writing even as contemporaries accused him of excessive femininity (Richers 209). With this in mind, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” can be read as more than just a warning of the dangers of a seductive woman. Through the connections of the Belle Dame and nature, the poem becomes a warning of consumption of not only women but of nature itself and the consequences therein.

Keats’ feminine ideas of writing and ability to write femininity in an authentic way has led to some critics treating him as a kind of “honorary woman” (Homans, 343). Though Keats’ letters suggest that he sees himself as a “male suitor courting poetry personified as a woman,” he does so not as an extension of the patriarchy, but as a masculine person with a deep love of the feminine creativity that he saw as central to poetry, the association with child-bearing drawing him into a feminized view of writing as a child-bearing activity (343). This use of and appreciation of “the feminine” which Keats considered to be the way in which a poet opened themselves up to the creative process, serving as a yonic and fertile vessel for creativity rather than a phallic controlling force, and to inspiration mirrors his appreciation of nature. He sees what he labels as feminine ways of approaching writing as something that enhances and lifts up his masculine identity of a male poet, just as he sees the natural world as something to lift up

humanity and define the human experience. Keats' relationship with both nature and femininity are displayed in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

The poem begins in a barren landscape. Nature has died out, "the sedge has wither'd from the lake, / and no birds sing" (Keats 3-4). It is, of course, possible to read the withering of the lakeside grasses as a sign of autumn through this image of loss and of emptiness. The sedge grass has withered away, and the birds have fallen silent. This is a scene of death and defoliation. Even the birds, many of which sing year-round, are silent, missing from the dead scene. But, the emptiness of this scene is contrasted by the images of harvest which playfully suggest an intimacy between animals and people. For both, "the harvest is done" and the "granary is full" (7,8). However, the man inhabiting this landscape, however, seems anguished, with a "fading rose" on his cheeks and a "lily" on his brow (Keats 11, 9). The fading rose and lily bring in images of death, a fading redness in cheeks signaling a deathly pallor and the lily carrying with it funereal imagery. The cause of his incumbent death seems to be a woman that he met out in a meadow. He made for her "a garland for her head, / and bracelets too," literally enrobing her in flowers as the two seem to fall in love (17-18). While he clothes her in flowers, she gives him "roots of relish sweet," letting him literally feed off the natural world as the two enjoy their love (25). When he falls asleep, lulled by the woman, he dreams of "pale kings and princes too, / pale warriors" (37-38). These pale men have "starved lips" and provide him with the warning that this woman has enthralled him (41). When he wakes, he is alone and in the autumnal scene that the poem starts in. This relationship and the images of his dream can easily be read as a loss rather than a betrayal. Keats invites us to read the poem two ways: on the one hand the woman may seduce the man and steal his life's vitality without mercy. On the other she may invite a thankless man to share her body, the body he has bedecked in flowers but from which he

ultimately retreats. By reading the woman as a floral body, the poem becomes a warning of what happens when bodies are separated. The speaker of this poem is called “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” or the beautiful woman without mercy (39). However, “merci” is also the French word for thank you. So, while this can be translated as the beautiful woman without mercy, it is also the beautiful woman without thanks. If this woman is the natural world, then the natural world becomes both merciless and without thanks. Considering the ravages of natural disasters, the persistent erosion of water, and the history of humanity taking what it needs from the Earth without considering the consequences, the natural world being both merciless and thankless is corrective and agentic, particularly against the background of the withered agricultural setting of the poem.

The beautiful woman of the poem, presented as a pagan goddess or a temptress, offers him potent plants from under the earth, roots and honey, in exchange for his rather hackneyed gifts of a floral garland and bracelets. If the knight says, “I set her on my pacing steed [...]” he also attempts to “shut her wild eyes” (Keats 21, 31). In response, she may have lulled him to sleep and may “hath [him] in her thrall” (40). The “pale kings and princes” warn this knight of how dangerous the woman is (Keats 37). But these men with “starved lips” and “horrid warning” are themselves horrid (41, 43). Like specters of famine and death, they warn the knight and disrupt his pleasure. Their death and their famine are seemingly blamed on La Belle Dame as their presence in the knight’s dream suggest that they are previous victims warning him of her danger. They starved, and yet La Belle Dame feeds the knight on her wild foraging “roots of relish sweet. / and honey wild” (25-26). Did these kings, leaders of complex social structures of mankind, starve because they rejected her wildness itself? The knight, upon waking, is not dead but is “palely loitering” and appearing like death at the start of the poem (45). The knight sees

nature as a woman to love and interact with, to partner with and cherish. But his beautiful dream is taken away by the warnings of kings and princes.

In this poem Keats seems to show an understanding of the boundaries men place between the entanglement of humanity and nature. Masculinist society, placed apart from wildness, is “deathly-pale” and sickly (Keats 38). In a poem that aligns well with Stacy Alaimo’s desire for a feminist recasting of nature that redefines the space as undomesticated, without gendered spheres, and necessary for all, Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” eroticizes an earthier female figure who offers her knight sweet roots and the fruit of interspecies attraction: wild honey. These images of roots, the covered and private source of life for plants that also sometimes serve as a source of food or medicine, and honey, the product of bees entering into what Linnaean botany considers the genitalia of plants in order to drink nectar to make food for their own young, serving as a vector for the reproduction of plants as they do so, are material examples of undomesticated femininity. The sweet, pale roots of plants, like the legs of a woman, are normally covered by the natural skirts that is the dirt. But in this poem these roots are freed and consumed. In much the same way the intimate, yonic flower is openly penetrated by bees, participating in its own floral sexuality while the bees participate in childbearing and rearing, using their honey to support their colony. While still equating the natural world with femininity, Keats does so in a way that articulates the agency of undomesticated women and a hospitable wilderness. The poem seems to advocate for a horizontal relationship that values the intersection of this identity and this space over the gaunt, masculine wasteland of manmade society.

This theme is strengthened in “Isabella: or, The Pot of Basil.” Keats’ poem tells the story of Isabella who falls in love with Lorenzo, a man who works for her family and is not of the same social class as her. Due to his lower station in life, Isabella’s brothers kill Lorenzo and bury

his body in the forest. After visions of Lorenzo's ghost, Isabella finds his body and digs it up, severing his head and burying it in a pot of dirt in which she plants basil. Watering the plant with her tears, Isabella becomes obsessed with the basil, spending her time with the pot and wasting away with grief while the basil plant flourishes thanks to her watering it so thoroughly with tears. When Isabella's brothers become suspicious of the plant, they dig it up and find Lorenzo's head, the sight of which leads them to flee Florence in horror and they dispose of the pot along the way. Isabella is even more grief stricken at now losing the basil and eventually dies seemingly of a broken heart.

In this poem the vegetal world serves as a respite for Lorenzo and Isabella before ultimately becoming the personification of Lorenzo, plant life and human life becoming one and the same. Early in the poem when Isabella falls in love with Lorenzo Keats says that she "fell sick within the rose's just domain" (34). This line reflects the repeated relationship between plants and medicine that Keats depicts. Isabella does not simply fall in love, but she becomes sick with the feelings that she feels. In this case the roses are not a literal treatment of her ailment, but a metaphorical one, representing the domain of romance and passion. This is why her illness is not in the domain of man or of science, but of roses. Flowers are central to the cure for her illness as well as Lorenzo finally cures her of her fever by speaking to her of his affection saying, "lady! thou leadest me to summer clime, / And I must taste the blossoms that unfold" (66-67). Lorenzo is comparing his love for her to the changing of the seasons, bringing about summer where once there was winter. As with the changing of the seasons, this change to summer brings blossoms which "like a lusty flower in June's caress" grow within Lorenzo's heart (72). Of course, these floral images carry with them images of sexuality. As Amy King suggests, after Linnaeus, a blooming flower became a metaphor for the ephemerality of a young

girl's sexual bloom (King). Alongside this suggestion of sexual attraction and sexuality, though, is a repeated image of floral healing. Isabella has fallen sick with her love as has Lorenzo and the cure, it seems, is to "taste the blossoms" of their romance. Like an herbal medicine, they must ingest this flower in order to be cured.

This floral romance is not to last, though. Keats says, "even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers,/ Know there is richest juice in poison-flower." (103-104). The same metaphorical flower that cured Isabella of her fever can serve as a poison, in this case because Lorenzo is forbidden to Isabella as he is in a caste below her. Isabella's Lorenzo and same love that saves Isabella kills Lorenzo through the poison of her brothers' pride. When he dies however, Lorenzo relies upon Isabella's knowledge of the forest flora to locate his body. His spirit calls out to her: "red whortle-berries droop above my head [...] around me beeches and high chestnuts shed [...] go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, / and it shall comfort me within the tomb" (Keats 298, 300, 303-304). Plants then provide Lorenzo and Isabella an ongoing communion through their leaves and roots. The site of the grave is dense with vegetation; he is literally surrounded on all sides and covered over with vegetal life. And when Lorenzo requests that Isabella cry over his grave to allow him to be at peace, he asks that she cries on "my heather-bloom," implying that the plant's vitality will "comfort me within the tomb."

This intimacy between plant and human body continues as Isabella cuts off Lorenzo's head and uses it to grow a basil plant that she loves as if it were Lorenzo himself. Keats says, "for it's [the head's] tomb did choose / a garden-pot [...] and o'er it set / Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet" (Keats 413-414, 415-416). Lorenzo's body is entangled with the plant. The relationship between human and plant, here, is reciprocal, though. Isabella, who has lost her love and is heartbroken, is not ready to let Lorenzo go. By planting his head in the pot of basil, the

plant itself represents him and she is also able to hide away the macabre remembrance of her lover, keeping a literal part of Lorenzo close to her. In fact, John Gerard's *Herbal* says that "the smell of basil is good for the heart and for the head" (Gerard, 674). While Isabella's head and heart do not have any literal illnesses, she is metaphorically sick in her heart, and so she finds solace laying her head against the pot, crying into the plant and, one can assume, benefiting from the smell of the basil. The basil benefits from this relationship as well, Lorenzo's head and Isabella's tears providing water and nutrition for the plant so that it grew "thick, and green, and beautiful" and so vibrant that it "smelt more balmy than its peers" (Keats 426, 427). The basil is literally feeding off of Lorenzo and Isabella, taking in parts of their bodies and using it to grow its own body stronger and fuller. While this scene is usually understood to be frightening or macabre, it also confronts the idea of the human body as beloved matter. Isabella does not perceive the decaying body as grotesque, but perceives its ecology, its ability to support a green plant, life itself.

In fact, this scene represents a moment of Isabella creating a hybrid of Lorenzo's body and a plant's body. Similar to the idea of trans-corporeality, Isabella literally combines the bodies of Lorenzo and the basil in order to create a new life that represents them both. The classic relationship between man and nature is one in which "freed from his body, the existentialist man masters woman [...] and subdues nature" (Alaimo *Undomesticated Ground* 4). The opposite, though, is happening in Keats' "Isabella: or, The Pot of Basil." Once she buries Lorenzo's head under the basil plant, it is not man that subdues nature, but man that both feeds and is consumed by plants, taking the literal flesh of the man into its roots for nutrition and becoming all the more virile for it. As Lorenzo does not subdue nature, neither does Isabella who works with the vegetation rather than against it. She works with the basil plant, feeding and

watering it, and is rewarded with a living embodiment of her slain lover. While still existing within the idea that women are inherently closer to nature, this situation challenges the idea of man as master of nature and women as reflections of it as Lorenzo becomes a part of the vegetal world while Isabella is the one to shape it.

Because Isabella loves Lorenzo, she loves the plant she has grown. When her brothers discover Lorenzo's head and her basil is taken away, Isabella seems to fall into an even deeper and more frantic grief in which she is "asking for her lost Basil amorously," making clear that she truly loves this plant as if it were a human (Keats 490). In the end she dies "forlorn, / imploring for her Basil to the last" and asking after her basil so much that the country creates a song of "O cruelty, / to steal my Basil-pot away from me!" (Keats 497-498, 503-504). So consuming is her grief over the loss of the basil that she is remembered crying out for it even after her death. This utter devastation speaks to an emotional attachment akin to having lost a lover. If the basil is seen as a site of literal trans-corporeality, a site in which the lines between human and plant are so blurred that the body of a man is consumed by a plant and, therefore, the man becomes a part of the plant, it makes sense that Isabella grieves as if Lorenzo has died all over again as Isabella expresses this trans-species desire. He already died once, but she was able to find his body in a place of heavy vegetation. Isabella is then able to transplant part of Lorenzo into a plant which she cares for and loves. She still grieves, but this new, half Lorenzo and half basil plant gives her enough solace to continue to eat and live. Without it she has no reason to keep living and simply dies, "forlorn," and likely of her broken heart.

This human/plant hybrid that is Isabella's pot of basil represents a physical embodiment of both feminized nature in Keats' poetry as well as Keats's idealized vision for the relationship between man and plants. This poem binds vegetal body and human body together so that their

bodies mesh. The plant literally feeds off a human body, becoming a locus for blurred ontological lines. The pot of basil is simultaneously a common garden herb and also the physical representation of her slain love, Lorenzo. This image of human/plant hybrid challenges Promethean Romanticism. Man does not control nature and, therefore, extract from it something beneficial. Man becomes beholden to nature, losing his physical body in a process that woman facilitates in order to create a mutually beneficial relationship. Lorenzo, Isabella, and the basil enter into a horizontal relationship in which each party feeds and supports another party. Isabella mourns Lorenzo and soothes his spirit, Lorenzo's body feeds the basil, and the basil soothes Isabella's heartache, creating a completely horizontal and equal relationship between the parties no matter their sex or species.

Level Ground on Which to Grow

Keats intervention into the Promethean masculinity of the Satanic school of Romanticism and the instrumentalist vision of the Lake School is a kind of lowering of humanity. A recognition of the reality that for all the social and technological structures that humanity has in place, they are still a part of the life, growth, and death cycle of the natural world. Through this understanding and leveled ground, Keats depicts a rich and penetrating satisfaction with life that makes even the most mundane activities become sublime. His poems "The Human Seasons" and "To Autumn" exemplify the leveling of plants and humanity and highlight the beauty and benefits of seeking out such a relationship.

"The Human Seasons" is a sonnet that focuses not simply on the vegetal, but on the way in which the life of a man is the same as the seasons in a year, reducing an entire lifetime to a single year of seasons. Keats boldly starts the sonnet saying, "four seasons fill the measure of the

year; / There are four seasons in the mind of man” (1-2). In the same way that a year is measured by seasons, so too will he measure the mental progression of a human life. First, of course, comes “lusty Spring, when fancy clear / Takes in all beauty with an easy span” (3-4). Using lusty to mean lively and cheerful, Keats is equating spring to youth in life. Apart from the obvious connections of a growing body and the growing vegetation of spring, Keats connects spring to a youthful mindset because of the ability to “[take] in all beauty with an easy span” (4). Keats is suggesting that youth is defined by the ability to appreciate beauty without needing to focus on only one thing or one aspect. Like an observer on the edge of a massive and beautiful field of flowers, Keats is presenting youth as able to take in beautiful things without being overwhelmed. In this way, the spring of youth is a way to experience the world without also experiencing the sublime, letting the sights fill you without ever becoming overwhelmed.

This understanding of beauty matures into a self-reflective period in Keats’ human summer. This summer is a time of adulthood in which people “luxuriously [...] ruminate” over “Spring’s honied cut of youthful thought” (5, 7, 6). In this passage, man becomes animalistic in his pleasures, chewing over cud like a cow. The use of the word ruminate supports this animalistic image of man. Cows, sheep, goats, and other less ranched animals all have what is called a ruminant digestive system. This means that after eating food and digesting it for a while, they vomit it back up into their mouths to chew a second time before swallowing it into a separate stomach for a different digestive process. This second chewing is the process of chewing their cud. In this poem an adult’s tendency to think back on and mentally ruminate on the pleasures of their youth is likened to an animal throwing up their half-digested food to ruminate on before further digestion. While the process of bringing up food and chewing it again seems off-putting, Keats points out that this is “honied cud” that brings him “nearest unto

heaven” by focusing on it (6, 8). Like a way to digest the wild intake of beauty from youth, the adult brings up memories from his youth in order to chew and digest them so that he can get the full spiritual nutrition from them. Keats is not only comparing the human mind to the seasons of a year, but in doing so he is comparing man and animals. The comparison does not raise up animals into anthropomorphic roles, nor does it bring humanity lower. Instead, Keats seems to almost point out connections that are already there, striving to remind humans that they are, no matter what, animals.

The animalistic images continue as Keats defines the autumn of life, but this season also brings with it a sense of melancholy loss that the other seasons have not carried. In autumn Keats’ man “furleth close” his wings, “contented so to look / on mists in idleness—to let fair things / pass by unheeded as a threshold brook” (10, 10-12). Once again, the man is like an animal, this time a bird who uses their wings to protect themselves as they reach their middle age. This season is presented as a time of contented rest, enjoying being idle as man pulls close the things that matter to him. However, Keats points out that this is also a time “to let fair things pass by” (11-12). While in youth, the man was able to take in all beauty, in middle age he is willing to let beautiful things pass him by and flow away like they’re flowing down a river. A willingness to let go of beauty is, inevitably, a sad thing. Keats describes this as a “threshold brook,” a time in man’s life that is a threshold between two worlds (12). He has crossed out of the vigor of spring and summer and into the quiet languor of middle age. While it is relaxed and peaceful, the fire and passion of youth is also lost. As, in time, is life itself. In winter man finds “pale misfeature” that he must face or else “forego his mortal nature” (12-14). The melancholy of age and the inevitability of death is simply “nature” and something that humanity is a part of. Keats’ view of man’s mind is one that reflects and engages with the natural world. Keats’ man

reflects humanity's animal nature, Keats pointing out the ways in which man is like cows and birds. Keats' man in "The Human Seasons" also embodies the reality of humanity: that we are a part of nature. Humans grow, live, and die like all things on Earth, and we do so in a span of time that is, in the grand scheme of things, like the passing of a single year. This poem displays the connection between man and nature, presenting them as equals who stand on horizontal footing as they exist on Earth together.

This horizontal relationship is represented again in Keats' ode "To Autumn." While Keats represents autumn in mankind's mind as a time of rest and almost melancholic idleness, in "To Autumn," the season is presented as a time of pregnant harvest and relaxing beauty. Farming and human driven agriculture is presented as a rich and natural landscape of autumn, working together in a horizontal relationship to create something wonderful. Keats' view of the natural season of autumn is one of almost sublime beauty. He describes it as a "season of mist and mellow fruitfulness" (1). This fruitfulness manifests itself as images of vegetal pregnancy, depicting a natural phenomenon through human images, thus bringing together man and nature as equal partners in the imagery. Autumn and the "maturing sun" work together to "bless with fruit the vines," "bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees," and "to swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells" (2, 4, 5, 8). In Linnaean botany, fruit is treated like a pregnancy, a uterus in which a seed grows and matures until it is ready to fall to the ground and grow into a fresh plant elsewhere. Keats' images mimic this gravid plant imagery, the vines being blessed with fruit like a woman is blessed with a child. The heft and weight of the fruit is felt as the apple trees are bent over with the weight of their fruits and the gourd, like a pregnant belly, is swollen with the potential life of a vegetal child. The plumped hazelnuts are swollen and, though seemingly gravid, are also strangely appetizing. In fact, all of the images are appetizing. These pregnant

images reflect the swollen bounty of the harvest season. This bountiful image of humanistic nature is not one of tactful restraint. These harvest fruits have been “o’er-brimm’d” by the warmth of summer, fed by the sun and finally ready for harvest in the autumn. By using pregnancy images, Keats is able to give weight to his depiction of the harvest season. Pregnancy gives weight and reality to the harvest, converting a simple apple into a fetus that is meaningful and perceived as living in a way that mankind rarely perceives fruit to be.

The blending of human and natural images to create a horizontal relationship continues in the next stanza of the poem. In this stanza human images are presented as a part of the natural cycle of autumn. The poem begins to speak to some unknown subject who is asked “who hath not seen the oft amid thy store?” (12). This speaker, who is never fully described and as such could be a human worker or could be autumn itself, is often seen in their stored-up harvest, already presented as a part of the agricultural harvest that takes place every autumn. The object of the speaker’s attention is then detailed as a part of the harvest process. They are “sitting careless on a granary floor,” their hair “soft-lifted by the winnowing wind,” or they’re found “on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep, / drows’d with the fume of poppies” (14, 15, 16-17). These images are soft, sensual images of rest, the human world of agriculture becoming just another beautiful part of the season. Terms and images of human harvest permeate this stanza and these images. The figure is sitting on the floor of a granary, a storehouse for grain. The wind that lifts this figure’s hair is a “winnowing” wind, a wind that blows through grain as it is tossed, the wind taking away the chaff and leaving only the grain behind. The figure is also taking part in harvesting, sleeping on a “half-reap’d furrow,” in the process of harvesting a crop, but sleeping now, enjoying the drug like haze of the season. The “fume of poppies,” while related to opium in that the poppy plant is distilled down into the drug, is not something that can be achieved simply

by harvesting poppy plants. Instead, the fumes of the harvest and the fatigues of the work itself seem to lull this figure to sleep, as potent as opium. In this peaceful place the object of Keats' stanza "watchest the last ooziings hours by hours" (22). Time moves, not like a river, but like sap, oozing by one hour after the next. In this position, the person that Keats' speaker is addressing is able to watch the season gently flow past. The presence of this figure in all of the harvest, their lazy attitude, and their watching time move by slowly suggests that this figure may be autumn itself, the natural figure of the season that is omnipresent and placidly enjoying the sights. Reading this figure as autumn makes it important that the figure is so involved in human harvesting. Like the natural world taking on pregnancy images, here autumn takes on the role of human harvester, reaping fields and actively participating in the human world.

This horizontal partnership is exemplified as a part of autumn itself, something lauded and celebrated in the final stanza. Keats asks, "where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?" only to say, "think not of them, thou [autumn] hast thy music too" (23, 24). This last stanza details the songs and music of autumn. The "wailful choir" of "small gnats," the songs of the "river swallow," the bleat of "full-grown lambs," and the songs of "hedge-crickets" blend together "with treble soft" in order to create the song of autumn (27, 28, 30, 31). The act of creating music and forming a choir is a human action. Although animals sing, a choir itself and the concept of music is a human creation. But this choir is not populated with humans but, instead, with animals. From the tiny gnats and crickets to the larger birds and lambs, this natural music is a representation of the beauty of autumn, and that beauty is simultaneously man-made and natural. Like the seasons of man, autumn is represented as a horizontal relationship between mankind and the natural world, both parties taking a part of their identity from one another and neither suffering for the connection. Keats' horizontal relationship between humans and nature

so inundates his work that both his depictions of humanity and his representation of idealized nature both contain a world in which humanity and nature exist on equal footing, existing as horizontal equals rather than taking part in a Promethean hierarchy. This leveling of humans and nature causes Keats to stand out as a poet who not only appreciates nature as his fellow Romantics did, but who, thanks to his life and training, appreciates what nature means to humanity and the need for mankind to exist as an equal part of the ecosystem.

The Poet's Body of Work

John Keats was a poet who understood the value of the natural world and what a partnership with plants can bring to humanity. As an apothecary as well as a Romantic poet, his short life displays an understanding of plants that goes beyond a simple appreciation for their physical beauty. During his apothecary training he was educated in domestic herbs with medicinal value, literally spending his time in classes wandering through the nearby fields in order to collect specimens. The herbs he studied made up the foundation for medicine at the time. Dried, measured, and processed into medicines, these herbs were potent sources of healing. After losing his mother to tuberculosis, Keats dedicated himself to healing and, therefore, medicinal herbs. Herbs remained present, reflecting a seemingly idealized vegetal landscape, one that challenges human power and human autonomy, but also one in which mankind benefits from plants serving as equal partners in a horizontal relationship.

Keats' plants are potent vectors of power that can be used to heal physically and mentally, and he treats society as a sickness that only seeks to consume. To Keats, nature is a place to seek solace in and to lose oneself in when the burdens of life become too much. But it is also the key to understanding both the depth of joy, and the reality of sadness that joy brings with

it. Nature, in his poetry, can also be a heavily feminized space that serves not to limit either plants or woman, but lift both up to what is normally perceived as the level of the human, bodies that matter. And in that feminized space, nature can even serve to become human while human becomes plant, creating a kind of materiality in which plant becomes both human and vegetal. Keats understands the human world and the natural world to be interconnected and as such reflects the trans-corporeality of life on Earth. In fact, Keats displays his own potency as an author through the potency of plant life. His agency is vegetal agency. His voice is an herbal voice. His life is plant life. This kind of horizontal relationship between mankind represents something that is contemporarily praised. But in the time just after Keats' death, this horizontal relationship became equated with an old way of thinking. Taking the concept of human and plant interdependence even further than his society, Keats imagines a world in which plants and humans are in a perfect, horizontal balance with one another as each party acts upon the other and exist in an ecosystem that is without hierarchy. He seems to understand that the life of man is dependent on the life of plants, something society is only now embracing. Keats' poems, then, stand for what many over the course of the nineteenth century wanted to modernize and do away with without awareness of the truth present in Keats' understanding of the world: that harming vegetal life harms humanity as well.

This equality and horizontal relationship between man and vegetal life, was something that would fall out of favor not long after Keats's death. As the medical field modernized, it increasingly distanced itself from botany, restricting the average person's access to plants and even casting suspicion on the potency of plants, stressing instead the importance of the physician's expertise. The Apothecaries Act of 1815 stands out as a moment of change in the medical field in England. The act which required the "licensing by examination" of apothecaries,

was intended to standardize the medical field and protect citizens from untrained and unqualified “charlatans” (Lawrence 45). In theory this “shift from haphazard, individualistic, and unregulated” medicine should have been a completely positive change in society (47). But the act endangered the common reader’s and indeed the average person’s plant literacy, endangering as well a large historic body of knowledge and a classic and previously respected profession. Without regulation those untrained and seeking to take advantage of populations could call themselves apothecaries while dispensing placebos. However, by requiring apothecaries to study at hospitals and from practitioners working with teaching hospitals in cities, the early stirrings of the loss of medicinal herbal knowledge during the nineteenth century can be seen. Whereas before a student would apprentice with an experienced apothecary, working by his side as he collected and dispensed herbal remedies in whatever region they lived in, students gathered in cities to learn. While they still learned herbal medicine, large groups of students learned from a single instructor. The diversity of regional plants and folk wisdom began to diminish as the medical profession increasingly created a medical culture that relied upon expertise rather than “nature” as embodied in plants. The human body ceased to be viewed as a natural entity that required maintenance and balance through vegetal influences. The link between maintaining health through herbs positively was replaced by the model of the diseased body in need of expert intervention. This point of view disrupted the relationship between the human body and the vegetal body, undoing the naturalization of human bodies and replacing it with a clinical body.

The transition from largely unregulated apothecaries dispensing herbal medicine to heavily regulated physicians dispensing lab created medicine was intended to protect patients and modernize medical science. Like a double-edged sword, this change did modernize medicine and lead to more reliable medical care. However, it also was a part of a social movement that

removed consumers' ability to know or understand what they are putting into their bodies. The remedies of the apothecaries, while seen as less "pure" or potent than lab created medicines, were something that could be known by Keats public because they knew the plants themselves. By the end of the nineteenth century, such knowledge would fall out of favor and even come under suspicion by the public. Without public support and appreciation of vegetal life, biodiversity begins to suffer as communities fail to support, grow, and respect the plant life they live alongside. This loss of knowledge does not just affect what people know, but directly leads to negative environmental outcomes.

Chapter 2: Defoliating History in an Herbal World: Robert Browning's *Paracelsus* and its Complex Humanist Narrative

Robert Browning's *Paracelsus* marks a tension between the advancement of a potentially masculinist humanist ecology and the uncanny presence of plant agency in Victorian literature and culture. Influenced by Shelley, Browning explored human conquest over the secrets of the more than human world and explored such themes in his poetry. But while *Paracelsus* (1835) is then a poem about the sixteenth century founder of the herbal doctrine of signatures as well and medical practitioner Paracelsus (1493-1541), often called the father of toxicology, it abstracts and even defoliates the text, avoiding direct discussion of Paracelsus's lifelong work with medicinal plants. Instead, plants creep into the poem from the margins, occupying textual space and blurring the lines between human and plant bodies. This trans-corporeality shifts the focus between plants and humans, creating a contest between humanist and masculinist ecologies and the vitality of plant life signaled by regeneration and even perennial vegetative versions of immortality. In Browning's creation, the natural world itself is both an agentic presence in the story and an idea to be possessed and used, developing an ironic conflict between a strictly hierarchical relationship between mankind and the natural world that places humanity firmly above "nature." The latter ascendant position, I argue, is often undermined by the presence of plants in the text.

In *Paracelsus*, plants act as a chorus, separate from the human voices in the story and with their own narrative and their own identity. Michael Marder argues ecocritics should imagine plants in such roles, reading their alterity as a form of vegetal resistance to human exceptionalism. If Paracelsus perceives plants to be present but not agentic, such a point of view stems from an understanding of the existence of plants through a humanist perspective. After all,

a plant is “wholly included in the place wherein it grows, to the point of merging with the milieu” (Marder “Resist like a Plant” 26). From a humanist perspective, plants are counted as the “environment,” inert beings without stories (Morton). As lesser bodies, they may be “instrumentalized” and treated as “resources” (Plumwood). Marder would suggest, though, that these views rob people of the capacity to imagine what he terms “plant thought,” a capacity which may offer us an alternative ecological model heretofore ignored by people. To explore this concept, Marder references the image of a tree. The tree seems to consume space, “grabbing all the nourishment” around it as it takes in the elements and grows without regard to what surrounds it (“Resist Like a Plant” 27). Marder pushes for an understanding of plants that goes beyond this humanist perspective. Seeing plants as taking up space and taking up resources without a sense of community or sharing is a human perspective, interpreting their seeming passivity for a lack of consciousness and constructing their ecological role as one of consumption. By leaving a humanist perspective behind, though, it can become clearer that the tree “gives back more than it takes” in creating oxygen from carbon dioxide, only consuming the infinite and readily available resource of sunlight (“Resist Like a Plant” 27). With this plant-thinking perspective, plants can be seen as not occupying anything other than space and not consuming any finite (27). Marder views this vegetal act in which plants “occupy space without appropriating it” as related to an act of protest (“Resist Like a Plant” 29). The occupation of space inherently fosters the tree’s species life and gives life to other species. Plant species then fosters species survival and models a collective consciousness humans may learn from. Such a peaceful occupation of space makes sense for vegetal beings for whom “life is de-centered” as the life of a plant is “disseminated throughout the body of plant communities” (“Resist Like a Plant” 29).

Acknowledging contemporary advances in the understanding of a plant's ability to think, Michael Marder cites an inability to fully define vegetal consciousness as he understands plant agency as a form of "non-conscious intentionality" ("What is Plant-Thinking?" 124). Marder argues, though, that to expect human consciousness of plants in order to afford them respect or agency is not appropriate as plants have intentionality which can be interpreted. He explains that "the intentionality of plants" is "seamlessly connected to its spatial, physical milieu" ("What is Plant-Thinking?" 130). As such, trying to read plant intentionality abstracted from a plant's environmental context "risks irreparably disturbing and losing sight" of plant intentionality ("What is Plant-Thinking?" 130). Plants then ironically occupy the biographical plot of *Paracelsus*, disrupting its masculinist humanist trajectory, countering the poem's plot of "aspiration" and "attainment" with their example of an alternative way of being.

For example, decay in particular is a relevant form of plant intentionality in the context of Browning's *Paracelsus*. Filled with images of Autumn, *Paracelsus* displays a unique form of plant agency in decay. Decay represents a plant's ability to "wither and flourish at the same time," thereby "rendering absolute terms like 'victory' and 'defeat' irrelevant" ("Resist Like a Plant" 30). It is this resistant and active plant-based environment that is presented in *Paracelsus*. The decay of plants is an active form of plant intentionality in a poem whose plants seem to expand their own milieu, bringing humanity within the scope of environment as well. Though the plants themselves have this activity and agency, the main character of the poem, Paracelsus, seems unable to understand it. He sees the plant milieu as something to possess and use, an inert tool that exists at the margins of human life and is a useful metaphor to better describe and understand human life. At the same time, though, the plants themselves seem to resist his

underestimations, giving to the story a vegetal perspective and a plant-based narrative of communal ecology.

Plants have a role in the story beyond their place on the page and a part in the ecology of the poem's history as well as narrative. This is connected through the figure the poem is named after, Paracelsus. The history of Paracelsus that Browning presents seems to run parallel to the history of the Swiss man named Paracelsus that lived from 1493 to 1541, but deviates from the history in some key places. Considered to be the father of toxicology, Paracelsus was a pre-Enlightenment physician. Like John Keats, Paracelsus learned to heal and treat human bodies through the use of plant bodies. He is renowned for the creation of the doctrine of signatures which asserts that the physical makeup of a plant signals its virtues, meaning its properties and therapeutic uses. Paracelsus also argued that plants which were toxic in large doses might be therapeutic in smaller doses, famously saying "it depends only upon the dose whether a poison is poison or no," a concept which suggests that only the size of dose causes something to be understood to be poison and that poisons, in smaller doses, cease to be toxic (Paracelsus 168). This suggests that the line between poison and medication is thin and it also suggests that the opposite is true. After all, to Paracelsus, "what is there that is not poison? All things are poison, and nothing is without poison." (Grandjean 126). This is a theory based on the idea of balance within the natural world. In this perspective, things are not innately good or innately bad. Substances are not necessarily toxic or not, instead, all things are capable of toxicity and seemingly toxic things are capable of aid, it all depends upon the dose.

Following his logic, toxicology as a field began to grow as toxic doses were studied. In a high enough dose, even water can be toxic, but in a small enough dose even deadly nightshade can have therapeutic properties. This almost homeopathic theory that Paracelsus created came

from not only his medical background, but his interest in mysticism as well. He believed in learning from anyone who was skilled in healing, “barbers, field surgeons, apothecaries, alchemists, and ‘wise women’” all served as sources of medical knowledge to Paracelsus (Pirog 222). Paracelsus valued the information of trained practitioners dealing primarily with the body, barbers and surgeons, practitioners that treated common ailments with herbal medicine, apothecaries, and practitioners that combine herbal medicine with a more mystical or divine based healing, alchemists and wise women. This purposeful connection to wise women is important to note. The practices of surgeons and apothecaries and alchemists were masculine professions. Wise women, though, are inherently female practitioners. Paracelsus’ willingness to learn not just from mainstream masculine sources, but from less appreciated feminine sources as well displays that he was a man who followed his interests and passions fervently, refusing to be held back by gendered divisions in learning. Paracelsus also connected medicinal plants to the zodiac, creating a wholistic ecology in which plants, earth, spirit, and bodies are interconnected. It is obvious that Paracelsus the historical figure used his medical degree to further medicine not just through humanistic means, but through vegetal and spiritual means as well, leading to his understanding of the doctrine of signatures.

Through his work with the doctrine of signatures, herbal astrology, and toxicology, Paracelsus was able to leave a lasting mark on the history of the medical field. Paracelsus understood that “the medicinal properties of plants [...] are not obvious at sight” (Arber 207). In the hope of bringing some structure to the study of medicinal plants, Paracelsus participated in the construction of the Doctrine of Signatures. This doctrine held that “plants displayed their intended use” through the confirmation of their vegetal bodies (Sanecki 65). Paracelsus believed the “virtues” of a plant were displayed by the features of a plant, and one of the multiple

examples he provided is St. John's wort. He explains that, "we may take notice of the form of the leaves and flowers, the porosity of the leaves, the Veins" (Paracelsus quoted in Arber 207). This suggests to Paracelsus that the plant must be useful for wound closure, working on closing holes in skin as evidenced by the holes in the skin of the plant. The Doctrine of Signatures created a direct language of plant potency that allowed plant bodies to be connected to their innate potential. It allowed, also, for a more accessible understanding of medicinal plants. Paracelsus did not lock away the understanding of plant potency behind textbooks and educational barriers. He imagined it to be written in patterns on the plants themselves, available to anyone who could recognize it.

Recognizing patterns in plants was crucial to Paracelsus. A supporter of "botanical astrology," Paracelsus believed "each plant to be a terrestrial star, and each star, a spiritualized plant" (Arber 213). This belief reflects his interest in vegetal patterns, but also the importance of plants in his world view. If stars are "spiritualized" plants and also the overhead blanket of the night sky, then plants play an incredibly powerful and important role in the world. Alongside the role that plants play, though, was the role that the stars played in plants themselves. By noting which plants looked similar to a crescent moon and which plants were connected to certain heavenly bodies, it was considered possible to heal diseases caused by a planet by balancing with the "use of herbs belonging to an opposing planet" (Arber 219). Knowing a plant's celestial connections was important to all aspects of plant growth as the associated celestial connection is what "dew the plant out of the earth when the seed germinated" (213). The pattern seeking that Paracelsus displayed in his support and furthering of both the Doctrine of Signatures as well as botanical astrology reflect in Paracelsus a desire to heal and to heal efficiently using plants as the backbone of medicine.

Paracelsus' desire to heal led to revolutionary discoveries in the field of medicine thanks to an understanding and appreciation for the vitality of plant life. He viewed the work of apothecaries as a form of alchemy in which physicians and apothecaries worked to bring out the potency already present in plants much like alchemists believed they would bring out hidden properties of metals. Paracelsus believed that "all nature is like one single apothecary's shop, covered only with the roof of heaven" (Paracelsus, 184). Though he desires to heal, Paracelsus seems to have understood the potency and value of nature, viewing vegetal spaces as just as potent and medically valid as an apothecary's workspace. With this point of view, herbs and humans work together towards healing under the roof of a single earthly apothecary shop. In his writing, Paracelsus does not focus on individual plants and the uses of them. His purpose is grander and more focused on human understandings of herbal life and the relationship between human and vegetal bodies. In Paracelsus' view, the work of humans and the work of nature were one and the same. He says "just as flowers grow from the earth, so the remedy grows in the hands of the physician. If he is a good physician, the remedy is like a root which grows a stem, which in turn unfolds into a flower, and which in the end becomes a fruit" (160-161). This is a metaphor in which vegetal life is being used to describe human actions, but it is being used in such a way that the metaphor serves to highlight vegetal potency and presents herbal bodies as the superior force in nature that humanity needs to learn from. Plants are presented as the ideal, growing seeds into plants which bear fruits. This is something that physicians must learn from in order to create better herbal remedies. The plants which serve as remedy in the metaphorical apothecary's shop of the world must be made more potent and allowed to come to healing fruition in the hands of a physician. In this way, Paracelsus is depicting plants as inherently

potent and medical practitioners as merely bringing out the potency and potential that already lies within the plant itself.

Bringing out the potency that is already present is at the core of Paracelsus' understanding of toxicity and is, perhaps, his most lasting contribution to medicine. Paracelsus believed that "in all things there is a poison, and there is nothing without a poison. It depends only upon the dose whether a poison is poison or not" (Paracelsus 169). This belief that toxicity was omnipresent and only dose brought out toxic effects translated into his expanded understanding of medicine that anticipated contemporary medical progress while still valuing herbal potency. To Paracelsus, "many herbal preparations lacked sufficient potency to treat current diseases" (Borzelleca 3). Therefore, he included the use of salts, minerals, and inorganic compounds in his understanding of medicine, weaving together botany, biology, and chemistry in order to create a more potent medicine. While this theory did call into question the power of plants, it did not overthrow herbal remedies or begin to present plant life as less potent or less useful. This blending of organic matter with inorganic substances is a perfect metaphor for the horizontal relationship between humanity and vegetation that Paracelsus seems to represent. Plants, as his metaphor for physicians bringing out the potency of remedies displayed, grow and increase in potency as their potential is realized through their maturation. Humanity then collects and distills inorganic compounds, minerals, and salts and uses these as a secondary planting and a secondary growth process that further brings out the potency of herbal bodies and allows humanity to access more potent cures to fight against diseases. Paracelsus the sixteenth century physician and alchemist was someone who, through his writing, can be seen as innately vegetal. He understood the potency of plants and he viewed humanity as partnering with plants in order to increase herbal potency. His impact on the medical community, while perhaps not grand

enough to make him a widely studied figure, did cement his name in medicine as the father of toxicology.

Although he altered the face of herbal medicine, calling into question the definitions of toxicity and pushing for an appreciation of and engagement with local herbal medicines, Paracelsus' connections with alchemy and his contribution to the doctrine of signatures became what he was most remembered for by the nineteenth century, if he was even remembered at all. Considered a "mystical [writer] who turned [his] attention to botany," Paracelsus was effectively stripped of his vegetal and medical connections as enlightenment thought and industrialization moved society away from herbal based healing (Arber 205). Agnes Arber, writing at the start of the twentieth century, takes the time to define Paracelsus as a mystical writer first and suggest that he "turned [his] attention" towards botanical pursuits. As a trained physician who practiced medicine and dabbled in alchemy and mysticism, Arber's presentation seems to purposefully flip the narrative (Borzelleca 1). Regarded as "something of a quack," the mysticism in Paracelsus' beliefs was highlighted and his serious work to enhance herbal potency was obscured (Arber 207). In a culture that benefitted from the alienation of beliefs that were considered to be outdated, though, it is not surprising that Paracelsus suffered during the nineteenth century as his reputation became distilled down into his alchemy and a potentially heretical story that he was a eunuch. This distillation of his rich history, though, obfuscates the importance of the work that he did. Paracelsus' magical or mystical understanding of plants was ecologically significant. While the Doctrine of Signatures and botanical astrology have been proven to not hold tangible connections to the specific actions of a plant's herbal capability, such lines of thinking highlight an important concept in ecological thinking: the idea that every plant has value. Paracelsus' mysticism is rooted in the idea that every single species of plants be they vibrantly colored

flowers or demure greenery, has potency within in. Seeking out patterns that are beyond the realm of the material world was how Paracelsus worked to connect the materiality of plant bodies to the power that he knew must be present, just not yet identified.

Paracelsus' history and his impact on botany and medicine has been effectively reclaimed and presently it is known that before enlightenment thinking altered his reputation, Paracelsus was considered the "Luther of Medicine" and the "reformer of the materia medica" (Borzelleca 1). By calling into question ideas of toxicity, Paracelsus actively reclaimed herbs as medicine that had been written off as dangerous. He valued domestic herbs and an appreciation for the diversity of domestic plant bodies in medicine. As Agnes Arber views him, Paracelsus sought to "depreciate the use of foreign drugs, on the ground that in the country where a disease arises, there nature produces means to overcome it" (Arber 202). The value Arber places on such a view can be understood as incredibly low as she promptly moves on to discuss Paracelsus' beliefs in astrology and the power of the stars. By devaluing Paracelsus' botanical knowledge and his emphasis on domestic herbs, Arber is able to reassure contemporary audiences of the superiority of lab created medicines and modern thought, easing the transition away from vegetal bodies and towards mechanical centered lives. But in doing so she also reveals the importance of what Paracelsus did as a medical practitioner. Valuing domestic herbs promotes plant growth and biodiversity and does not welcome in potentially invasive species. It also promotes, as shown in Paracelsus' writing, a relationship between plants and humans that allows humans to learn from plants as they engage in a horizontal partnership. This kind of understanding of vegetal life is distinctly ecological as it promotes intimacy between plants and people. In fact, Arber stands out for even mentioning Paracelsus as a medical practitioner as many wrote him off as a mystic and alchemist. The reality of history, though, is that Paracelsus was a strikingly vegetal figure who

made great contributions towards medical science which promoted human health and vegetal agency and potency.

Browning, however, tells a different story of Paracelsus, keeping some aspects of the historical figure, but changing key components which reflect Victorian medicinal and herbal sensibilities. Browning's Paracelsus is an educated man as well, but focuses on philosophy rather than medicine, desiring to use his talents for the good of social wellbeing. Privileging knowledge above all else, Browning's Paracelsus has become mired in his philosophical pursuits and, until he meets a passionate poet named Aprile, seems to have forgotten the importance of social connections. After the death of his friend, Aprile, Paracelsus decides to re-devote himself to what he has deemed to be the true meaning of human life, something he instructs his friend Festus on as he dies: love. More so than the study of philosophy, which is labeled as a natural science in this poem, Browning's Paracelsus learns to value love for mankind above all else. The use of the phrase mankind is purposeful here. This poem is as masculinist as it is defoliated. Paracelsus surrounds himself with men and finds value not in the romantic love of a woman, but the platonic love between men. The nature centered and mystical figure that was Paracelsus willingly learned from both masculine and feminine sources as well as both scientific and mystical sources. This historical Paracelsus is not completely divested from Browning's Paracelsus, of course. Browning's Paracelsus grieves with and for his friends as characters in the poem die, and he does seem to truly have compassion and love for the one woman in the poem, his friend Festus' wife, Michal. However, the core of vegetal mysticism which drove the historical man Paracelsus has been watered down and muted so that Browning's Paracelsus is a humanist figure with an awareness of the importance of the material world, but seemingly still at odds with it due to his human-centric understanding of life.

Browning's revisions to the figure of Paracelsus distort the plant thought of the original man and contribute to the defoliation of modernity. But, although Victorian culture seemed to be attempting to disentangle human bodies from the material world of the vegetal ecosystem, "the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific and substantial," and the bodies of the people are still intertwined with plant life (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 20). Plants haunt Browning's poem although he focuses on humanity and religion as *Paracelsus* depicts "the self destructive poetic, which would allow only the poet's self to be its antagonist and which repudiates the struggle for earthly fame by embracing God" (Erickson 25). Browning's Paracelsus' greatest struggle is against his own ego and once he is able to move away from a position of ego, he is able to find meaning in life. This achievement is created by attempting to push aside a connection that cannot be broken, however. Although Browning's *Paracelsus* seeks out an ultimately human-centric meaning of life, the poem is inhabited by plants which creep into the spaces of the philosopher's story, displaying their alterity and potency in subtle ways which resist defoliation even as the figure of Paracelsus himself is defoliated from who he was historically.

Vivid Landscapes

In Browning's poem, vegetal bodies gain potency through their situation and metaphorical power as well as through their connections to humanity despite a narrative which places humanity as firmly "above" the natural world hierarchically. Paracelsus, for the majority of the poem, is "a prologue to Browning's depiction of a possible unification of the idealist and realist strands" in literature, particularly Romanticism, that he had been unable to reconcile (Baker 67). In this unification, though, "Browning's motives [...] are humanistic" (68). Writing a

poem that began as a dare to write a poem about an unlikely subject, Browning “saw a challenge in the subject of Paracelsus and conceived of making him a man who eventually discovers the power and the meaning of love,” perversely using a castrated historical figure to explore a concept that Paracelsus the man could only experience in the theoretical and non-erotic sense (Erickson 31). This juxtaposition is reflected in the role of plants within the narrative. Ironically, Paracelsus seeks an answer and a goal which supports human exceptionalism in a world reliant on plants and in a profession dependent upon vegetal partnership.

Certainly, “most places on Earth which contain life are visibly landscapes” and Browning’s poem is no exception (Hall 3). Initially, as Browning’s Paracelsus opens the poem and, towards the end of what he first says, suggests how the one woman in the poem, Michal, will look back at the present time they are in a garden together in Würzburg and say “this autumn was a pleasant time, for some few sunny days; and overlook its bleak wind, hankering after pinning leaves” (68). In this scene Paracelsus is using the metaphor of Autumn to express the time they have spent together. In the early part of the poem, Paracelsus is preparing to leave his friends and begin his quest for understanding. In this way we can read their social moment as reflective of Autumn. They have had “sunny days” together in the embrace of good company, but now “bleak winds” have come to strip the leaves from the trees and bring about a metaphorical death to this season. Autumn, which brings with it the death of seasonal plant life, is representing the end of this era in their lives, the last few “pinning leaves” a vivid metaphorical image for the last days of connection. But through this metaphor, Paracelsus assures Michal that in memory it will be the good times which stand out. In creating this metaphorical connection, though, Paracelsus simultaneously opens a trans-corporeal and transcendental connection even as he uses and values Autumn for its metaphorical value instead

of its ecological and vegetal value. If their time is like Autumn, then the next steps of this connection must be considered as well. After Autumn, Winter brings cold and the finality of death, but it is followed by Spring and the promise of new life. If their time together is like Autumn, then surely Spring will come soon and, with it, bring life and joy. Even as the season itself does not seem to be valued, the potency of the vegetal world peeks through, creating a transcendent connection in which the season predict and also dictate the future for the humans involved in the metaphor. This pattern is repeated as plant images continue to appear in the poem in similar ways.

When Paracelsus' mimicking of Michal causes her to cry, he responds to her, saying, "look up, sweet Michal, nor esteem the less your stained and drooping vines their grapes bow down, nor blame those creaking trees bent with their fruit" (68). His whole speech to her contains further green images as he asks Michal not to grieve the change in seasons but is asking her to "look up." In this scene Paracelsus is suggesting the seasons she grieves and the vegetal imagery he references are what she is looking down at. The metaphorical imperative to "look up" and become more positive also reifies the hierarchy that sets humanity above vegetal bodies. The change in seasons that she is grieving, though, is not the change in the seasons of nature but of seasons in their life. The "stained and drooping vines" are not real vines growing nearby, but a metaphor for the maturation of this moment. Paracelsus suggests that Michal would not blame plants for bearing fruit, a natural occurrence each fall, so she cannot blame life for the fact that they must now metaphorically harvest this season of their lives, collecting the memories and time and letting it come to an end so they can move on. The plants here are not doing anything for themselves. This scene, which on its own would be very vibrant, is stripped of its potency and turned into a metaphor for humanity. The vines are rich with grapes and the trees are full of

fruit. The images themselves are ripe and luscious and suggest a thriving world and a bountiful harvest to come, but they are stripped of their agency and twisted into a negative metaphor for human emotion. The bounty of the fruit is feminized, as well, as the fruits of the apple tree are called “a rare after-birth” (68). The cycle of the season seems to be misunderstood by the characters in the poem. The very fascinating image of an apple as afterbirth does not consider the life cycles of nature. An apple, rather than being the placental afterbirth of procreation, is like a fertilized egg, only being born once the seeds begin to grow in the dirt. Similarly, Paracelsus says that the wind “shall vex” the berries of an ash tree (68). The wind does not “vex” berries, though, as it carries the seeds within the berries so that the plants can reproduce and spread during the next growing season. This decay is not damaging, chaotic, or the end of birth, but is a part of the life cycle of nature as the decay of Autumn leads to the growth of Spring.

The productive plant narrative seems to be something the humans in the poem cannot understand, though. Michal is complicit in this act, seeing the metaphorical bounty of fruit as a negative and weeping while Paracelsus sees the natural images as only a metaphor for Michal’s emotions. And yet there is still an intimacy between human and vegetal bodies here. Even in this one-sided interaction, the image of the fruit, a reproductive one within Linnaean understandings of botany, is connected to Michal. Her body and her womanhood like the ripening fruit which must be removed from the vine if it is to participate in the ecological life cycle. In this way the tension between plants and humans is readily visible. Michal is the plant and is also herself, becoming trans-corporeal through the metaphor. The plant, though, is present to help define Michal and is not present for its own self-interest, reifying a hierarchy that favors humanity over plants.

Within this tension it becomes clear that Browning is presenting a vegetal world which is agentic and active, but which is seemingly most valuable when it is an idea to be possessed or used for human betterment. In this way we can see representations of “human denial of [plant] autonomy” (Hall 37). An example of this comes when Festus thinks wistfully about the “garden-walls and all the things they contain” (69). Here Browning begins to reveal Victorian perceptions of nature and what is “natural.” A garden is no less vegetal than a forest and the presence of garden walls or human interactions with plants does not alter the life or the potential of the plant bodies themselves. What is altered, though, is human perception. Gardens can be seen as an extension of the home and, therefore, a domesticated natural space. In this way the unnamed “things” of the garden are privileged and thought after wistfully. The plant bodies of the garden are neither named nor appreciated for their individuality or autonomy, becoming merely “things” which are stripped of unique identity in this scene. This stands in stark contrast to the natural presence that is falsely seen as untamed and, therefore, different and more terrifying than the garden space.

When exposed to the seemingly untamed natural world Paracelsus says, “its mountains, lakes and woods confined me--what oppressive joy was mine when life grew plain, and I first viewed the thronged, the everlasting concourse of mankind!” (80). The mere presence of a garden wall transforms a space into something positive instead of this negative natural idea that Paracelsus describes. To Paracelsus, the open and natural spaces of mountains, lakes, and woods represent confinement. This confinement reflects the desire for a natural space that can be possessed and used, but also belies the intense agency of natural spaces. The “mountains, lakes and woods” are vibrant. When Paracelsus leaves them is when “life grew plain,” the simplicity of city life being juxtaposed to the activity of the natural spaces. Even their confinement suggests

their inborne agency, the area itself being literally open and yet somehow still able to act upon him and create a sense of confinement. This oxymoron of confining open spaces is then juxtaposed to the oxymoron of the “thronged” and literally cramped spaces of cities become a source of “oppressive joy” (80). By calling it oppressive joy, Browning seems to be creating a moment of the sublime, suggesting that mixture of negative and positive that accompanies sublime images. This is ironic as mountains, lakes, and large natural structures are often sources of the sublime, their grand scale in this poem somehow creating confinement instead of sublimity. Paracelsus feels joy in the city, but it is oppressive joy. Oppressive, usually used to describe restraint, subjugation, and discomfort, is being used as a modifier for joy. But this is not supposed to be seen as negative. Paracelsus does not see the joy he feels as a hardship. It is an enlightenment, to him, as he discovers the “concourse of mankind” that becomes his driving force in this poem. Similar to how Romantic poets used sublime images, pairing fear and beauty to create a moment of overwhelming emotion, Browning is pairing oppression and joy as Paracelsus discovers his own moment of the sublime in the busy, populated streets of a city. Browning, creating a “purified brand of romanticism,” has appropriated Romantic sublimity, something almost always paired with natural images, and shifted it away from the idealist and naturalistic sensibilities of Romanticism and towards the rational and humanistic tendencies of Victorian society (Baker 67). The tension and tenuous balance of the images in this scene reflect the tension that plays out within the scene itself as the natural world is powerful and capable but is rejected in favor of a human-centric setting.

Plants continue to appear in this way when Paracelsus shifts from academic studies to medical practices. During the time that the historical figure Paracelsus lived, medicine was, of course, largely herbal in nature. And yet, as Browning’s Paracelsus works with plague victims

and the gravely ill, plants are presented as medically inert and as tools to better understand the humans of the poem, even if within these connections there is plant vibrancy. Paracelsus tells the story of a man in his care who died saying that the man died an hour after saying, “God told him it was June; and he knew well, without such telling, hare-bells grew in June; and all that kings could ever give or take would not be precious as those blooms to him” (115). These flowers, to this man, represent new life and new growth. Even as he dies, the metaphor from the first section of the poem seems to return and the season and the life cycles of nature become intrinsically tied to human existence. The tangible things that a king could give or take away mean nothing to him as he faces death. Instead, he finds solace in a transcendental idea in which his death does not mean Winter and the end of life, but mean Summer and the continuation of blooms. Just as the harebells of the previous year died back so too does this man die. But in the same way that June brings fresh blooms, so too does his death not truly final. Instead, he becomes a part of the ecosystem of life and death and rebirth so that his existence can become nearly immortal as he becomes like the harebell blooms. Harebells, better known as hyacinth, do indeed bloom in June, but they are more than just their blooming period. Harebells’ roots were used in a wine to “stoppeth the belly” and to “helpeth against the venomous bitings of the field Spider” (Gerard 116). To the dying man, these flowers are precious, even if not explicitly appreciated for their power, because of the rich metaphor which they present. Paracelsus, the medical practitioner who should appreciate the harebells for their potency even if they are not personally significant to him, does not acknowledge the power of harebells and, instead, questions the man’s thoughts. He wonders “why pansies, eyes that laugh, bear beauty’s prize from violets, eyes that dream -- ([Festus’] Michal’s choice)” (Browning 115). Rather than understanding this man’s appreciation for nature and the importance of human transcendence into natural ecosystems, Paracelsus

questions flower preferences but in reference to human bodies and the preferences of Michal. Pansies and violets, belonging to the same genus, both have medicinal purposes. Pansies were used “against inflammation of the lungs and chest” and violets were particularly popularly used in an oil to treat “all inflammations” (Gerard 855,852). But to Browning’s Paracelsus, pansies are “eyes that laugh” and violets are “eyes that dream” and not potent plants with life and power of their own (Browning 115).

It is important to note that Paracelsus does not go on to explain why pansies laugh but violets dream. From the same genus of flowers, pansies and violets look very similar in structure but where pansies grow larger and have four petals per flower, having markings on the petals that are sometimes considered to look like a face, violets are smaller and have three petals and are a more solid color. The physical description of these flowers does not elicit why Paracelsus sees them as so different. There is no reference to a metaphorical language of flowers that carries meaning past what he has said. Instead, to Paracelsus, these flowers are metaphorically human eyes and the real difference in them is that Michal prefers violets to pansies. Paracelsus’ almost flippancy toward the dying man’s use of natural imagery reflects the internal struggles that he is facing. Paracelsus does not seem to understand that it is not about the flowers and never was. He sees the metaphor in which flowers have human features or can define humans, even if he cannot ascertain what it means that Michal prefers violets to pansies, but he does not seem to understand the transcendental metaphor. Of course, at this point in the story, Paracelsus is struggling to meet a humanist goal that would see him understand the mysteries of life that only God knows. Rather than busy himself with the natural world, he seems to focus on the human world and in doing so has missed the plant agency and chance for potential plant potency and has mired himself in a

metaphor without an answer. In time, though, Paracelsus is finally able to reach new levels of understanding through his pursuits.

As Paracelsus explains to his friend, Festus, what has changed in him during this pursuit, he says that he has given up his previous disdain for “petty vile delights” and, instead, sees them as “dead aims” and not worthy of his time (127). He then uses a metaphor to explain what these “dead aims” are, saying, “as in the autumn woods where tall trees used to flourish, from their roots springs up a fungus brood sickly and pale, chill mushrooms coloured like a corpse’s cheek” (127). This scene and this metaphor create two striking points which exist in a tense stand-off with one another. These “delights” he used to scorn, things like lust and lighthearted social interactions, are now likened to mushrooms “coloured like a corpse’s cheek.” Paracelsus describes mushrooms as “sickly,” ironically comparing his youth to a kind of death. In the poem, however, it seems that the mushrooms transformation of the forest into soil marks a productive stage in species life, and perhaps even of Paracelsus’s as he moves forward in life. The poem’s human narrative rejects this metaphoric time while its imagery suggests that birth and death, even poison and sustenance, are linked in the life cycle. Growing wild in the damp and decaying parts of the forest, mushrooms are can be both a wonderful source of food and a terrifyingly deadly poison depending on the species. With so many species that look similar, mushrooms represent an indirect connection to the duality that led to the historical Paracelsus’ discoveries on toxicology. But as representations of pursuits and pastimes that Paracelsus has deemed a “petty vile delight,” these mushrooms and their connection to dead bodies become things the philosopher disdains.

This disdain is seemingly unaware of the activity and power in the act of decay. The growth of the mushrooms represents this power. In an area where “tall trees used to flourish,”

rather than finding nothing at all, mushrooms are found. Just as the earlier metaphor of the seasons saw life coming after death, so too does decay see life coming from death. The trees have died but as their vegetal bodies break down, the potency is not lost but is transformed so that life can creep back in. Like agentic plants seem to creep into Paracelsus and ground human existence as merely a part of a larger ecosystem, so too do these mushrooms creep into dead wood, growing and flourishing in the space and continuing the vegetal metaphor within the poem. Paracelsus' own metaphor stands at odds with the vegetal reality of the image he creates. He would see the dead trees as "vile petty delights," something repulsive and unworthy. But these trees were once vibrant and alive and now fodder for further life, they are not inherently repulsive or unworthy. And the life that grows on the dead trees, a life that Paracelsus describes as "corpse like" and, in his metaphor, not for him as it is founded on something repulsive, is still life which begets more life and is a part of a complex ecosystem. Without decay to fertilize, life cannot continue on. The mushrooms he looks down on help facilitate the decay and serve their role in an agentic image of an ecosystem which sustains life on Earth. The tension remains, though, between the vibrant life itself and the human desire to possess and use it. The decay is active, but Paracelsus paints it as useless and dying.

The connection between plant life and death remains as Paracelsus continues to work with the sick and dying later in the poem. As Paracelsus mourns for poor peasants he saw die due to their social class and lack of resources, talking wildly, he begins to sing "heap cassia, sandal-buds and stripes of labdanum, and aloe-balls, speared with dull nard an Indian wipes from out her hair: such balsam falls down sea-side mountain pedestals" (149). The plants he mentions are all used in perfumes or have a strong scent. Cassia is Chinese cinnamon, the curled cinnamon sticks that are so easily recognizable. Sandalwood produced a strongly scented and oily resin

while labdanum is a resin that was used as a base for perfumes during the Victorian era. Aloe, nard also known as spikenard, and balsam are all plants known for having unique or potent smell. All of these plants come in a list after the directive to “heap” them. What Paracelsus is describing, then, is not the plants themselves, but the plants being used to cover the smell of a decaying body for a funeral. Even with Victorian embalming science, the smell would have been overpowering. During the era that this is set, embalming was not even invented yet, people still relying on flowers alone to cover the smell of decay that sets in only hours after death.

Therefore, this seeming herbal scene is not about the potency of these plants or their medicinal uses, it is about their ability to cover the smell of death. And yet they can cover the smell of death. The plants have the power and the capability to fill the space and invade the senses enough to overpower even the evidence of death. They are being used, yes, and possessed as Paracelsus desires them as a respite for his sense. To Paracelsus they are a tool, and yet they are present and active even in their role as tool. Their presence is another death, a waste which Paracelsus has seen due to the tyranny of class inequity, something he is sick of and in need of a literal respite from, thus the need for a metaphorical respite of his senses through these perfumed plants.

Paracelsus’ negative view towards his time working in medicine and, consequently, the plants that are associated with this section of the poem is summed up well when he talks about the death he has seen and the cause of this death. He tells Festus, “a spotless child sleeps on the flowering moss” (159). In the context of the conversation, it is apparent that this child he describes is not actually sleeping. Instead, the “flowering moss” follows the classic images of mossy stones being a neat metaphor for graves, the “flowering moss” representing the grave of this child. It is flowering, though. It is alive and bright in a way that seems to reward the child for

their innocence that makes them “spotless.” This is in contrast to the “sinful man” that Paracelsus goes on to describe who is envious of the peaceful death of the child and “may desire to put his guilt away” in order to find such a peaceful death (159). Paracelsus finds this offensive and believes the only reward for such sinners should be “dark cells, dim lamps, a stone floor one may write on like a work: no mossy pillow blue with violets” (159). Once again, the vegetal images of the poem represent an ecosystem of death bringing life and a metaphor which allows humans to transcend their material selves while simultaneously being used to build a metaphor which possesses and uses plant life for human betterment. The flowering moss that grows over the grave of this child is vibrant. It is vibrant, though, due to what lies beneath it. In the same way that dead trees feed mushroom growth, the body of this child is feeding the growth of these plants and seeming to become one with them as the flower’s pleasantness and beauty reflect the pleasantness and beauty of the child they cover and subsequently feed off of. The death of this child has allowed it to enter fully into the ecosystem, never truly dying but living on through the life that decay brings about. The beauty of this agentic natural world that brings life from death, though, is not what Paracelsus focuses on. To him the flowers are a metaphor for the soul of the child, the sinful man being left in a cell where he will not be covered over with beautiful flowers. He does not reflect the reality that even a sinful man’s grave can grow flowers. Instead, to Paracelsus, the natural world is a metaphor which reflects humanity. Flowers grow for good souls and not for sinners. The vibrant world in front of him is made secondary to the humanist metaphor which supports his solidifying world view that understands a love for all human life to be above all other pursuits.

However, plant bodies often stand in defiant juxtaposition of the humanist intent of Paracelsus’ quest for knowledge, growing a presence which suggests humanity is implicated in a

greater ecosystem and cycle of life. Life on earth is supported by agentic plants which grow, mature, and decay within the poem, existing on their own terms within Browning's words. Their life and the trans-corporeal relationship they represent stands in contrast to the uses for plants devised by Paracelsus himself. Paracelsus clearly wants human control over the material world. He presents a hierarchy of human superiority that sees plants as literally and metaphorically on the ground and something to be possessed and used to define humanity. Consequently, his use of plants as something secondary to human life allows him to focus on his ultimate goal of a humanistic search for knowledge. In his metaphor the plants are "wholly included in the place wherein [they grow], to the point of merging with the milieu" (Marder, 26). The milieu, though, is still important. It is a part of Paracelsus' celebration of the human and the material world over the celestial world. Paracelsus seeks the knowledge of God himself and in doing so seeks to lift up humanity. He lifts humanity into a dominant position, above the Earth and the plants found there. But even so, the Earth and the plants are still a part of the discussion and the celebration of humanity that Paracelsus presents. Occupying space and displaying intentionality through their decay, the plants of Paracelsus suggest a narrative which sees humans included in the vegetal ecosystem, finding the same life that plants do. With this position, plants are able to participate in a tension created by Paracelsus himself wherein Paracelsus seeks to possess and use plants, a force of appropriation, while plants, who do not appropriate, seek to provide resources to humanity.

Browning's Human Landscape

What plants seek to provide is not noticed by Paracelsus, though. He seems to not value the plants enough to notice the intentionality they display. By creating a world in Paracelsus in

which the plants present and vivid but are socially devalued while humanity is privileged, Browning creates a world that reflects not only Victorian sensibilities, but the actualization of the Promethean masculinity that stemmed from some Romantic writers. With plants used only as metaphor, Paracelsus' intention to see them as things to be possessed or used, it becomes necessary to question what world Paracelsus envisions as valuable. Early on in the poem, Paracelsus tells his friend Festus "I have been possessed by a fire" (79). Immediately the character of Prometheus is grafted to Paracelsus, with the mythological fire displacing Paracelsus's historical subject which was plants. Plants lose their "intentionality" as their dramatic role in human culture is stolen, replaced with the image of fire and the attached Promethean mythology which allows the mythological figure of Prometheus to hold the dramatic space and plants to be assigned a "non-identity" through human thought, their identity becoming only milieu (Marder "What is Plant Thinking" 1). This ascription of a lack of identity to plants is a marker of human thinking which has not yet ascended to a vegetal level. This type of thought views "devouring a thing" as an elementary act of consciousness, eating defining life (Marder "What is Plant Thinking" 140). Such a humanist viewpoint sees consumption as necessary and a part of life but lacks the nuanced appreciation for ecosystems and life which plants are inherently a part of. In plants, their physical existence "delimits the process of assimilation" as what they consume is not truly consumed but is the ever-present elemental force of the sun (140). In this way, the substitution of fire for plants represents Paracelsus' lack of understanding of his quest. Paracelsus seeks the knowledge of God for the good of mankind, but as becomes clear through his understandings of plants and women, it's truly just a small selection of humanity he wishes to benefit. Should he wish to work for the good of all humanity, he would be consumed by plants and not fire, seeking to end the greed and assimilation of resources which he decries on his

deathbed. As a humanist, though, limited by his human-centric and anti-ecological viewpoint, he sees himself as Prometheus stealing fire.

Similar to Prometheus, Paracelsus seeks to gain something for the benefit of mankind. Or so he believes, at least, as he desires “to comprehend the works of God, and God himself, and all God’s intercourse” (83). Two things are revealed in this quotation: Paracelsus’ ego and his humanistic focus. This quote comes from the first section of the poem title “Paracelsus Aspires.” This section introduces the characters of the poem, but it also introduces Paracelsus’ intellectual pursuits. It is, quite literally, what Paracelsus aspires to know and to do with his life, a young man telling his friend of his goals and dreams. The goal, it seems, is to understand the “works of God,” a shockingly lofty aspiration.

What is perhaps most apparent in this quote and in this entire section of the poem is the ego that Paracelsus displays. He seems to crave knowledge and seek greatness at every turn. It is apt when he says that he has been “possessed by fire,” as this young Paracelsus seems to have the same egotistical goals as Prometheus. While Prometheus stole fire from the gods, Paracelsus wants to understand “God himself” (83). This inspiration came from a voice within him that asks him “hast thou gazed presumptuously on wisdom’s countenance, no veil between” and then urges him saying, “waste not thy gifts in profitless waiting for the gods’ descent” (82). Once again there is a connection to Prometheus who stole rather than waiting for the gods to bestow. Paracelsus seems to view himself as a similar figure. Whereas Prometheus deals in fire, Paracelsus deals in wisdom, a much less tangible concept. He wants to look at “wisdom’s countenance,” seeing the truth of wisdom without any barriers in place (82). Seeming like the historical figure of Paracelsus who sought patterns in the physical being of things, Browning’s Paracelsus wants to see the face of wisdom in order to understand it. Because the gods will not

lower themselves to providing this information, Paracelsus sets it as his goal to, therefore, rise to the level of God himself, able to understand divine ideas, something considered to be unknowable by humans.

The connections between Paracelsus and Prometheus hint at what Paracelsus wishes to do with this knowledge once he has it. While the desire to learn the truths of the world and the wisdom of God is so strong that Paracelsus is willing to spend his time exploring “till [he] near craze,” the purpose of this knowledge seems more diffuse (83). As he tells his friends of his dream and his goal, it is the journey that he focuses on, desiring to “gather this, the sacred knowledge, here and there dispersed around the world” but not expounding on what tangible things he would do with said knowledge (90). His humanism “is evident in his desire to ‘crown’ life rather than ‘scorn’ it,” desiring to be an “acolyte of a faith in human life” (Baker 47). Browning’s Paracelsus seeks knowledge for the belief in and supporting of humanism. Like Prometheus he seeks to lift up humanity with his gift. By seeking the knowledge of God’s will, Paracelsus will be able to devoutly but mankind, to whom he is faithful. Paracelsus is, of course, a part of the human interest he seeks to further, becoming a “speaker who is seeking form and a sense of self in the world” something repeated in Browning’s poetry (Erickson 17).

The knowledge that Paracelsus collects is not plant-based knowledge, though. The poem does not shy away from Paracelsus’ medical knowledge or the connection to plants, but it does not foster the value of the herbal knowledge. After listing the herbs used to disguise the smell of a dead body, discussed earlier, Paracelsus says, “the list of drugs smacks of my old vocation” (149). This vocation, though, and the drugs therein, which Paracelsus himself has acknowledged to be herbal, are not treated as sources of cures. Paracelsus seems to view the herbal medicine as useless and archaic. He calls himself “a wretched failure” who has worked hard but has not yet

done enough good to make his mark on the world (172). He has “labored” while his body “has decayed” and he still does not have “some profit” to show of the work he has done (172). His time working as a doctor, then, has not provided profit. He seems to have found no satisfaction in medicine, and so it casts doubt on the usefulness of herbal medicine. If Paracelsus who has worked so hard to create something of value to mankind has not found value in herbal medicine, it must not provide anything useful to mankind. Like Tennyson’s “The Lotos Eaters,” the herbal medicine is archaic and potentially dangerous as it provides nothing useful, but only serves to wear out Paracelsus’ body as he works his life away on a journey to aid mankind.

This journey that Paracelsus is on, though, seems to be one for the benefit of man and his material self and is in defiance of celestial powers. His use of vegetal metaphor seems to bring plants along with humanity, the material world becoming an entanglement of human and vegetal interests that Paracelsus seeks to lift up above divine interests. Something notable, though, is that he does see humanity as above plants in this desire, even if plants are included, and, in a similar way, he seems to suggest a male superiority as well. Without suggesting that Robert Browning himself viewed men as superior to women, his character Paracelsus does put forth an understanding of the world that values masculinity and one which similarly appreciates women while gently placing them in an inferior position, as is done with plants, too.

One way in which this happens is simply through representation. In the entire poem, women are barely present and have a relatively minor impact on the plot, seeming to exist in the margins and as a way for the men to understand themselves and each other, much like the plants do. This begins from the moment the poem starts. The narrative has one woman in it, Michal, who Paracelsus cares for and Festus marries. She is only physically present in the first part of the poem, but calling her present is almost a bold assumption to make considering her role in the

poem. In this section her lines consist of brief interjections such as, “in truth we have lived carelessly and well,” “is it so, Festus he speaks so calmly and kindly: is it so?”, and “ask at once, Festus, wherefore he should soon...” a line that she never is able to finish as Festus interrupts her and goes on to spend over a page speaking (68, 73, 74). Her role is almost like the most superficial interpretation of a Greek chorus. Instead of explaining the plot and serving as a narrator, she asks the questions and pushes the men to speak further so that they explain the plot and further the narration. It’s apropos that she says they have lived “carelessly” as her entire character seems to exist without care. Not that Michal herself has no cares, but that the character of Michal is treated as if no reader would actually care about what she says or who she is. She is passive in this section that she does not even get to finish her request to Festus, asking him to ask Paracelsus more questions, before he interrupts her to do what she has asked. He starts his monologue that she was requesting by saying, “stay, Michal,” her few words apparently even too many for Festus to hear before he cuts her off and asks her to be calm and quiet (74).

Michal’s longest speech comes as she spends seven lines begging Paracelsus to stay. She begins her speech with “stay with us, Aureole!” and while she continues speaking after that sentence, her entire speech comes down to her begging Paracelsus to stay, fearing that he will die on this quest (86). This outburst of emotion seems to be what Michal good for. From crying in the first pages, to begging Paracelsus to stay, to having died when Festus needs to try and shock Paracelsus into having greater humanity and empathy, Michal’s presence serves to define and inspire emotions in the men of this poem. It does, of course, inspire emotion. Paracelsus grieves for her with his friend. Festus and Paracelsus have great tenderness in their hearts towards Michal. Like the heart of the poem, Michal inspires emotion even in her limited presence. In this way she is very much like the plants referenced in the poem. Used for metaphors and viewed as

tools, the plants resist this narrative by simultaneously creating images and narratives of their agency and potential. So too is Michal used, in many ways, to define the male voices in the poem. And yet she seems to resist obsolescence by her repeated presence as the source of great emotion, haunting Paracelsus' thoughts like a specter of caring as he struggles with his quest for knowledge. Paracelsus and the poem itself seem to desire to exclude her from the humanist narrative, metaphorically and literally interrupting her. And yet, like the plants' transcendental existence, Michal's love from the start of the poem reflects a character that already understands what it takes Paracelsus the entire length of the poem to understand. She is already enlightened and displaying her agency through her ability to affect Paracelsus even after death.

In fact, after Michal's death is the moment of the poem in which Paracelsus most seems to understand what plants can offer humanity in terms of a place in the ecosystem. Discussing her death with Festus, Paracelsus seems to find comfort in the fact that Festus has "laid her among the flowers" (163). He goes on to comfort Festus saying, "I have no julep [...] to cheat the grave," going on to say, "I believe we do not wholly die" (163). Paracelsus clarifies that he believes that "the soul can never taste death," but in this moment, he comes close to understanding how being put into the "cold earth" is not death, but is entering the decay of the ecosystem (163). Paracelsus finds comfort in Michal being "among the flowers," taking the time to state it before he seeks to comfort Festus. He seems to acknowledge the importance of the Earth, telling Festus "you did not ill" to bury her in the ground (163). In this moment he seems to understand that Michal's soul is able to live on because of being put into the ground to decay. He seems to almost grasp that the flowers she is with are able to grow because of the decay of her body. But Paracelsus never fully makes the connection. He sees this view as not a "julep" that he can offer, a julep being a sweet syrup that was often mixed with medication, for Paracelsus what

would have been herbal medication, in order to make it taste better. Paracelsus still views the herbal medication of his vocation as separate, even as Michal's influence seems to finally push him towards understanding the potency of the Earth and the potential of the ecosystem as a source of sustainable life and growth. He has, though, begun to understand Michal's point of view, it seems.

As Paracelsus goes out to seek this humanist and self-interested knowledge, he begins to shift his values towards the sensibilities of Michal as he realizes that the pursuit of knowledge may not be in his own best interest. This information comes in the form of a friend that Paracelsus makes named Aprile. When he is studying and striving to attain his knowledge-based goals, Paracelsus seems to feel simultaneously content with the progress he has made and frustrated with how much further he still has to go. He says, "at worst I have performed my share of the task [...] I have obstinately held by my own work" (94). Found at the start of the second part of the poem, appropriately named "Paracelsus Attains," this quote shows a Paracelsus who has learned much in his time studying but has still not attained his goal of understanding the knowledge of God. He is frustrated with the passage of time and the small progress he has made, admitting, "what am I! Oh, bitter; very bitter!" (97). While his friends have married and given in to desires, he has dedicated his life to exploring truth with "an eagle-glance" (99). But even if he has not attained his goal, he has made progress. Paracelsus has done his "share of the task" and attained greater knowledge and built on the knowledge of others with his own discoveries (94). And yet he is still bitter. This is not terribly surprising considering the younger Paracelsus of the first part of the poem was so driven to not just add to the conversation, but to complete it. If, as Erickson said, Paracelsus is seeking a "sense of self" it is logical that he would be frustrated even in the face of his successes as he still has not found himself in this journey (Erickson 17).

Paracelsus' unmoored and still strikingly egotistical search for knowledge becomes more obviously negative when it is juxtaposed with Aprile's still humanist but love centered point of view. Paracelsus wants to know Aprile's secret and asks the poet, "I am he that aspired to know: and thou?" to which Aprile responds, "I would love infinitely, and be loved!" (Browning 104). When faced with this declaration of Aprile's intentions and desires in the world, Paracelsus tells Aprile, "Poor slave! I am thy king indeed" (103). The shocking ego in this response reveals the kind of man that Paracelsus has become in his intellectual journey thus far. His knowledge-based studies have created in Paracelsus a hierarchy which places theoretical and philosophical knowledge above emotional knowledge. In his eyes he has freed himself from emotional constraints with his pursuits, seeing Aprile, by comparison, as a "poor slave" (103). While he does seem to pity Aprile in this moment, calling him "poor slave" rather than just simply a slave, that seems to be the extent of Paracelsus' humility as he declares himself Aprile's king. That initial goal that manifested itself as devotion to humanity and humanism has become self-serving, Paracelsus lifting himself up into the role of ruler because of the intellectual successes he has had.

What was once a journey inspired by Paracelsus' fealty to humanity has become an exercise in egotism as Paracelsus charges Aprile "by [his] fealty," calling for Aprile to have fealty to him rather than for Paracelsus to have fealty to human interests (104). Not only is Paracelsus seeing himself as a King and announcing his status, he is acting on his perceived superiority as well. As Paracelsus treats Aprile as an inferior subject that should simply obey rather than a human with his own relevant point of view, Aprile continues to only respond with positivity and love, reflecting what he values most in life. Aprile tells Paracelsus that he "would love infinitely, and be loved," expressing to Paracelsus a desire for all encompassing love to be a

part of all aspects of his life, saying, “if thou hast ne’er conceived this mighty aim, this full desire, thou has not passed my trail, and thou art no king of mine” (106). Within moments Paracelsus, who raged against God for not revealing the full truth to him even as he felt successful in what he has learned, is denied the egotism that he craves by the love focused Aprile. The egotistical reassurance that Paracelsus seems to crave, calling himself a King in order to reaffirm his personal success even as he struggles with God “hiding secrets,” comes crashing down the moment he meets the poet Aprile who simply rejects his knowledge and suggests that Paracelsus’ years studying the secrets of knowledge mean nothing. Things come crashing down so resolutely that shortly after meeting Aprile, Paracelsus says, “love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn to love” (109). While Paracelsus has not abandoned his knowledge-based goals, he almost instantly shifts them upon meeting Aprile.

Knowledge, Love, and Bonds of Men

As the poem moves towards its conclusion, the humanist landscape of the poem begins to coalesce into a space that does not value the ego of a single man but supports all of humanity and their material world. This reality, of course, remains hierarchical with Paracelsus not lifting plants or women but seeming to include all life in his aims, continuing the tension between his possession of plant images and Michal’s scant activity and his ultimate conclusion of an entangled human and material world being more important than a celestial world. Michal’s emotional and chorus like role in the first part remains relevant as the story progresses, but she is not the one who inspires ultimate change in Paracelsus. This more masculine world focuses on the love of men to the point of queering the characters as Paracelsus finishes his poem having learned the real meaning of life from Aprile. The love and lessons about love coming from Aprile creates a world in which Paracelsus is not only a Promethean figure, but a homosocial

figure, relishing in and focusing on “mankind” so resolutely that a feminine presence in the poem, like the presence of plants, is marginalized or possessed by Paracelsus, only asserting agency in ways not related to his words or direct actions.

This relationship which inspires the ultimate conclusion in *Paracelsus* can be read as male homosocial desire. The concept of male homosocial desire, fleshed out by Eve Sedgwick, exists as a way to define and understand male interactions in an obligatory heterosexual and inherently homophobic society. It is appropriate to consider Browning’s Victorian society one of obligatory heterosexuality and an inherently homophobic one. Victorian society was just as sexually active as previous and future generations. However, Victorian culture often garners a reputation of prudishness due to the use of coded language and the implementation of social lines of propriety. What happened inside the house as opposed to outside the house were two vastly different spaces when it came to what was acceptable in the realm of sex and sexuality. The rise of sexuality being more tightly restricted to private spaces and codified language alongside the influence of the patriarchal and heterosexual body of the Church led to what Michel Foucault defines as “a single locus of sexuality [that] was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom” (3). The image of the married couple engaging in sex for the sake of procreation, then, became the public image of Victorian sexuality. Whether or not this matched private behavior or the rise of codified language to be able to discuss sex and sexuality through metaphor does not alter the fact that the public definition of sexuality in Victorian society was a procreation based heterosexual one, suggesting a society of obligatory heterosexuality.

This assumed obligatory heterosexuality led to the homophobia of the late Victorian era. Remembered by the criminal charges late in the century that Oscar Wilde faced for his sexual

activity, the Victorian period saw homosexuality being litigated and officially sanctioned as wrong in the eyes of society. As Browning was writing before this litigation, though, homosexuality was less acutely defined. Foucault suggest that “homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy” (43). That is to say that the act of homosexual sex existed and while social understandings of sexual preference may have existed as well, the concept of being a homosexual and the socially constructed meaning attached to that identity were not created until the late nineteenth century when the term became popularized as we understand it today. So while it is difficult to call Browning’s early Victorian society homophobic when it lacked the terms to understand the social construct of homosexuality, it is possible to understand the spirit of homophobia as present in the social structures that viewed sodomy as a form of deviant sexuality that was inappropriate for polite society. This means a husband and wife can publicly acknowledge their love and their relationship which indirectly references a private sexual life, but Victorian standards of propriety would not have accepted the same behavior from two men without understanding it and defining it as a type of social and sexual deviance. In this way, Browning is writing in a society of obligatory heterosexuality and homophobia, just as Sedgwick suggests is necessary to understand male homosocial desire.

This homosocial desire is inherently tied to both women and gender. It is important to note that “no element of [homosocial desire] can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole” (Sedgwick 1). This awareness of women and their missing presence in the poem is something displayed by Paracelsus. While remembering his good friend Festus who spoke with Paracelsus and counseled him in the first part of the poem, Paracelsus says, “my poor Festus, with his praise and counsel and grave fears--where is he now with the

sweet maiden, long ago his bride?” (95). He goes on to look upon their relationship disparagingly as he says, “I am saved the sad review of an ambitious youth choked by vile lusts” (95). Paracelsus is proud of the fact that he has been able to walk the path of his life without such lusts, lusting only for his knowledge. In this way he sees himself as great and seems to look down upon “poor Festus” who has married and, while his procreation is not confirmed in a heterosexual relationship it can be assumed, become the Victorian model of reproductive heterosexuality. Paracelsus, who views his goal of acquiring knowledge as paramount, views this expression of sexuality as a “vile” desire that chokes out the ambition of youth. In other words, to Paracelsus, the act of reproductive heterosexual sexuality is something deplorable that serves to destroy intellectual ambition and the quest for personal power and betterment. For Paracelsus, then, homosocial desire would be ideal. Sedgwick says, “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (25). By keeping desire and attention focused between men, excluding women from the direct emotional intensities, Michal only receiving emotional intensity from Paracelsus when she is not present, the power that desire and attention give are kept in a patriarchal space which for Paracelsus is also a space of knowledge and learning. This is exactly what happens as Paracelsus and Aprile’s friendship is formed.

The relationship of Paracelsus and Aprile is marked by homosocial desire. After Paracelsus has looked negatively on heterosexual lusts, Aprile enters and immediately an intense rivalry is created between the two men. Aprile immediately challenges Paracelsus, saying, “thou wouldst be king? Still fix thine eyes on mine!” as he demands Paracelsus who views himself as a king to lower himself to make eye contact with Aprile (101). When Paracelsus greets Aprile with an equal amount of disdain, Aprile begins to compare the two of them, finding Paracelsus

lacking as he says, “thine eyes are lusterless to mine; my hair is soft, nay silken soft: to talk with thee flushes my cheek, and thou art ashy-pale” (102). Aprile suggests that he is superior to Paracelsus and his physical appearance is proof of that. Paracelsus rebuffs this attack by suggesting to Aprile that the poet will always be one step behind him, saying, “thou art ordained to follow in my track, reaping my sowing, as I scored to reap the harvest sown my sages passed away” (102). This entire introduction is one of emotional intensity and a passion from Paracelsus towards another human that he had earlier suggested he only felt for his intellectual pursuits.

Paracelsus begins this section of the poem passionate about what he has learned and what still evades him, looking negatively on the personal connections that friends like Festus have. When Aprile enters this passion shifts quickly to Aprile himself, both Aprile and Paracelsus suggesting that the other desires what they have. Aprile speaks on his physical appearance, suggesting that Paracelsus does not have the same beauty and vigor that he has, the unspoken suggestion of Paracelsus envying Aprile’s appearance present in the moment. Paracelsus shifts to a farming metaphor, suggesting that he and Aprile are dealing in the same trade but whereas he reaped the idea of previous scholars, Aprile can only desire his knowledge and end up reaping what Paracelsus has sown into the intellectual landscape. Through these suggestions of desire and the sudden presence of emotional intensity towards another human, male homosocial desire begins to appear between Paracelsus and Aprile. Their initial antagonism mimics Sedgwick’s exploration of homosocial desire in the love triangle narrative, enlightenment becoming the “woman” in the triangle that both Paracelsus and Aprile desire as they treat one another with the quiet envy and simultaneous egotism of a rival.

It is Aprile, though, who ends their rivalry just moments after arriving on the scene. Aprile, driven by love as he is, seems to soften to Paracelsus and says, “sing to me; for already

they wild eyes unlock my heart-strings” (102). Just as quickly as he began this verbal altercation, Aprile finds himself drawn to Paracelsus as Paracelsus seems to have “reveal’st [Aprile’s] soul” in their brief interactions (103). Paracelsus, too, finds himself drawn to Aprile. Though he still wants to view the poet’s desire for love as inferior, in his internal monologue he says of Aprile, “he stands with eve’s last sunbeam staying on his hair which turns to it as if they were akin” (103). He sees in Aprile the suggestion that the poet has “learned the cause” and discovered what Paracelsus has been searching for: the knowledge of God himself (104). But even as he seeks to gain knowledge from Aprile, the way Paracelsus views Aprile is charged with desire that borders on sexual desire. It is not Aprile’s mind or words that make Paracelsus suspect that he has found the ultimate truth of life, it is Aprile’s appearance. In Paracelsus’ eyes, the sunbeams that touch Aprile’s hair do so in such a way that suggests the sun and Aprile’s hair are related to one another. Aprile is related to the sun, the powerful driving force of life on Earth. Though it is the evening sun that is shining on Aprile, calling it “eve’s last sunbeam” that touches him does create a tie between April and Eve, the Biblical mother of mankind. The first woman in Christian mythology and, therefore, a partner in the first reproductive and heterosexual desires, Eve being connected to Aprile suggests that Aprile is capable of carrying a type of procreative desire. In this section of the poem, Aprile acts as Eve and Paracelsus as Adam as their homosocial desire for one another in this moment reshapes Paracelsus’ priorities, allowing him to go on at the end of the poem to discover the real meaning of life. In this way, Aprile is the mother of this realization and in this moment, the source of the procreative desire that creates Paracelsus realizations.

As Paracelsus realizes the desire to know Aprile’s knowledge of love, he begs the poet, saying, “love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn to love; and merciful God, forgive us both”

(109). They need forgiveness as Paracelsus has cast love aside as Aprile has cast knowledge aside, both focusing on only one aspect of humanity instead of what it means to be human. Together they can create something whole. Of course, upon passing on his knowledge of love, Aprile begins to die. As he begs his now friends not to die, Paracelsus says, “we must never part. Are we not halves of one dissevered world” (110). Within the span of minutes in this poem, Paracelsus has gone from charging Aprile to fealty and viewing himself as king and Aprile as subject, to viewing them as two halves of a whole which should never be parted. So intense is his desire for Aprile that their homosocial desire pushes into the realm of the homoerotic as he seems to treat the two of them as a masculine Adam and Eve who, when brought together, can birth a new understanding of knowledge and love. This reveals the humanist and masculine focus of the poem. Women are removed from the scene, present only in their notable absence as Aprile and Paracelsus express homosocial desire for one another, a deeper understanding of the will of God standing in the feminine role of object that both men desire. Their desire is for the betterment of themselves and of mankind, focusing on only the human experience of life and never thinking beyond their humanist scope. With his humanist and homosocial desires re-aligned, Paracelsus enters the final volumes of the poem poised to finally attain his goal of understanding the thoughts of God himself, a gift he can bestow upon mankind.

Paracelsus’ Humanist Conclusion

After the death of Aprile, Paracelsus seems to have lost some of the direction and drive he had before. Going to Basil where he works in medicine, *Paracelsus* finally begins to resemble, at least in some ways, the life of the historical figure named Paracelsus. However, Browning’s Paracelsus continues to be focused solely on people as he works towards his new life

goal of understanding love as Aprile inspired him to. Even as he continues his journey, his focus shifted, he struggles and rails against the process, saying, “love, hope, fear, faith--these make humanity; these are its sigh and note and character, and these I have lost! --gone, shut from me for ever” (142). Similar to the second section of the poem, here in the third part Paracelsus feels unsettled and unhappy with his progress and what he has learned. After the death of Aprile he fled Constantinople, seeing himself as having had a part in the death of his friend with whom he shared such sudden and pointed emotional intensity. Whereas previously Paracelsus seemed frustrated with his lack of progress, but still felt happy with the mark he had made on the scholarship he was studying, after the death of Aprile, Paracelsus is depressed. When his friend Festus tries to assure him that he will be happy again, Paracelsus tells him, “gone, gone, those pleasant times!” (141).

Browning is writing a “self-destructive poetic, which would allow only the poet’s self to be its antagonist and which repudiates the struggle for earthly fame by embracing God” (Erickson 25). At this stage of the poem, Paracelsus is still struggling with his own ego and his role as antagonist in this poem. Even into the fourth part of the poem, titled once again “Paracelsus Aspires,” Paracelsus struggles with his own ego and his own mind. When he sits with his friend Festus again, he says, “if I smile, ‘t is with as very contempt as ever turned flesh into stone” (147). His time working with plague and leprosy victims has depressed Paracelsus to a point that he seems to be losing his faith in everything, even his goals. Whereas mentions of God and his quest for God’s knowledge previously permeated Paracelsus’ dialogue, here it is almost jarring when Festus mentions God, saying, “you may have sinned, but you have loved. As a mere human matter--as I would have God deal with fragile men in the end--I saw that you will triumph yet!” (162). Festus tries to assure Paracelsus that his sin of not valuing love previously is

not as egregious as Paracelsus sees it. He is reminding Paracelsus that as men they are human, weak, and inherently less than God. As Paracelsus grapples with his life and choices, his quest for human transcendence and celestial transcendence slowly coalesce into something Paracelsus can live with.

In the final part of the poem, as Paracelsus faces death, his humanist passions in life find their final conclusion. In the end, “the ultimate goal of this quest, for Paracelsus and the reader, is an understanding of God’s love and how it alone allows one to reunite the fragmented world” (Erikson 33). In doing so, Paracelsus finds it necessary to conclude his life by walking back his earlier goals of celestial transcendence and reifying the hierarchy of god, man, and material world that has already been present in this poem by virtue of Paracelsus’ words even though the vegetal world resists such a role. As he lies on his deathbed, speaking about what he has learned in life, Paracelsus speaks about the spirit of mankind, saying that some other soul might seek a task like his “and, grappling Nature, so prevail on her” (182). In his fantasies of someone else following the same path he has, Paracelsus imagines someone “grappling Nature,” physically wrestling the natural world into submission. And it is submission as he imagines this person in a position where he can “prevail on her.” While the gender of this person is not specified, it is easy to assume Paracelsus imagines a man in this poem where a woman only appears briefly early on and is, otherwise, only referenced now and then and always in relation to her love and relationship with men in the poem. To Paracelsus, such a journey is not fully necessary. The relationship between god, man, and nature is already laid out and grappling with it to try and force superiority is unnecessary. As evidenced by the use of natural images and natural metaphors, Paracelsus understands that humanity is inherently entangled in the material world of the Earth. So too is humanity entangled in the celestial world, unable to ever truly understand the

knowledge of God. But the world is already set forth and the lessons present, even if he foresees others following his same path. God is superior to man and man superior to nature, but through a transcendent understanding of self, the boundaries can blur even as the hierarchy remains in place. Facing death Paracelsus seems to have finally learned from the vegetal presence in the poem which he ignored and used only as a tool. He imagines this man overcoming a female gendered nature and proclaims, “his nate spirit so majestic!” (182). This ironic praise of a naïve man reflects the lessons he has learned over the course of his life.

Much as he hoped to discover true human superiority, Paracelsus’ real lesson that he has learned in life is that power is not for man to worry over. He says, “I gazed on power till I grew blind [...] the power I sought for man, seemed God’s” (188). Returning the poem to Promethean mythology, Paracelsus is finally able to reflect on his life and the mistakes he made. Like Prometheus he sought power that he would gift to man. But in the process of seeking this power, Paracelsus discovered that he was on the wrong path. He sought to perfect humanity but learned that while “it is not fruitless idealism to hope to make men like gods; but one must follow the correct path, and the road will be a long one” (Baker 69). The key to the path, as Paracelsus learns, is that “equality must be attained before humanity can be perfected” (69). This is not equality between man and nature or equality of the sexes, though. The equality that Browning’s Paracelsus dreams of is “democratic equality” (69).

Paracelsus imagines this equality coming about only when things are correctly ordered in society, “love preceding power, and with much power, always much more love” (189). This is the final sentiment that he leaves with Festus before he dies, that the purpose of man is to love one another more than they desire power. This seems like another moment of irony though, as in his calls for democratic equality and a transcendental understanding of self he continues to

discuss generic masculine humanity, women and nature not explicitly included in this philosophical conclusion. It is, in the end, a humanist conclusion and yet a conclusion which dips its toe into a vegetal understanding and gender equality, both plants and women having agency and impactful presences in the poem. But the poem never explicitly acknowledges the importance of vegetal or feminine power, continuing to put forth a transcendentalism which pushes boundaries in its understanding of humanity, nature, and God as interconnected, but which still supports Victorian values as it values male humanism primarily.

Vegetal and Humanist Conclusions

It is almost shocking to see the conclusion of Browning's *Paracelsus* in comparison to the life and writings of the historical figure of Paracelsus. Paracelsus the man devoted himself to the science of his time, studying medicine and patterns in the natural world while working so closely with plants that he revolutionized medicine and is considered the founding creator of the field of toxicology. He sought to understand the potency of plants and to find ways to define and predict their power, creating an herbal knowledge that was widely accessible. Paracelsus is, therefore, a deeply vegetal historical figure whose impact on plants is still felt today as we continue to use foxglove's digitalis for heart conditions. He is a historical figure who is richly foliated and who, in his own exploration of medicinal herbs, envisioned the stars as having the spirits of plants and set forth ideas which present humanity and herbs as equals in this world. Browning's literary ideation of Paracelsus stands in relatively contrast to the historical figure he is named after. Browning's Paracelsus busies himself with philosophy rather than botany, first questing for knowledge and then questing for love but always with a humanist purpose. He does heal and work as a physician, but the experience of doing so does not lead Browning's

Paracelsus to deeper vegetal understandings but, instead, to deeper humanist understandings. The end of Browning's Paracelsus' intellectual and personal journey is a spiritual one rather than a vegetal one. Paracelsus stops desiring to know what God knows and, instead, seeks to love like God loves.

It makes sense that Browning's poem would reflect the religious values of Victorian society while working to question the power structures of the class system. Browning's purpose in this poem seems to be to challenge and, in time, alter society's view of class and class inequality. Paracelsus is horrified by the divisions he has seen, the rich living in comfort while the poor die of disease by the dozens. He believes that only love can fix this error and create balance in society. But the balance that Paracelsus speaks of only actively takes white men into consideration. Race is entirely absent from this text. Women are barely present, finding agency in the ways they affect men and in their emotional but not physical presence. Plants are more present than women, quietly depicting a transcendental understanding of life which acknowledges humanity as mere players in a large ecosystem built on life, death, decay, and rebirth. Yet as the plants themselves present this narrative, Paracelsus uses them as tools to better define and understand humanity, placing them in a subservient role as possession. In *Paracelsus* it is never argued that vegetal life must be inferior to human life, it is assumed and only discussed when nature is discussed as something man must dominate in order to expand their own quest for humanist personal betterment. Rather than explicitly speaking towards the inferiority of plants, the titular character of the poem so focuses on masculine humanism that the only two-way emotional intensity exists between the two men, forming a homosocial bond while the only woman mentioned dies outside of the narrative. Such a focus suggests inferiority without needing to state it directly. Even as plants and women seem to resist the narrative by

their agentic displays of power from the margins, man is placed into a position of power and left with the directive to make the world better by loving one another. But that love does not explicitly expand beyond men and into female or vegetal spaces. Browning's Paracelsus spends his whole life dedicated to finding ultimate truth and in doing so successfully entangles God, humanity, and the natural world. And yet that entanglement does not create true horizontal transcendentalism. The moments of vegetal trans-corporeality resist the final conclusion, but in the end the poem still concludes with Paracelsus preaching a life lesson which, at its core, seeks only to break down class hierarchies while reifying the hierarchy that places mankind above plants.

Chapter 3: Uprooting the Queer Body of Silas Marner

George Eliot's novel, *Silas Marner* (1861), tells the story of a miser who famously "enrolls in a remedial course on familial respectability" upon the adoption of a poor, orphaned child (Nunokawa 120). When Eppie enters his life, Silas desists from his queer fondling of his hoard of gold coins and turns his attention to an anxious parenting of the little girl. Much has been made in Victorian studies of Silas's "two bodies," erotic and "respectable," and their development through the trade of Silas's hoard for Eppie's golden curls (Nunokawa 120). However, very little has been said of the other queer bodies Silas must abandon in the novel in order to enter a respectable modernity: plants. Turning away from his illicit hoard of gold, Silas turns his back on his family history of herbal healing and the joy he finds in plants when he becomes Eppie's father. As the latter, Silas replaces his loyalty to his "Wise Woman" mother with his love for his domesticated daughter (Eliot). By novel's end, Marner's body itself is straightened, in many senses, while the bodies of plants become metaphors rather than potent or "vibrant matter" (Bennett 5). Clearly, Silas' queer herbal body has to be contained, purged of plant lore and remade in the shape of a leafless father who ultimately gifts his adopted daughter with a thoroughly Victorian, ornamental "lady's" flower garden. The potent, common plants of Silas's past are now uprooted. This process aligns the shift from traditional culture to modernity with a more general defoliation that is of interest to ecocritics.

Indeed, the latter have recently turned their attention to the Victorian period. They note that the Anthropocene - the current geological time period in which humans are considered to have impacted the very crust of the earth as well as its air, water, and soil - is recorded and represented in Victorian literature and culture. As Jesse Oak Taylor argues, Victorian literature, particularly the realist novel ironically naturalizes or normalizes climate change, representing for

example the new phenomenon of smog and “helping us attend to the banality of the Anthropocene – the way that ecological crisis is wrought out of the accumulated trivial acts of everyday life” like lighting a coal fire in a hearth (Taylor 877). The realist novel, like *Silas Marner*, allows critics to see beyond texts written to and for an abstract nature and into the ways the growing power of industrialization transformed the material world, a process represented as a new normal, everyday life, in Victorian realist novels. George Eliot in particular is relevant to Victorian ecocritical discussions because her “novels were pervasively – even frustratingly, for her first readers and reviewers –saturated with scientific allusions and imagery” that have been particularly linked to environmental loss and the process of human evolution (Kingstone 90). However, Eliot’s personal library as well as her writing notebooks on *Middlemarch*, reference not just her knowledge of the latter, but of a vibrant natural history of plants still in common usage, abortifacients, plants and roots, that signify potent everyday ecologies and “illustrate the existence of sub-public Victorian archives of knowledge and apparatuses” even at the heart of the Anthropocene (Theirauf 488). Doreen Theirauf proves that Eliot was taking part in a culture of scientific exploration and understanding that goes far beyond the neat definitions of Victorian science. This science and ecology do not stay within the boundaries of scientific researchers and universities, but instead grows into every-day life, permeating culture as well as the literature of the time.

Eliot can be read as engaging with the environmental impact of the Anthropocene and “how it might reflect in human terms the slow causalities” that we only now are beginning to understand: the loss of diversity in species and the loss of untouched wilderness (Choi and Leckie 567). At the same time, if the Anthropocene began during the eighteenth century and “the Victorians were its first inhabitants,” building their society and their culture in a world that is

shaped primarily by humanity and not by natural forces, the presence of potent green leaves in Silas Marner's hands at the end of the novel contests the linear destruction the geologic term suggests (Taylor 878). The novel asks then if the "anthro" of the "Anthropocene" is quite as leafless as it would seem to be, and on what terms, or if in fact, plants do surrender their agency to modernity. When Silas Marner traces the pattern of bright green leaves on his hand by the end of his story, we question, even if fleetingly, the smooth transformation of the materiality of plants into metaphor in modernity.

Within the terms of Eliot's *Silas Marner*, defoliation seems like salvation, finally bringing Silas forward into the fold of the rapidly industrializing village and separating him from both his perverse intimacy with his gold coins and his queered gender through his matrilineal herbal knowledge. As a traditional artisan in an agricultural community, Silas first appears as a different or bizarre man because of his unique skill and earning potential as the sole linen weaver in the village of Raveloe. If this difference makes him strange or suspect, so too does his resistance to marriage against the grain of the village's heteronormative. Initially, Silas' aptitude for plant-based healing serves as his singular connection to that society; the villagers' curiosity and fear intermingle in their desire to place Silas into the archaic and anachronistic role of village "Wise Woman". When Silas seeks to retain the science, but reject the magic of plant-based medicine, he is rejected by the community and left with only his cash hoard he so infamously fondles nightly. Once stolen, that loss leaves the miserly weaver with neither his money nor his vegetative intimacy with plants and people. Silas is triply cast off. It is only when he descends this low, without the traditional weaver's cash money or the consolation of foraging and healing that Silas "finds" something in exchange: parenthood, respectability, and domesticity. With the approval of the villagers and the presence of an adopted daughter as an acceptable locus for his

attentions, Silas finds peace at the end of the novel. But his peace seems to come at a price: the agency of plants.

In *Silas Marner*, the traditional practice of herbal healing is exiled and linked to magic as well as the realm of the irrational, while potent local plants themselves are shown to their proper place, a decorative rather than a utilitarian one, a lady's purview on the margins of culture. Even while plants are still present, seeming to foliate the pages of the novel, true plant life has been stripped away and replaced with inert metaphorical stand ins. Silas' leafless domestication is a harbinger of the defoliation of the Victorian novel, signaling the seemingly proper and natural rise of the consumption of biomedicine, the increasing confinement of queer outliers like Silas to the heterosexual family, and the concomitant decline of biodiversity and plant literacy. The "naturalness" of these transitions interlock with each other problematically in the novel. For example, when Silas' medical abilities are introduced, the work has already been done to other him, thus creating an easy transition in which his abilities as a healer are othered too. When Silas first appears in the novel, it is the discomfort he inspires in his fellow villagers that is initially highlighted. He is the source of "half-fearful fascination" and is rumored to be able to heal illnesses "if you could only speak the devil fair enough" (Eliot 2, 3). The villagers' initial reaction to Silas is a blend of both fear and dark curiosity as to what he is and what he can do with his body and to others. This introduction queers him within a context of a widely heteronormative ecology and economy in the village.

In the broadest terms, a queer figure is simply someone who is odd or an outlier when considered alongside society as a whole. But because "the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered

self,” Silas need only perform acts – gathering plants for example - that the society views as feminine in order to have a body that is viewed as queer (Butler 179). Foraging for, distilling, and dispensing plants as medicine is enough for the village to treat Silas as less male than female. Their reaction to Silas also queers him. They recognize him immediately as different from them. And he is entirely queer in the purest sense of being different from the norm and, therefore, threatening or confusing. The sounds of his loom are “so unlike” the sounds of their winnowing machines (2). His abilities are feared because it is assumed that only the kind words of the villagers prevent him from “doing [them] a mischief” (5). The villagers recognize him as different from themselves and, therefore, a potent presence in the society. Hence, they do not drive him away. They have a “fascination” with him and, after all, “he might cure” the villagers (2, 5). Like an exotic other, Silas is treated with both fear and respect by the villagers who see him as both a healer and “the devil” (3). An understanding of a queer figure more in line with Judith Butler and queer theory in general, though, needs to have an aspect of either their gender or sexuality that is either not fully cisgender and performing socially assigned gender roles or not fully heterosexual and performing socially assigned sexual roles.

Reading Silas as queer, then, provides an opportunity to push back against the queer’s exclusive equation with homosexuality. As Silas is shown to have romantic interest singularly in women, his queerness, does not come from his sexual expression in this reading,² but from his gender expression. Because “gender is culturally constructed,” it becomes necessary to look at the culture in which Silas lives in order to understand his gender presentation (Butler 6). The

²Silas’s secret, nightly fondling of his hoard of coins has been read as queer in that it is masturbatory, a kind of non-reproductive, same-sex expression of desire. See Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel*, 100-122.

society of the nineteenth century, beyond the specific cities that Silas lives in, was a society with rigid gender binaries. While feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft criticized the “spheres” of society, men inhabiting a public sphere and women a domestic sphere, such concepts were still a part of society during the time that Eliot was writing (Wollstonecraft). Within the idea of these spheres was a constructed ideal of both man and woman in Victorian society. In these ideals, men had much greater freedom, meaning that “man may press forward without considering whether he is stepping out of his sphere” while women were criticized and shunned for pushing past the boundaries they were supposed to exist behind (Wollstonecraft 33). It is in this reality that Silas begins to display a queer gender. Othered for his bachelor status, his weaving, and his herbalism, Silas is queered three-fold by his connection with feminine identity and also by his society’s constant critiques of his actions.

Through his interaction with herbs, Silas Marner’s tie to a traditional women’s culture queers his gender status. Silas “inherited from his mother some acquaintance with medicinal herbs and their preparation” (Eliot 7). His wisdom was learned at the feet of his mother, carrying the maternal line with it. Later in the novel when recalling what herbs to use to treat someone, Silas remembers “the relief his mother had found from a simple preparation of foxglove” (15). This further strengthens the connection between herbs and mothering. Silas was not only taught to locate and use these herbs by his mother, but he remembers her using them and finding relief in them herself. Silas’s memory creates an emotional connection between women’s bodies and medical knowledge, furthering the strong connection that his plant lore has, not simply to his mother’s instruction, but to her body and its openness to the properties of plants. Through this joint materiality, we see both humans and plants in a position of becoming, organizing and creating both their materiality and discursive identities, through plants. Reading this intimacy not

as mimicry (human bodies becoming plants, for example) but as bodies “becoming” themselves through each other gives plants the same status as other creatures who partake in an ecosystem of becoming (Deleuze 235). Growing wild or grown by humans, they are active agents whose potency might harm or ally with humans, decentering the human subject enough, moreover, to at very least, queer a gender or two and even thwart human exceptionalism. Silas does not have the masculine scientific knowledge of study as a licensed male apothecary would have, yet he is intimate with the plants that empower him. In an increasingly industrialized, regulated, and patriarchal, capitalist culture, Silas is something different. The currency which empowers him, common herbs which he gathers, is, moreover, anarchically free.

Plants have a long history of being the source of what is sometimes considered a dangerous power, perhaps particularly when they are in the hands of a woman. In early modern culture, it was believed that a woman’s power with plants was dangerous. There was a “fear of female power to deceive and destroy men” (Hallissy xi). This caused female apothecaries and medical practitioners to become known as *veneficia*. While the apothecary is a man of science and medicine, a trusted healer for the community, the *venefica*, or apothecary’s wife, is a figure of witchcraft and medicine. The female healer did not work simply through science but through charms and potions she created using the herbs from her apothecary husband. This was only compounded by the folklore history of witchcraft connecting powerful women to the supernatural world. Therefore, “this belief in the possibility of supernatural aid reinforced the general belief in women as deceptive and therefore possibly poisoners. Since she who knows the drugs that heal must also know the drugs that kill, accepting a potion from a woman was a risky business” (Hallissy 63). Because Silas’ gender is made queer and unsteady through his feminized herbal knowledge, it makes sense that he is treated not as a masculine herbalist but as a feminine

one. In order to see this connection, it becomes important to note that another term for this Medieval and Renaissance figure of the supernatural female healer is a Wise Woman, the term Eliot uses to refer to Silas' mother.

In Raveloe, the role that Silas fills is one "that had not been known since the Wise Woman at Tarley died" (Eliot 16). Explicitly placed into this role once his knowledge of plants is known, Silas finds himself "beset" by villagers looking to seek treatment of their own physical ills or those of their children (16). But their insistence that he can help them and their willingness to pay for his services does not mean the villagers are treating Silas with caring and respect. Like a *venefica*, the villagers still view Silas as someone to be feared even as he is used for his medical abilities. Silas does not enjoy his ability to use herbs. As a devout Christian, he not only "ha[s] doubts about the lawfulness" of his herbal knowledge, but also believes that "herbs could have no efficacy without prayer, and that prayer might suffice without the herbs" (7). In his mind, these "charms" as the villagers call them, are evil temptations and something he must withstand because of how they are characterized. The previous Wise Woman offered "little bags" to wear around the neck and would tie "a bit of red thread round [a] child's toe" to prevent "water in the head" (16). This is what the villagers want from Silas. They want him to perform magic and they call his treatments "stuff" and "charms," which dilutes the reality that what he is providing is medicine.

Being unwilling to chant and perform the charms that the villagers desire, both because he considers them a "falsity" and also because of his own moral discomfort with this supernatural and un-Christian practice, Silas sends the multitude of villagers away when they seek out his remedies (16). His ability to treat the heart condition of Sally Oates, but refusal to continue to practice his medicine, gives him "a transient sense of brotherhood" which only

“heightened the repulsion between him and his neighbors, and made his isolation more complete” (17). Blaming his “ill will and irritated glances” for any misfortune, Silas is isolated from the villagers (17). Though they viewed his medical abilities with a fearful fascination that leaves Silas othered, the villagers truly reject him from their society when he refuses to perform in the anachronistic and feminine role that they have set forth for him.

Indeed, the villagers’ magical ideas of Silas work cast the feminine herbal knowledge of Silas into the realm of the belief rather than reason, magic rather than science. Silas dreads such associations and finds them a “temptation” he would prefer to avoid. If *Silas Marner* is a fable of entry into modernity, then, neither plants nor their practices will be able to come forward into a more rational present. Eliot’s construction of the villagers’ ignorance and superstition, then, serves to defoliate modern society. As the misguided community demands “charms,” Silas must logically refuse them (Eliot 5). The “Marner’s stuff” that he provides is to them a “shadowy conception of power” instead of a rational medicine (7). The naming of it is reflective of this hazy, uncertain medicine that the novel depicts Marner as providing. It is not a cure. It is not a charm. Instead, it is merely “stuff:” an umbrella term for a tangible item that gives no insight into its origins or purpose and, as such, something which has an inherently disputable purpose as “stuff” is neither good nor bad by definition. The Oxford English Dictionary reflects this ambiguous definition, containing dozens of definitions of the word that range from tangible working items to intangible emotions. This serves to other Marner’s cures, separating them from both the supernatural and the medical so that the cures and the herbs they come from are relegated to an impotent and undesirable third classification of simply “stuff.” While herbs are still present in this text, their meaning is as contested as is the definition of “stuff”.

Marnier himself is relegated into this unknown and undefined world of materiality or “stuff.” He is a character of paradoxes. Silas performs herbalism, something outdated to the contemporary audience Eliot is writing to, but not unheard of for a man. Silas is caught between several gendered epistemologies, none of which he fits. He is not a doctor, not a licensed apothecary, nor is he a Wise Woman, nor is he a Victorian lady, walking through the fields to collect specimens merely for educational purposes. Consequently, Silas Marnier becomes a truly queered character. In the eyes of his society he is neither fully masculine nor fully feminine as he interacts with domestic herbs, and something must be sacrificed in order for Silas to find a place in modern society.

Exiled from his first home, Lantern-Yard, and othered by Raveloe, Silas does not seem to have a metaphorical home. Like his “stuff” he is between worlds and, like his “stuff,” his entire existence seems to be tied to social conceptions of herbalism and herbal medical practices. In fact, early in the story, Silas seems most relaxed and accepted when he wanders through the fields to collect herbs for his cures. He has “inherited delight” in his wanderings and, as previously shown, this herbal knowledge seems core to Silas’ genetics and is not just something learned (Eliot 7). Silas, who finds no welcoming home early in the novel, finds delight and self-definition in the fields. Similarly, the connections plants have with Silas answer a question central to Critical Plant Studies, not what plants mean, but “what they *are*” (Laist 14). When connected to Silas, plants are entities. They exist apart from people in abundance and enact their power upon characters, healing them from ailments. Plants become plot points and named companions when Silas is an herbalist. But this becoming must be stopped in a modernized society that views lab-based medicines as superior to herbal medicines. Plants cannot become

lively if they are to become commodities; they must be forced into inert roles to make room for modernized medicine to be valued as superior.

Ultimately plants are sacrificed to modernity in the novel despite their real medical abilities. A plant like digitalis, the Latin name for foxglove, is powerful. It regulates the heartbeat and when used with skill in the novel it cures Sally Oates. Such plants provide Silas with the power to control his catalepsy and aid villagers. They should be powerful figures in this novel. But by emphasizing their cultural role as irrational charms, Eliot must then, naturally, defoliate the novel for the villagers' own good. Such an undomesticated and queer person as Silas Marner is not a part of industrialized capitalism and is, therefore, a threat to modernity. In order to ease the tensions of such socially necessary modernization, Silas must, inevitably, become tamed and domesticated so that his "natural" knowledge becomes socially constructive.

"Wandering in the fields," Silas's foraging makes the point that his love lies outside the factory and labs of industrialized consumer culture (Eliot 7). His foraging is antithetical to cultivation and to the proper keeping of a Victorian garden, in which plants are brought in and curated within set boundaries that exist to mark the line between the domestic household and the undomesticated meadow or forest. Instead of cultivating plants, Silas seeks them in the wild, engaging in long, leisurely walks to find them, spending hours on end in the fields looking for specific plants which only he can read. Silas's foraging implicitly acknowledges the diversity of plant life outside the garden and the properties of plants, their preference for one spot or another. Their sheer mobility marks their more than human vibrancy and even a type of agency to thrive where they will. By drawing him out into the fields, the plants also are a part of a greater vegetal body, agents of the becoming of the fields themselves. As a forager, Silas gives himself over to plants which obey no human hand. He "wanders" on their vegetative map not immediately

legible to him. They demand his attention and time, drawing him into the fields where he is subordinate to them, seeking to partner with them in order to heal. Eliot's plant lists, "fox-glove and dandelion and coltsfoot," names these allies, recalling that dandelion, then and now considered an invasive weed to domestic gardeners, may heal. Coltsfoot, a common and sometimes considered invasive plant, and foxglove, a tall plant with bright blossoms that tends to grow in dense clumps, are more than things to look at, but are and were longtime companions to people as people were to plants (7). This relationship defies the logic of capitalism itself as plants grow apart from human cultivation, human supplies, and human demands.

However, Eliot's brief list of "coltsfoot, dandelion, and foxglove," reveals the limits of her own local plant literacy (Eliot 7). These three herbs are ones that George Eliot herself would have known well as the child of an estate manager who grew up on "7000 acres" of land which was both farmlands, rich with coal deposits, and home to deciduous forests (Hughes 1). Often accompanying her father to work in this vibrant landscape in her childhood, Eliot continued to show an interest in botany and the natural sciences as an adult. A look at her library and that of her husband, naturalist George Henry Lewes, reveals their ongoing interest in plants. But the breadth of botanical and medical information of their books displays a typically Victorian interest in exotic species. Eliot owned multiple books by the scientist Ferdinand Jules Cohn which cover topics ranging from the connective tissues of plants to the digestion process of carnivorous plants (Baker 41). One of the more notable presences in Eliot's scientific library is her collection of scientific journals, in particular a "16 volume run of *Nature*" (Baker lviii). *Nature*, a prominent British scientific journal, covered all contemporary schools of science, including botany, at the time of its initial publication. But, like the other botanical texts in Eliot's

library, *Nature* reflects the ideals of the time, depicting plants as specimens to study, catalogue, and collect rather than as potent medicines to ally with.

Like her Victorian contemporaries, then, Eliot approaches plants as things to be named and examined via botany or contained and cultivated via gardening. What is missing from Eliot's library, a Victorian edition of Gerard's *Herbal*, for example, a household manual that is a comprehensive list of common medicinal plants and their uses, is as revealing as what is present. Likewise, the brevity of plant lists in *Silas Marner* suggests a missing sea of green, meadows stripped of contemporary biodiversity. Plants are important to Silas' story, but they seem already to be vanishing, relisted. Silas' herb collecting in the fields becomes unfixed and unsettled. The reader is shown his distance from the domestic world as he is "wandering in the fields" (Eliot 7). The reader knows the plants' names that he collects, potentially even knowing them as members of Victorian gardens, foxglove being prized for its beautiful blossoms while dandelion in particular was a dreaded weed to keep at bay, but the depth of plants as medicinal power-houses is not plumbed. Silas' vegetal knowledge is wild and untamed, reflected in the wilderness he wanders through, but it is also increasingly attenuated.

In 1861, when *Silas Marner* was published, herbal knowledge and the ability to use herbs to cure were experiencing a gendered transition. By that time medicine was increasingly masculinized, licensed, and regulated. Plant based medicines were giving way to patent medicines. Knowledge of medicinal plants was fading and seemed old fashioned despite its ongoing importance. Under laissez faire economics, moreover, herbs could be cheaply imported. After industrialization, they could be commercially grown as well. Local herb gardens and foraging was taken over by commercial endeavors. With licorice, lavender, and most culinary herbs coming from commercial farms, domestic gardens became decorative. At the same time

gardening was done by women “for fun” rather than for health (Sanecki 80). This gendered domestication of plants then may be linked to the decline of the status of local plants in modernity and hence in a decline in plant literacy and biodiversity. Eliot’s novel then not only describes the defoliation of culture in modernity, she prescribes it by replacing Silas’s womanly herbalism with paternity. This places Silas ironically outside the realm of medicinal plants and squarely into a discourse of “bloom” when he leaves off healing for fathering, a feat celebrated at the novel’s end with the gift of a garden and the beginning of a botanical education for Silas’s adopted daughter Eppie (King 5).

As Kennedy writes, botanical study came to be considered “a genteel pastime for women” in the nineteenth century (Kennedy 45). The connection to flowers and visually appealing plants gave botany an “elegant beauty” that caused it to be deemed a fittingly feminine pursuit (King 16). This rise in female botanists is due to the work of Carl Linnaeus. Linnaeus’ system of classifying plants was an inherently sexualized and often eroticized method of classifying and understanding plant reproduction. In his understanding of plants, flowers often marry one another, sometimes the reproduction of a species being explicitly erotic. Through this gendering of vegetal reproduction, Linnaeus provided Victorian culture with a socially acceptable means of discussing sex and sexuality. Women had the tools to discuss sexuality openly and explicitly in floral narratives. But Linnaeus also “explicitly included rather than excluded women from the study of botany” (King 17). Therefore, Linnaean botany opened the door to plants being a tool for women to speak more freely of their own bodies and sexuality, but also purposely included women in the study of plants. With the now scientific connections between the bloom of a young woman coming of age and the bloom of a growing flower, botany and the study of plants was not just something open to women but was something “morally

improving” as it naturalized women’s roles in heteronormative reproduction (King 16). Going out into both domestic gardens but also trekking into the wilderness to view, draw, paint, catalogue, and study plants became a means of accomplishment for young Victorian women. Eppie begins to be schooled in this lesson by novel’s end, replacing Silas’s queer herbalism.

As plants “helped late Victorian readers think about themselves and their world, in all its political, economic, and scientific expanses,” they held “widespread general interest” and were something Victorian readers knew to think “seriously” about (Chang 85-87). But for Victorians, herbs were not of much interest and medicinal plants were not the subject of botanical studies. Hence, a plant’s potency mattered little under the Linnaean system. If “herbs remained” both the “remedies to be relied upon [...] for the country people” then “native and naturalized species were considered to be old fashioned” (Sanecki 70). Eliot’s text contributes to this process, transforming plants from potent things to potent, gendered metaphors.

Uprooting Herbs in Victorian Society

In the realist novel, “wedding bells” often work to obfuscate the violence of the fall into modernity and *Silas Marner* is no exception. In order to domesticate Silas, the pain of the loss of herbal and vegetal knowledge and power must be obfuscated. In order to do so the novel unseats the idea of “natural” from the natural world and, instead, naturalizes the gendered values of modernity, aiding and abetting the transition from traditional labor practices and crafts to the mechanized labor and commodities of industrialized society. Indeed, the novel naturalizes the rise of industrialism and the gendered fall of herbal medicine, making it seem like a social good. Historically, however, urbanization meant a loss of plant literacy, a key component of biodiversity preservation. A boom in farming had already developed monoculture in England by

the late eighteenth century, displacing people and their knowledge if not plants themselves. Gone were the subsistence farms in which families grew and knew medicinal plants. These either died out through the selling of land or through the same farmers buying up more and more land in order to create a commercial farm (11). Land that had previously been untouched was snatched up and parceled out for commercial farming, pushing domestic plants further away from civilized spaces. In many cases, the invasive weeds associated with monoculture pushed out herbs. With less space available, plants had to compete with one another for the space to grow, limiting biodiversity with the limitations on untouched “wild” spaces. Fossil fuel was increasingly burned to import herbs from elsewhere.

Silas Marner obscures the violence of this cultural and ecological defoliation. The farming villages in *Silas Marner* remain populated with people and bloom with flowers. Raveloe, the village in which the majority of the story takes place, is a rural community with a church in the center of town. The seat of power is still agricultural, run by Squire Cass who is one of “several landed parishioners” (Eliot 20). Early in the novel we learn of the soft rhythm of farming present in the novel that is characterized by the “cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine” (2).

Seemingly doomed from the beginning of the novel as well, by the end Silas’s weaving with of course the plant flax turned into linen has also ceased. Silas’ loom always sounded disturbing when compared to the “natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing machine,” Eliot’s depiction of Silas works to denaturalize artisanal weaving and favor industrialization as progressive (Eliot 2). The sounds of machinery, though not machines associated with industrial textile factories, sound “natural” and are associated with pleasant emotions. Silas, on the other hand, is such an unknown and othered figure that he is “alien-looking” and represents a strange

and “disinherited” profession that has been left behind by society (1). The society of the mid-nineteenth century had shifted to favoring the wool and cotton fabrics that industrial textile mills produced easily and cheaply over the labor-intensive work of hand-woven flax, and so even though they live at the start of the nineteenth century, the villagers display discomfort towards Silas’ archaic profession. The impact this shift had on plants cannot be ignored, either. Flax is both a food product and a source of natural fibers. As such it lended itself well to pre-industrial societies as farmers could sell the waste from their flax harvest to a weaver who could then turn it into flaxen thread and linens. This fabric was replaced by wool and cotton, both of which required large plots of land to be domesticated and dedicated either to sheep or to the farming of cotton. The attitude of the villagers reflects mid-nineteenth century society in which the undomesticated “natural” world continued to be pushed further back by expanding cities and growing commercial farms. The reaction is not as extreme as when the society of *Silas Marner* comes into contact with Silas’ herbalism, but it still serves to prevent Silas from being either truly outdated or modernized. A truly outdated Silas is one that is easy to ignore because he is simply an old way of thinking. An old way of thinking can be left behind whereas a very nearly modern or archaic but powerful way of thinking needs to be brought forward. Only by giving Silas enough power to require attention can Eliot modernize him and smooth the transition into a modernized world.

A medical subplot in the novel, moreover, intensifies the need for progress. Upset with doctors like Doctor Kimble, Raveloe’s resident physician who had very little training and even less regulation, the novel makes note that historically British medicine was “crumbling under the weight of practitioners’ discontents” (Peterson 283). Starting with the Apothecaries Act of 1815 and culminating in the creation of a General Practitioner (GP) position that could be studied at

hospitals, medicine spent the nineteenth century shifting away from the cures of an apothecary and towards the lab-refined tablets of a GP. The movement towards regulation and requirements concerning the training of doctors, as well as medical breakthroughs such as the invention of the stethoscope in 1816, anesthesia in 1842, and antiseptic surgical practices in 1862, led to a medical renaissance. While not trained in medicine, George Eliot cared enough about the scientific field to have understood the implications of nineteenth century scientific discoveries. In her library there are “215 titles representing an early and continuous interest” in medicine on the part of George Henry Lewis and George Eliot (Baker xxii). In fact, her library is “representative of British contemporary medical research,” allowing for the assertion that Eliot was very invested in following the modernization of the medical practice in the nineteenth century (Baker xxii). This influx of medical knowledge came with a price, though. One that Eliot herself likely would not have known about or cared about, focusing on the scientific side of botany rather than the medicinal epistemologies. In order to mass-produce medicine, labs had to distil reagents into easily produced and easily prescribed forms so that the medical field could become standardized and modernized. This took medical precedence over historical medical practices, driving medically potent but commonplace domestic herbs out of household gardens and replacing them with plants valued only for their inert beauty rather than any potency they contain. This shift was to begin the decline in pollinator forage which was to impact ecosystems severely in England.

Indeed, plants themselves suffer from the divide between medicine and botany and the rise of consumer culture just as Silas does. Two of the three plants Silas is explicitly stated as using, dandelion and coltsfoot, are common herbs used in remedies for common ailments. Both plants also have deep and sturdy roots that allow them to flourish in virtually any terrain in

England. And for both of these plants, that ability to grow well has garnered them the title of “weed.” They became considered invasive and were plucked out of the ground and kept away from domestic spaces as the domestic garden gained popularity during the nineteenth century. Garden plants were chosen carefully to be a beautiful and sweet-smelling display (Sanecki 72). Little attention was paid to the impact this had on plants outside of the domestic garden and, in some cases, this led to invasive species like the Japanese knotweed being planted. First introduced to England around the middle of the nineteenth century because of its beauty, the Japanese knotweed became such an invasive species and proved to be so adept at choking out domestic plants, that the proliferation of the plant became illegal in England in the twentieth century. But Victorian gardeners did not care about invasive species or whether or not they were harming plants in their selective breeding for larger, fuller blossoms. Instead their gardens served as displays of beauty and the personality of the home, much like Eppie’s own garden does later in the novel.

Silas then must give up his plants for something socially “natural.” This is something he seems to struggle with at first as his queer connection with plants initially shifts to a queer obsession with gold. Eliot classifies plants with metals, shifting Silas’s desire to touch and know from plants and gold to people. The things once his family when “handled them” and “counted them, till their form and colour were like the satisfaction of a thirst for him” were once “companionship,” as Nunokawa says, a stand in for masturbation or sexual intimacy, queered because it lies outside heteronormative human contact (110). The intimacy he shared with plants through their connection to his mother and his wanderings to collect them is now focused on the coins, keeping his expressions of intimacy and nigh sexual thirst focused wholly on inanimate objects. He remains queer and the society continues to treat him as such. When his coins are

stolen it marks for Silas the first time, he has truly been a part of the community. Eliot says that the support and attention of the villagers “had doubtless its influence on Marner, in spite of his passionate preoccupation with his loss” (56). This affection changes Silas and changes what he values in life.

Upon finding little Eppie in his house and mistaking her golden hair for his golden coins, Silas adopts her and takes on the responsibility of raising her himself. She becomes his “precious plant to which he would give a nurturing home in a new soil” and in turn he will have to rely on the society to “help him to satisfy the wants of the searching roots” (136). For the first time since coming to the village of Raveloe, Silas is expressing desire and intimacy towards another human. It is not a sexual desire, but it is still enough to seemingly rectify his queerness. A child is a product of a socially acceptable heterosexual relationship. It stands to reason that his affection for a child, even without the presence of a female sexual partner for him to desire, moves him away from his queer passions of plants and gold and focuses his intimacy on something more socially acceptable. It is worth noting, though, that Silas is not made into a truly heterosexual ideal through his relationship with Eppie. Rather his queerness is shifted from a “radical” queerness in the face of modernization, to a more socially acceptable queerness through his non-traditional family structure. In fact, late in the novel Eppie is given a chance to return to her biological family and claim them as her own but she responds saying “I can’t leave my father, nor own anybody nearer than him” (Eliot 173). Eppie chooses Silas and “speaking socially, if not sexually, Eppie makes a queer decision. Her announcement marks her need to articulate and insist on the kinship she desires over the kinship she is expected to accept” (Griffiths 21). Eppie refuses her biologically legitimate family and, instead, chooses the family of kinship that Silas has built with her. Similar to Silas’ gender being queer because of his existence in a liminal

space between genders and, therefore, one not accepted by social constructions of gender, so too is their family queer as it exists in a liminality between a biological family unit and the found family of close friends. Silas raised Eppie, and yet their family is a relationship of mutual parenting that is so meaningful to Eppie that she refuses her biological ties in order to remain faithful to Silas. Because their relationship is based not on reproduction but on a kind of, as Devin Griffiths calls it, coproduction, Silas can still be read as queer, just a more socially acceptable form of queer. Marner participates in and reaffirms modern society and an intrinsic need for domesticity in his new queerness, only marginally subverting social expectations as he builds a family based on choice and not lineage.

In fact, this choice, while queer, fully takes Silas away from his previous associations. His knowledge which was “inherited” cannot be passed on through the bloodline as his bloodline has ended (Eliot 7). This is, in part, due to the almost reversed relationship between Silas and Eppie. Although Silas is the parent, it is Eppie who saves, shapes, and ultimately domesticates Silas from his world of dangerous vegetal associations. The plants that were before represented by a potent medicinal herb used to treat medical conditions, are now a convenient domestic metaphor in which a plant is uprooted and replanted in domestic soil. Silas sees Eppie as “a precious plant to which he would give a nurturing home in a new soil” (Eliot 136). She is his houseplant, dependent on him for all care as it has been removed from its natural habitat where it might thrive without close attention and care. Even though the metaphor in the book is treating Eppie as the plant, Silas too is re-planted in domesticated soil through the very construction of the metaphor, the adoption of Eppie, his plant more “precious” than common herbs. His entire worldview is changed and, under her watchful eye, always present by his side once he adopts her, Eppie transplants Silas into a domestic world. He no longer desires gold. He is no longer

isolated from the village. There is a “softening of feeling towards him” among the villagers that leads the women in the village, in particular his neighbor Dolly Winthrop, to provide him with clothes for Eppie and assistance in sorting out how to raise her as a single father (131). Now domesticated, Silas is freed from the “cold, narrow prison” it was once held in (131). In the novel, it is nothing but a good thing that Silas turns his back on what was once his passion in order to fall in line with social expectations of domestication and procreation.

This domestication, as previously stated, is still queer, though, and that is important to both the story and to Eliot as a writer. Silas is to be Eppie’s only parent. While he takes advice from Dolly Winthrop, he serves as both mother and father to the little girl. Yet the previously present othering in which the village was drawn to Silas even as they rejected him is not present. George Eliot read history as evolutionary, “a slow process of development” towards a “a place or time that was in some way better” (Hughes 6). Deconstructing conservative conceptions of what makes a family support that progress as it leads towards a modernized world in which connections and kinship define family more than biology itself. At its core, Silas’ queer nature is not constructed as inherently dangerous. As long as his queerness is constructive to the modernization of society, Eliot does not seem to present Silas or his choices as undesirable. Therefore, it must be the wild plants themselves that are negative and harmful to his soul, and not the connection to femininity. Plants seem to surround Eppie at all times and she is Silas’ metaphorical plant which he must give tender care and attention to in order to satisfy his own soul. This would make no sense were it not for the presentation of plants in relation to Eppie. Like Silas’ domestication, plants are domesticated and contained into an inert and socially acceptable role in the novel.

Silas's adoption of Eppie immediately disrupts his foraging and his intimacy with plants so that he is able to redefine his relationship with the vegetal world as non-utilitarian. It is clear that these plants are no longer familiar tools of his trade but rather vehicles for meaning. Nostalgia for plants replaces intimacy and knowledge, plant literacy itself. While out walking with Eppie when she is still a toddler, "Silas began to look for the once-familiar herbs" he used to walk the fields in search of (Eliot 131). But this is merely a game that must be left behind. "As the leaves, with their unchanged outline and markings, lay on his palm, there was a sense of crowding remembrances from which he turned away timidly" (131). These "once-familiar" leaves, must be "turned away" though they may still be the "temptation" he once saw them as (131, 7). Parting is sorrowful, he holds the leaves in his hands and recognizes their outline and markings. These plant bodies were once his only contact with living things. The touch and the feel of these plants on Silas' palm is markedly intimate. This haptic intimacy, however, is pushed away. While this scene is not an explicitly sexual one, it is an intimate and troubling one. In a book where Silas' touch becomes "fondling" and "revelry," his fondling of the leaves in this scene suggests a queerness of sexuality that is not dependent on hetero- or homosexuality. Instead, his touching of the plants is an expression of sexuality and close intimacy with other things. Like the obsession with his coins, this intimate touching of plants is an improper expression of desire for Silas and, therefore, is not allowed to thrive. He is only content when he expresses affection and parental desire towards Eppie, a much more socially acceptable outlet for his desires for social intimacy.

She too is schooled in the new meanings of plants, a proper connection to other things. She is not attracted to the potent leaves Silas fondles, but to flowers. She "toddled to pluck the flowers" as a baby (Eliot 130). The image of "buttercups [...] thick in the meadows" is a sign that

indicates her own bloom and Silas's prosperity; the flowers are used to indicate the passing of time and the blooming life in Silas' life thanks to Eppie, but they are a metaphor or a set dressing for her development (130). The meadow of buttercups does nothing. It does not provide healing and it does not even seem to provide good smells or pollen for the bees. The activity and life of the vegetal world is entirely missing from the text. Much like Eppie plucking the flowers, Eliot has plucked the flowers, thus separating them from their roots and the source of their life so the novel is left with one-dimensional plants which are present but inactive *as* plants. These inert plants are accepted and loved while the "once-familiar herbs" are something that Silas "turn[s] away timidly" when he sees; their leaves bring a "sense of crowding remembrances" (130). The language used here is notable. Looking at leaves which in most cases store a plant's powerful alkaloids, Silas' spirit is "enfeebled", and he turns away "timidly" (130). Silas becomes passive and weak after only holding these plants in his hand. Plant fondling, it seems, is now strictly prohibited. The big world of plants in which Silas once wandered contracts so that he may take "refuge in Eppie's little world." This contraction seems inevitable. The plants that were once his potent allies, he now turns away from like a fearful lover, their touch and their potency now frightening to him in his modernized worldview. These plants are, now, only comforting when contained within the domestic space of the garden.

Eppie's Garden

Finally, the ultimate transformation of plants from vibrant matter to inert objects in *Silas Marner* comes when plants are domesticated and feminized through their placement in Eppie's garden. Eppie, associated with plants since her entry into the novel as she "toddle[s] to pluck the flowers" or is to Silas "a precious plant to which he would give a nurturing home," puts plants in

their place (Eliot 130, 136). She is ultimately the flower Silas grows and expresses the disciplining of plants and her proper femininity by containing both within the space of her garden at the end of the novel. Like the female botanists of the nineteenth century, Eppie's garden is a productive place for Eppie's own bloom as a woman, the novel's hothouse flower. One of the first things she desires when she asks for a garden is "double daises" (141). Double daises are daisies which were carefully and selectively bred to have extra petals in their bloom, creating a flower which has upwards of twice as many petals as a naturally occurring daisy. These double daises being chosen first is representative of the kinds of flowers and plants which were beloved in Victorian society and indeed now: flowers which had been shaped and altered by humans so that they no longer truly resembled their wild cousins preferred by pollinators. Such a plant, in Eppie's case, signifies luxury and social standing. The double daises are "like Mrs. Winthrop's" and the list of herbs she wishes to include, rosemary, bergamot and thyme, are chosen because they are "sweet-smelling" (142). Ever respectable and self-sacrificing however, Eppie draws the line at lavender; it is omitted because "there's no lavender only in the gentlefolks' gardens" (142). Eppie's garden knows its place. Forgoing lavender is a sure sign of her sobriety and humility.

Eppie selects plants for her garden based mostly on social pressure. The "sweet-smelling" herbs allow her to produce potpourri or nosegays, both popular in Victorian homes, while the double daises mirror Mrs. Winthrop and lavender is omitted because it only gentlefolks grow it in their garden and in their sweet-smelling homes where it "fills the vases" (Eliot 154). The flowers, too, are not chosen for any purpose but to be beautiful and inert. Eppie says she wants to plant flowers because "[she] always think[s] the flowers can see us and know what we're talking about" (142). While this may seem like a moment of vegetal presence in the novel, it reveals her

desire for a living but inert garden. In fact, the only activity these flowers can have is to be used in order to define a human, to “see” humans and to “know” them. This is a common use of plants in literature and one that Critical Plant Studies pushes back against. Plants can easily serve as metaphor, becoming aligned with humans and reflecting “what an attentive reader is already able to discern about the human characters” (Laist 12). This happens when plants are seen not through a vegetal lens but through a human one. Because “plants seem to inhabit a time-sense, a life cycle, a desire-structure, and a morphology that is so utterly alien that it is easy and even tempting to deny their status as ani-mate organisms,” it can be difficult for humanity to comprehend vegetal life for what it is (12). Historically, literature and ecological studies have seen plants as Eppie does, as reflections of our own humanity. When a plant reflects humanity, though, it is little more than a piece of glass. Just as a mirror seeks not to alter what it reflects nor impart any of itself into the reflection, so too do plants become lifeless when their only purpose is reflection. While Silas may have viewed plants as having “uncanny ontological potency,” becoming vegetal as he walked through the fields, Eppie sees plants as mirrors of humanity, tools for better understanding oneself and society (12).

Reading Eppie’s plants as a mirror and not active characters, finally, it becomes necessary to consider what the plants are saying. This vegetal statement is twofold, the literal and the symbolic: the Victorian language of plants and the symbolism of Eppie’s garden. Inspired by a Turkish custom of conveying meaning with objects and flowers, the Victorians “flower symbolism became particularly elaborate,” leading to the idea of floriography or a language through flowers (Kirby 4). This language allowed meaning to be conveyed through bouquets, gifted flowers, and even gardens. The idea of flowers serving as a language was not, however, created by the Victorians. Building on figures like Shakespeare’s Ophelia, the Victorians took

the connections between flowers and emotion that were already present and transformed it into a language. In doing so plants are, once again, rendered inert and for human use. The plants themselves do not have meaning and do not express themselves. Instead, humans write onto them meaning and words. The plants in Eppie's garden are conscripted to write the meaning of innocence (daisies), remembrance (rosemary), courage (thyme), and irresistibility (bergamot) (Boeckmann). These are all traits that it would be wise for a young woman such as Eppie to have. And, throughout the novel, it is easy to argue that Eppie embodies these traits, proving herself to be wholly innocent in her familial love for Silas, thoughtful enough to remember past years and the changes to the scenery, courageous enough to turn away her biological family, and irresistible enough to easily catch the attention of a suitor. But in converting plants into a language, they have no power or potency save for that which humanity ascribes to them through interpretation.

The plants in Eppie's garden are not the herbs Silas used to use, chosen for their activity in the body and ability to heal. These are flowers chosen so they can be passive viewers of the household, beautiful and sweet smelling, but only able to exist and grow. The closest they come to affecting the world around them is the social status the society has placed on some plants over others. Eppie is affected by plants in this way as her femininity and domestic identity are defined by her garden. If "the bloom of a girl [is] like the bloom of a plant," then Eppie fully blooms into a woman when she asks her father for a garden (King 35). Whereas Silas' sexuality and gender are initially presented as queer, Eppie's is consistently in line with the social norm. She grows into a beautiful young woman who is interested in a local gardener, Aaron. Considering the metaphor of flowers as a "description of a potential and ephemeral sexual reproduction," the connection between Aaron's profession and Eppie's sudden desire to plant a garden reveals a

desire for her sexuality to bloom under the caretaking of Aaron (King 35). This is a socially acceptable and correct way to express her sexuality. Because Linnaean botany used the readily available and conceptually accessible tools of gender in order to describe plant reproduction, within society “sex became spoken” through the language of blooms and flowers (13). Flowers had sexual organs under Linnaean distinctions and discussions of a beautiful bloom or floral reproduction were coded language that could be used to openly discuss a woman’s sexuality or sex itself. It is no surprise to discover that Aaron recently told Eppie that “he should like to be married” and that it is Eppie he is interested in (Eliot 152).

As if they are building her womb in which she will bear their children, Aaron and Eppie build Eppie’s garden under the watchful eye of Silas. Once again, the garden and the flowers do not grow for themselves nor do they serve to bring characters to a new ontological understanding. Instead, they reflect desires, mimicking the Victorian language of flowers as Eppie writes herself and her future with her garden. In a culmination of Eliot’s modernization of Silas and the novel, Eppie ends as the perfectly modernized Victorian woman. She does not fret over the lowering of the water in the Stone Pit reservoir due to larger farms requiring more irrigation water. She does not wander through the woods. She has not inherited Silas’ knowledge of medicinal herbs. She is a domesticated beauty who is married off young and who has “a larger garden than she had ever expected” (187). She is fertile and blooms sexually through the metaphor of her blooming garden, thus being perfectly appropriate and perfectly in line with social expectations. Even though the novel ends filled with plant life, it is inert and a metaphorical stand in for humanity and sexuality. This lush garden at the end of the novel, though beautiful, is powerless and marginalized and so unwittingly represents a defoliation of the few wild, powerful, and narratively present herbs Silas gathers at the start of it.

In the same way that the anachronistic reaction to Silas' knowledge of medicinal herbs exposes a desire to eschew traditional medicine as archaic representations of pagan beliefs in favor of naturalized and industrialized medicine and society, so too does this oxymoron of a defoliated garden expose social realities of the time in which George Eliot was writing. During the nineteenth century medicine moved away from its herbal roots. While the purely scientific side of Victorian botany focused on discovering and cataloguing plants, the popular culture side of botany saw a boom in superficiality. Plants became tools to create beauty and decorate a home. While flowers and plants were often everywhere, they were manipulated and controlled so they represented not their own vegetal beauty and power, but the beauty and meaning that humanity desired. It is this control of plants that can be seen in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. The plants with real power are treated as terrifying agents of a supernatural power while the second half of the novel has lush but inert vegetation, one-dimensional life whose only purpose is to amplify the humans present or serve as a sexual metaphor. It is foliated but it is not planted with vegetal life and power, displaying a balance between man and nature. Instead, it is planted in such a way that reifies humanity as above and superior to plants, creating vegetation that does not reflect vegetal life but instead only reflects the nearby human presence.

In the industrialized Victorian society of the mid-nineteenth century when George Eliot was writing *Silas Marner*, such a view of flowers and gardens was the modernized one to have. When taken in context with the treatment of Silas and his knowledge of medicinal herbs, it becomes apparent that this novel is pushing towards a peaceful modernization through industry. It is seen in Eppie's garden. It is seen as the stone pit has less and less water, the flow being diverted to help farms which grew larger as industry advanced. The evidence of industry is taken even further at the end of the novel when Silas and Eppie return to Lantern Yard. Rather than

finding the church at the center of town, they find “a large factory, from which men and women were streaming for their midday meal” (Eliot 183). The village from the start of the novel is gone, replaced by a factory, a literal embodiment of industry. Such a sight in what was a peaceful and seemingly idyllic farming community should be deeply unsettling. While both Silas and Eppie express discomfort and surprise at the former village of Lantern Yard, the story quickly diverts away from the place and back onto the happiness that Silas and Eppie have found together. As if brushing upon the fact that industry inherently changes the countryside, Eliot draws the reader back in to the comforting reality that Silas and Eppie are perfectly happy as Eppie closes the novel out saying, “I think nobody could be happier than we are” (187). Any discomfort or violence is obscured by the social systems. Any hardships forgotten because they have found happiness in their family home.

Eliot’s *Silas Marner* charts the expulsion of plants from medicine and the split between the latter and gardening or botany which was a field which was increasingly gendered as female and amateur. At the same time, Eppie’s garden naturalizes the rise of botany and gardening as a woman’s field. Plants shift from active beings, queering Silas’ gender and sexual expression while carrying both memory and healing properties, to inert, becoming statements of social status or literal wallflowers who can only observe but never interact. In this way the novel traces the path of modernization and industrialization and the impact it had on society, while also presenting an idealized version of this industrialized world. Eliot seems to work hard to assuage any fears of modernization, discrediting old ways of thinking as worthy of the Middle-Ages and enough to cause someone to be a social outcast. She presents a modernized Raveloe that seems to shine with its joy and perfection as the winnowing machine still cheerfully trots on in the distance. While Eliot defoliates the landscape of *Silas Marner* of local food and potent local

medicinal plants, she also plants a troubling new kind of garden that naturalizes modernity and women's place in it. Neither Silas nor Eppie can find true happiness until they eradicate potent plants. By containing them to the space of the domestic garden, plants become docile and "naturalized" in the modernity of the society.

Growing Changes in Victorian Culture

When he is a part of a domesticated and socially progressive, if still queer, family, Silas is rewarded with happiness and a place in the world that he once could only dream of. The novel rewards a defoliated modernization in order to obfuscate the violence such modernizing brings with it. *Silas Marner's* last chapter before a brief conclusion ends on a telling image of Silas and Eppie, a founding family that chooses one another over biological ties, looking out at the place where Silas once lived. The city that he knew before is almost completely gone, replaced by an industrialized space that he does not recognize. Nor can he find any of the people he knew before. Within his lifetime, an entire village has been seemingly eradicated and replaced with a factory. This image reminds Silas not of what has been lost, but of how much he has grown as a man and how much he has gained through his domestic ties to his adopted daughter Eppie. The cold, foreign city of a modernized world is warmed with the love of family and a happiness that he has found. This is Eliot's characteristic image of modernity which displaces more apparently dangerous ecologies.

The latter shift is made clear in Silas's own internalizing of a modern rejection of herbalism, his self-loathing towards his herbal knowledge which precipitates his break from the world of potent vegetation. Eliot's representation of medicinal and decorative plants in *Silas Marner* naturalizes the edging out of plants in modernity. This move rearranges the horizontal

relationship between writer and plants that marks Keats and other Romantic works. In Victorian realism, herbs become metaphors rather than partners or companions to humans. Plants that are treated with agency and power early in the novel are pushed out; they are considered too volatile, ironically. Their use provokes a kind of primitivism in the people of Raveloe who assume they are only able to heal because of dark supernatural forces, easing the rejection of what had recently been a cornerstone of modern medicine through constructed ties to the occult. What was intended to represent a straightforward way to conceptualize the need to refuse archaic medicine in the mid-nineteenth century and, instead, support modernized industrial medicine, also reveals what is lost in the modernization process.

Like the push towards industrialized medicine, these healing plants are metaphorically pushed back in time and back into the darkness while the pretty, inert, and lifeless plants feature prominently later on in Eppie's garden, watching the lives of Silas and Eppie but never taking part in them. Eppie plants flowers, but only in a garden in which they can serve as metaphor for her life and sexuality, observing humanity without the power to become anything other than decorations or mirrors which reflect the humans observing them. These vegetal lives are not living for their own sake but are being paraded onto the page in order to domesticate Eppie who, in turn, domesticates Silas. Like the plants that were crushed, dried, cut, and mutated for the betterment of biological sciences, the plants in *Silas Marner* are tools for "progress." This leads to a deeply ironic role for plants in *Silas Marner* and perhaps more generally in nineteenth-century English literature itself. Even so, the very "timidity" which green leaves provoke in *Silas Marner* suggest the queer resilience – and potency – of plant life, surely a force to be reckoned with and honored in the Anthropocene.

Chapter 4: Vegetal Villains: Plants, Women, and the Reclamation of Agency in L.T.

Meade's *The Sorceress of the Strand*

As England moved towards the *fin-de-siècle*, plant literacy and biodiversity continued to decline. As corporations took over farming practices, they began to focus the crops that they grew on potatoes and wheat, allowing fruits and vegetables to “retreat” from fields, this practice displaying “the negative side of the agricultural revolution” (Thirsk 148). The crops over the course of the nineteenth century showed “the acreage of woad, caraway, and liquorice diminishing while hemp, flax, and hops became concentrated in a few specialized areas” (148). The focusing of crops in agriculture represents a tangible loss of biodiversity. The land that once was devoted to a great diversity both in types of crops as well as variations within crops, became so focused that where there was once “hundreds and thousands of crops,” there became only “wheat and rice derived from a very narrow genetic base” (Shiva 66). In fact, industrialized farming and the monoculture that came with it was “anathema to biodiversity,” leading to a “high social and ecological cost” (Carroll *New Woman Ecologies* 9). Culture and the progress that culture had made over the course of the nineteenth century, then, actively worked against a vibrant and biodiverse ecosystem. Plants were in a precarious position. Having started the century as potent partners for medical practitioners and members of a diverse ecosystem, plants ended the century as agentic tools in the hands of criminals, feared as sources of potential poison and inhibited by social practices that hampered biodiversity. This incongruous reality in which plant literacy declined and fears of medicinal plants rose occurs historically in tandem with the New Woman’s social role during the late nineteenth century: as a “poison panic” rose in the period, it was linked to a diffuse fear of secret poisoning perpetrated particularly by women that

led to social and scientific focus on poisoning, creating a social sense that “danger lurked in every sip of milk and mouthful of stew” (Hempel 2248).

In *New Woman Ecologies*, Alicia Carroll discusses how women began to participate in an herbal revival in the early twentieth century after more mainstream crops proved unprofitable. Her study of women and herbs culminates in Agatha Christie’s deployment of herbs like digitalis or hemlock as powerful weapons, easily misused or concealed by women in tales such as “The Herb of Death” (179). However, detective literature clearly reflects and constructs anxieties over the decline of plant literacy and the twisting of vague memories of plant potency into a significant force that appears even earlier, particularly in tales which feature female villains that arose during the mid-nineteenth century and lasted through the *fin-de-siècle* (Hempel). Such tales entered the volatile bodies of plants into the slippage between the New Woman and criminality. As Elizabeth Miller explains, the New Woman was suspect, entering and occupying public space, changing her features and disguising her flaws with cosmetics. In detective fiction, this figure uses her audience’s plant illiteracy and their assumption of the New Woman’s criminality to create poison plots which center around knowledge and ignorance of plants. This is clear in L.T. Meade’s serial detective fiction series titled *The Sorceress of the Strand* (1902-03), in which the villain Madame Sara exercises her newfound power through her knowledge of vegetal bodies.

In serialized detective fiction, as is the case with Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, most of which predate *The Sorceress of the Strand*, it is the detective, a masculine force of intellect and power, who names and drives the storylines, always winning at the end of the day. A part of a boom in detective series which “emerged simultaneously with the mass-market illustrated monthly magazine,” Doyle’s stories were widely read and are considered integral to

discussions of late-Victorian detective fiction (Miller 27). One of the more striking things about Doyle's stories is the attempts at realism which permeated even the more fantastical narratives. This was often grounded in the gendered rhetoric of Holmes and Watson. Created to "appeal to the predominantly male readers of the *Strand* magazine," Holmes in particular engages in "good habits of 'observation,' particularly how to read 'signs,'" this use of logic an expression of "paradigmatic masculinity to be emulated by the sons of Empire" (Kestner "'Real' Men" 76). Holmes is able to assert his dominance and masculinity through his use of logic in order to "[reassert] stability through narrative closure" (78). In a series which contains "23 uses" of the phrase "ejaculate," in context meaning a sudden utterance but whose masculine sexual connections cannot be ignored as "both meanings predate Doyle's texts," the stories of Sherlock Holmes are well stocked with images of masculinity and maleness (Bonar). The presence of masculine phrases and images allowed these stories to "firmly locate [...] men's power over women" (Kestner *Sherlock's Men* 4). For Doyle's stories, masculinity was asserted as dominant often through the lack of female presence and the dominance of Holmes' detective work. As they challenge his ability to read a scene easily and figures like Irene Adler confound Holmes, "Conan Doyle suggests that women present a challenge to conventional Western conceptions of truth as associated with public space, visibility, and transparency" (Miller 49). Holmes and Watson, whose lives are visible to the reader and whose logic is always laid out in the story, are masculine paragons of truth and transparency. Even the women who are victims in Doyle's stories seem to confound Holmes' logic, their private femininity going against the "conventional idea that 'public' and 'visible' are coterminous with authentic truth" (49). Elizabeth Carolyn Miller suggests it is Irene Adler's femininity which allows her to confound Sherlock Holmes, her

gender itself giving her that power. The transparent masculinity of Holmes standing at odds with the obfuscated femininity of Irene Adler is reflected in LT Meade's stories.

In *The Sorceress of the Strand* stories it is Madame Sara who is the sorceress, her intellect and power feel familiar to that of Sherlock Holmes whose vast and often unexplained intelligence was his greatest asset. However, whereas Holmes' power is laid bare through his discussions and deductions, Madame Sara's is hidden, her femininity allowing her to use her abilities for villainy. As Madame Sara suggest that "knowledge is power," she never gives her power away, keeping her knowledge secretive as she navigates the masculine genre of detective fiction with a notable ease (Meade 13). An educated medical professional and a capable herbalist, Madame Sara is also a powerful and overtly feminine figure. As such, these stories stand apart for their engagement with the politics of the New Woman and the use of potent plants. Madame Sara becomes the site of a feminist engagement with plants, her body and actions become both feminine and herbal as she moves from story to story committing crimes. As with other stores of the genre, each short story contains a complete plot of Madame Sara's agentic malice. More unique to this series, though, every story ends with Madame Sara getting away with her crimes and leaving masculine professionals frustrated. Her constant success, remaining free and affecting events even if her initial goals are not met, marks Madame Sara as incredibly powerful within the narrative. This power, due to the connections present on the site of Madame Sara as a character, is simultaneously feminine and vegetal and affords both women and plants a voice with which to occupy narrative space and take agency for themselves.

Vegetal bodies, plant philosopher Michael Marder offers, provide an alternative form of agency that may augment the ecological problem of human transcendence and supremacy. Marder encourages ecocritics to imagine the vegetal world to be inhabited by agentic plants

which engage in “plant thinking,” and which occupy space as a “collective being” made up of the individual bodies of each plant, take up commodified human space, always seeking the collective survival of the species, a unique vegetal perspective (Resist like a Plant 29). Plant-thinking and being, Marder argues, can be disturbing for humans to consider because of its alternative temporality and spatial mobility. Because “vegetative growth knows neither an inherent end, nor a limit, nor a sense of measure or moderation,” Michael Marder suggests that it is inherently “monstrous” (Plant Soul 87). This monstrousness is not grounded in reality, necessarily. But, like *Little Shop of Horrors*, the fear of vegetal violence due to the growth and seemingly monstrous potential of plants crept into late nineteenth century literature, plant activity becoming something fearsome. Like Elizabeth Chang in her study of imported monstrous plants killing humans to take agency through fear in late nineteenth century literature, Marder suggests that plants, often seen as passive and unmoving in their rooted state, are not passive or unmoving at all. Thanks to a constant state of replication, growth, and proliferation, plants exist in an almost anarchic state, their will or plant intention on public display as they grow and replicate simply for the sake of growth and replication. Plants, due to their growth without intention beyond the act of growing are, therefore, able to take up space “without appropriating it,” pushing back on the British imperialism and capitalism of the nineteenth century (Marder “Resist Like a Plant” 29). “Life is de-centered” for a plant and so vegetal life is able to grow around obstacles in all directions (Marder “Resist Like a Plant” 29). Meade, an author by trade, created a villain whose intimacy with plants and knowledge of them has impressive power to disturb the commodified world around her, particularly the marriage market. Sara takes up that space, merging human and plant bodies. In the tradition of the New Woman criminal, Madame Sara’s beauty is beguiling and her badness appealing (Miller). She and her

plants display an anarchic energy that overcomes obstacles. In this self-reflexive act of becoming, plants and women are able to find simultaneous agency through the body and actions of Madame Sara and, through her murderous intent, overcome their cultural fetters and take agency for themselves despite all attempts by a male insurance detective to control female business and the anarchic presence of plants in her medical practice.

Vegetal Being in the *Fin-De-Siècle*

Meade's interest in potent plants reflects a trend at the *fin-de-siècle* that saw a rise in interest in herbs (Carroll 152). While anxieties rose around the increasing difficulties in distinguishing domestic versus imported plants, so too did plants become increasingly threatening in the rise of literature which depicted carnivorous and dangerous plants. These plants instilled terror because they "opened up new and unexpected plant dangers" (Chang 82). Algernon Swinburne and Grant Allen both imagined the sundew, a plant which has adapted to grow in poor quality soil by trapping insects and feeding off of them, as "wicked" and filled with danger due to their carnivorous abilities (Chang 88). The line of science fiction and science was blurred as these fears led to man-eating plants, Arthur Conan Doyle telling a story which included "tree-sized murderous flytraps," participating in a trend of imagining plants growing on foreign soil as capable of growing large enough to kill humans (Chang 90). It created a sense of potential fear around imported and exotic plant species as dangerous to domestic lives, something founded in the much less extreme but still very real issues of invasive species. While imported plants raised issues of national security, even common plants such as herbs might also be dangerous. Lady Rosalind Northcote, for example published her *Book of Herbs* shortly before the Sorceress serial took off. She imagines and seeks to define a new type of garden in the *fin-de-*

siècle that is vastly different from the manicured and exotic gardens of much of late Victorian culture. Her garden remembers the “magic” of herbs quite literally. Northcote creates an alternate aesthetic to the Victorian flower garden. She imagines a garden in which the plants are chosen for their potency and their use rather than just their appearance. Rather than drawing the reader to visual beauty, she draws the reader to the thrilling uses of herbs. In her chapter on “Magic” Northcote daringly explores the role of herbs in dark magic (175)

Exploring “misty lore” which “led to the association of plants and magic,” Northcote explores that lore in order to display the dark and sometimes dangerous connection between herbs and magic (176). Some herbs were seen as prophetic, their growth or death a portent of things to come. Northcote explains that in this school of thought, “where Rosemary flourishes, the mistress rules,” but that “Bay-trees are famous, but melancholy prophets” (176, 177). Northcote collects this information from her aforementioned “misty lore,” quoting from Shakespeare’s *Richard II* the line “’tis thought the king is dead, we will not stay, the Bay-trees in our country are all withered” (177). She spends the majority of this chapter, though, talking about herbs that hold magic when used. However, she focuses exclusively on herbs for protection, particularly protection against evil spirits or witches. She explains to readers that “wormwood is in some parts of Europe called the ‘Girdle of St John,’ it has so much power against evil spirits” (180). A reference to the Biblical apostle John, wormwood being the “Girdle of St John” suggests that it is a belt from a saint, given to protect against evil. Northcote also warns that “there was a strong belief that plants beloved by magicians, and powerful for evil in their hands, were equally powerful to avert evil when used in charms against evil” (179). She cites the plant Honesty as a “plant with a double edge” (179). Apparently used in witchcraft, she quotes Mr. Friend who says that Honesty has “a natural power of dispelling evil spirits” as well

(179). Similar to her other description of magical herbs, Northcote then moves on. She suggests the use of Honesty in witchcraft, but she does not directly say it. Consequently, the use of these herbs in witchcraft becomes like a specter that haunts this chapter. She gives example after example of herbs that can be used for protection, “Vervain, Periwinkle, Sage, Mint, Valerian, Ash and Basil” listed in a chapter which is dense with specific examples herbs that can be used for protection, and so the specter and the danger of witchcraft seems all the more pressing (178). If so, many herbs are needed and useable for protection, how large must the risk of witchcraft be? Without Northcote directly addressing it, witchcraft becomes as dangerous and as prevalent as the reader can imagine. Moreover, it is, as described by Northcote herself with her “double edged” plants, herbal in nature (179). Northcote creates a narrative of fear in this chapter, herbs being necessary for protection against witches who are capable of turning the same herbs into something dangerous.

During Meade’s era, these potent herbs which Northcote describes became increasingly associated with dangerous toxicity, especially in the hands of women, shifting the narrative from the specter of witchcraft to the contemporary fear of potential sources of poison. They became re-cast as poisons. “Perceived as constitutive of femininity itself,” poison was linked to women in popular culture (Hughes and Punter 500). As Alicia Carroll notes, one such vegetal poison source which also suggests a deep intimacy between dangerous herbs and women is “The Seed of the Sun” by Una Ashworth Taylor (156). This short story tells the story of a young woman who is gifted a strange seed by a beggar. When she grows the seed, she proceeds to fall in love with the plant. In a moment that echoes the early nineteenth century herbalism, the main character, Raël, seeks out information from an “old physician” who still keeps a garden filled with “many strange and rare and health-giving herbs” (Taylor 192). But the physician cannot

identify the plant but warns her that many plants are poisonous, or as the physician describes it some plants “breathe out strange maladies” (193). This plant, it seems, is one of them. In time Raël gives up working, eating, and doing anything in her life except staring at this plant and giving it her love and devotion. In time her friends begin to say that “she has grown a poison plant” (193). Their observation is found to be true as Raël finally dies, knowing the plant is dangerous but unable to love anything but the plant itself. This short story displays the complex relationship between plants, women, and society which existed during the *fin-de-siècle*. Raël and the plant share a love, the plant responding to her devotion and Raël finding fulfilment in her connection to the plant. But the plant, unknown and foreign even to a figure who represents older knowledge which was passé by the *fin-de-siècle*, is shrouded in mystery. The knowledge of what this plant is capable of is missing from the story. Instead, only its agentic potency is present, the plant seeming to have a murderous intent, a personality and purpose, in the way it destroys Raël. Both the feminine connection with plants and the vegetal potential of the plant itself are strikingly present in this short story, displaying that while this point of view was not shared by the majority, it was also not a foreign one. Like a constant reminder of their physical and evolutionary resilience, these literary herbs still grew in defiance of the lost knowledge of their potency, remaining literally and physically potent whether or not human society was recognizing their potential.

Playing off of the Victorian poison panic, the lack of cultural knowledge of plants, and the constant stream of imported plant bodies into England, plants by the *fin-de-siècle* only found agency in fiction through violent and deadly means. Over the course of the nineteenth century in England a growing fear of toxins formed in society, fueled by literature and a handful of real-life cases of poisoning, leading to what is called the “poison panic” (Hempel 2247). The main source

of poisoning fears came from white arsenic, an inorganic substance that was relatively available earlier in the Victorian era and which quickly gained a reputation as a terrifying and silent way to kill someone. This poison panic was closely connected with women as poisoning was considered a passive form of violence and, therefore, well suited for the perceived and socialized passivity of women. With famous female poisoners like Mary Ann Cotton, a convicted serial poisoner, and Florence Maybrick, a poisoner whose conviction was widely reported, the literary stories of poisoning in Victorian England were spurred on by actual cases of female killers relying on poisoning, a relatively few cases inspiring widespread fear.

Poisoning fears in Victorian England were inherently domestic when it came to fears of real women poisoning real people. As an ultimately violent expression of “conjugal discord, domestic murder was an opportunity for Victorians to express their marital unhappiness and, with “more than half of wives who killed their husbands” during the nineteenth century using poison, the connection between women, domestic spaces, and fear of poisoning is understandable (Robb). Of course, even though so many women chose poison to kill spouses, “greater than 90%” of domestic murders were still committed by men (Robb). In the end, about “40 wives” ended up attempting to poison their husbands during the century, not a notable number when it is considered that “20 husbands” attempted the same thing during the same time period (Robb). And yet the women who were tried for poisoning gained infamy and their crimes created deep fears which built upon the image of a supernatural, hidden woman capable of spreading the disease of poison which was depicted in Bulwer Lytton’s *Lucrecia, or the Children of the Night* (1846). Lytton’s book gives great detail of the acts of Lucretia and the poison she gives to others, “vegetable compounds” which build up over time and are nearly untraceable (Lytton 228). This story was feared to be a “handbook on poisoning” due to the details given and

Lytton's drawing from actual criminal cases in his writing and, consequently, is a central work of fiction in the "poison panic" (Hughes 500). The fame that the poison panic gained despite such relatively small numbers came not from the scope of the crimes but the crimes themselves. Women, the keepers of morality, were turning their backs on the motherhood and domestic caretaking that they were socially charged with to kill children and spouses. Sarah Chesham, who appeared in court first in 1846 for charge of murdering her sons and an unrelated male baby, for which she was acquitted, and again in 1851 when she was charged and convicted for poisoning her husband, represents why such a small movement of female poisoners garnered such attention (Nagy 216). In her first trial the prosecution focused on Chesham's failure of femininity in her marital infidelity, suggestion that "by being a bad woman, Chesham was a bad mother" (Nagy 217). In her second trial, still without material evidence of her criminal acts, the prosecution focused on depicting Chesham as "a wayward and threatening woman" (Nagy 219). Her failure as a woman in the eyes of society, according to the prosecution, led her to poisoning. Such crimes "evoked fears of sexual anarchy and decreasing patriarchal authority" during a time period in which feminism and legal strides for women's marital rights literally decreased patriarchal authority (Robb). In this way, anxiety over poisoning rose not because of actual numerous poisonings, but for the fear that a sexually and domestically liberated woman could not be contained by the patriarchy and, in the minds of a patriarchal society, the most extreme expression of this liberation came in the form of murder, specifically murder by way of poison.

L.T. Meade's contemporary and fellow writer of detective fiction, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle, who "attended lectures [...] in medical botany" in 1877 at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh while pursuing a medical degree, was privy to the potency of plants (Paterson). His medical training in botany would have afforded Doyle an understanding of

botanical potentiality in medical settings which had become a specialized craft, English society having recast plants as either unworthy of attention or visually beautiful, either role viewing plants as inert things. This training found literary purpose in the stories of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, in “A Study in Scarlet” when Holmes’ intellectual abilities are being listed, one of which is a knowledge in “botany. —Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening” (Doyle). This list which is replicated within the story includes examples of Holmes’ botanical knowledge and also its limits, the poisons and plants listed being separated entirely from gardening. Such a list reinforces gardening as divested from potent herbs during the *fin-de-siècle*. These herbal examples are powerful and potent and, therefore, something Holmes can know, a man who knows nothing of social norms or polite society such as gardening. Reinforcing the feminine ties of gardening as well as the decline of practical plant literacy, it is noteworthy that Holmes must be noted to know nothing about “practical gardening.” The practical uses of plants as well as their diverse uses are not of any concern of his be it due to the social decline of plant literacy or the Linnaean ties which saw plants become lined with femininity. Holmes does not bother himself with the practical knowledge which would create a well-rounded and biodiverse landscape. Instead, he knows poisons. The examples themselves, too, are notable: belladonna, opium, and poisons. Not only is Holmes’ general understanding of herbal poisons mentioned, but Doyle specifically mentions belladonna also known as deadly nightshade.

The latter, *Atropa Belladonna* was, for nineteenth century England, a terrifying source of poisoning and, almost seemingly perversely, a cosmetic. Robert Eglesfeld Griffith’s *Medical Botany* describes belladonna as “a very powerful poison, acting with energy in doses not exceeding a tenth of a grain” (487). Belladonna was still used commonly, though. A “powerful

narcotic,” belladonna was used as an “antispasmodic” but also “in disease of the eye it [was] much employed, from its property of dilating the pupil when locally applied” (Griffith 487, 488). Considering its potency with “one tenth a grain” representing a maximum safe dose, it is not surprising to find out that it had a poisonous reputation in the nineteenth century (Griffith 487). In the August 1st issue of the London Lancet in 1851, George Edwards records a medical case of treating a woman who had been poisoned with belladonna. After an accidental overdose, he spends days treating her. She lived, but it took “some days before she was able to walk, even with the assistance of a person on either side of her” and her vision “slowly returned” over multiple days after having been lost entirely (107). Edwards remarks at the novelty of “witnessing and recording the symptoms” (107). This is likely due to the speed with which belladonna kills. On January 4th, 1901 the New York Times reported on a five-year-old girl dying after taking “pills containing belladonna” (“Little Girl Takes Poison” 2). The girl died “after an hour of agony following the eating of several pills” (2). The article goes on to explain that the family did not know what happened, finding her “in convulsions” and only realizing the pills were the cause after finding the box of pills on the floor nearby (2). A similar narrative is repeated again on October 8th, 1900 when a six-year-old was reported in critical condition after eating “some berries” which were suspected to be belladonna because of his symptoms (“Ate a Poisoned Berry” 7). These examples display a pattern of violent, swift, and incredibly life-threatening results when relatively small amounts of belladonna are consumed. This is why belladonna represents everything *fin-de-siècle* British society feared about herbal poisons and why these herbs were both frightening and repulsive. Even so, belladonna particularly was also used cosmetically. “Causing dilation of the pupil,” belladonna eyedrops could be used for non-medical purposes as well (Griffith 487). To enlarge the pupils and, therefore, become more

beautiful, “belladonna was dropped in the eyes” (Miller 97). The use of belladonna eyedrops dates back to the Renaissance period when “Venetian women were known to use ‘deadly nightshade’ in small doses as eye drops to dilate the pupils, increase the heartrate, and arouse, thereby luring nobles and lords” (Matthews). The name itself, belladonna meaning beautiful woman, is often considered evidence of the beautifying effects of the plant.

This cosmetic use, though, was something women took advantage of in the Victorian period and which reappears in literature (Miller 97). In Vernon Lee’s short story “The Legend of Madame Krasinska,” belladonna makes a brief appearance when a fancy ball is being discussed. Cecchino, enthralled by Baroness Fosca, offers to design her a dress for the ball, suggesting “all black and white and wicked green” so that she might go as “Deadly Nightshade, as Belladonna Atropa [sic]” (Lee). This dark connection again entangles woman, plant, and criminality in shades of “wicked green,” naturalizing the independent woman’s apparent deviance. The Baroness rejects this association and “contemptuously” tells him, “Belladonna Atropa[sic]! why my ball is in comic costume,” however she is increasingly attracted to the darker side of life (Lee). Madame Krasinska, after the ball, becomes agitated and swings from depression to mania, sometimes seeming normal save for her “flushed cheeks and over-bright eyes,” physical symptoms that seem to suggest nightshade in her system (Lee). Her trance-like behavior for the rest of the text connects her to the belladonna dress she so quickly dismissed. It is almost as if she is affected by the poison, but it is not traceable. Acting fast and only traceable if the source can be ascertained, herbal poisons represented a terrifying specter. Madame Krasinska’s mania leads her to attempt suicide at the end of the story, smiling at the men who find her when her attempt fails, her mental state seeming to reflect the darkness and dangers of the nightshade with which she is linked. As a cosmetic, belladonna is, then, related to the New Woman’s potentially

criminal or unwholesome manipulation of her appearance through cosmetics which in the case of belladonna continues the entangled history of women, plants, plant-based poisons, and cosmetics.

Common medicinal herbs and plants then are potent sources of fear and repulsion in literature of the era, participating in the fear which perpetrated the “poison panic” while also reflecting the fear that society felt (Hempel 2247). The prevalence of the origin of these fears is exemplified in Thomas Love Peacock’s novel *Crochet Castle* including not only a character who is explicitly a toxicologist, but a toxicologist named Mr. Henbane who kills himself after taking an “infallible antidote” of his own creation (Peacock). Henbane is a common name for *Hyoscyamus niger*, a cousin to belladonna which can be used in medicine but can also be deadly in higher quantities (Griffith 485). The toxicologist being named after a potential poison and killing himself with poison feels like a reflection of contemporary fears while also continuing to propagate fears of herbal poisoning.

This entanglement deepens when L.T. Meade’s Madame Sara is considered. A professional beautifier she has many mysterious jars of “scintillating” perfumes and tinctures which like flowers themselves draw her victim, playfully nicknamed “Bee,” towards her (Meade 4). Meade, writing alongside other authors like Lee and Doyle, is, therefore, maximizing *fin-de-siècle* fears and the popular literary usage of those fears which resulted in the “poison panic.” For Meade, as for Lee and Doyle, the “poison panic” found life in vegetal poisons. And, for Meade in particular, this life led to agency. It is in this social moment that L.T. Meade brings together a handful of disparate cultural threads in order to create her villain in *The Sorceress of the Strand*. Taking advantage of *fin-de-siècle* ignorance of plants and the fear of both dangerous plants and unknown toxins, Meade creates Madame Sara, a villain who is able to kill without consequences

by becoming plant and, in doing so, representing both plant and women's consciousnesses and experiences as she blurs the lines between plants and people.

New Women and New Herbal Connections

In writing a villain who participates in the poison panic but is neither insane nor punished for her actions, L.T. Meade “reclaims the popular, misogynist ‘poison panic’ for feminist purposes” (Miller 97). In fact, as evidenced by the recurrence of feminine presence both in the history of plants but also in the history of the reclamation of herbal knowledge, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in England the life and history of plants was intrinsically linked to the life and history of women. Women, the historic caretakers of the domestic spaces and the physic gardens used to treat common ailments in the household, had long been associated with herbal bodies (Sanecki 68). With the popularity of Linnaean botany and the acceptability of botany as a pastime for genteel women, the connection only grew. It was, of course, a connection of relative superficiality during the Victorian era. Women were expected to be like flowers, beautiful and less respected as their connection with one another led to botany becoming a field “geared toward amateurs” (King 57). As the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century began, both women and plants found themselves at a turning point in their social status and cultural significance.

For women, the turning point came during the *fin-de-siècle* and the construction of the New Woman: a conceptualization of emancipated women which highlighted the social and economic freedoms women gained during the nineteenth century while also bringing into focus the fears of both men and women who saw less restrained women as dangerous to society (Miller 8). As Sally Ledger writes, between the Married Women's Property act of 1882, an act in 1891

which “denied men ‘conjugal rights’ to their wives’ bodies without their wives’ consent,” the booming transportation industry, and the formation of a working middle class, women at the *fin-de-siècle* were not property, had bodily autonomy even in marriage, could travel with a freedom they had not had at the start of the century, and were able to seek education and careers which allowed them to support themselves so that marriage was not a woman’s only course of action to survive (11). This was also the era of first wave feminist and suffragists demanding further social and legal rights for women. While the fight for rights was still happening, women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century experienced what was, in long nineteenth century England, unprecedented social freedom.

With this increased freedom, though, came new concerns and heightened surveillance. As women were no longer the private property of first their fathers and then their husbands, they quickly became seen as public property, the society as a whole becoming responsible for their propriety. One of the ways this was realized was through the depictions of the New Woman and the tension surrounding the identity. Named by Sarah Grand in 1894, the concept of the New Woman was “predominantly a journalistic phenomenon, a product of discourse” (Ledger 3). The New Woman was depicted by supporters as an “advanced woman,” a “modern woman,” and a feminist who was, in many ways, emancipated (3). Supporters of feminist and New Women simply believed that an “unmarried woman should be enabled to lead a full and independent life as man’s equal” (12). To critics, though, the New Woman was a propaganda figure, depicted in literature and art of the era as a “glorified spinster,” an “odd woman,” and a direct threat to the English way of life as it had been (3). Drawn and depicted in a way that was intended to be negative the New Woman of propaganda rides her bicycle and works her job because she is wholly undesirable to men. Whether her interest made her undesirable or whether women

became outspoken feminists when they failed to find marriage at an early age is variant. What is consistent, though, is that in negative propaganda the New Woman is something no young lady should want to emulate. Such propaganda represents the attempt to socially control women since legally they were no longer something to be controlled. The fear became that an emancipated woman was a “threat to marriage” and without marriages and children, British society would crumble (12). Elizabeth Carolyn Miller explores how supporters of the New Woman played upon these fears through the figure which she calls the New Woman Criminal. This New Woman Criminal was an extreme version of the fears surrounding the New Woman, constructing a “female criminal to naturalize change” through her active expression of everything feared most about women’s social emancipation (Miller 2). A fantastical figure, the New Woman Criminal reflects a “*public* form of femininity for a culture that was redefining and redistricting ‘public’ and ‘private’ amid modern social change” (3). On either side of the New Woman discourse was a social group, though, arguing about what they believed women should be like. The discourse was far reaching in connections, too. So much so that the New Woman was “central to an account of *fin-de-siècle* culture” (4). The culture of the era was entangled with the New Woman and the New Woman was similarly entangled in the large cultural phenomena of the time.

One of the cultural phenomena that New Women were linked to was scientific progress and the continued social conceptions of “nature” and “naturalness.” The freedom of the New Woman was considered “unnatural” as was her desire for equality. This was supported by the “purported ‘naturalness’ of the reproductive woman, the intellectual inferiority and emotionalism of women, and their inferior physical strength,” all backed up by “published pseudoscientists” who “argued that women’s bodies are best limited to reproduction” (Carroll *New Woman Ecologies* 11). Just as women had been linked to the natural world and vegetal bodies since the

Middle Ages, had been allowed to study botany even as the science lost legitimacy due to the feminine connection, and had found a language of physiology and sexual expression in the language of flowers, women of the *fin-de-siècle* were newly linked to the natural world through their interest in women's herbalism as popularized by writers such as Alicia Amherst and Rosalind Northcote. In fact, as industrialism and male driven society had damaged the environment and purged herbal knowledge from culture, "women herbalists were to rediscover the benefits of [...] biodiversity," positively affecting the environment by nature of the connections between biodiversity and ecosystem (10). Between a history of connection and the further blurring of boundaries that happened when the New Woman found herself tangled up in contemporary social issues, women and plants at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century were, in many ways, planted together both by default and by choice. Like the persistent herbs that Northcote imagined growing without boundaries of a garden, having the right to grow wherever they are due to their potency giving them the right to the space, women continued to grow and seek rights even as they met continually with ire, becoming "vilified in the periodical press" (Ledger 12).

As women and plants grew together in the cultural sandy soil of the *fin-de-siècle*, though, they were able to find new strength in their partnership. This is embodied in L.T. Meade's use of the figure of the New Woman Criminal. The New Woman Criminal, while connected to the New Woman, was her own unique entity. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, who coined the term New Woman Criminal, defines her as "an imaginative creation within a wildly expanding popular culture of crime narrative" (4). The New Woman Criminal represents a type of public femininity as society dealt with women crossing into the public realm and gaining more mobility both physically and professionally. She acts on others, her femininity and the execution of her desires existing in the

public space then are often seen as criminal trespassing. The New Woman Criminal stands in contrast to the actual female criminals of the era who were “poor and desperate” and “tended to commit domestic crimes” (4). Another defining feature of the New Woman Criminal is her appearance. In contrast to both the popular depictions of the New Woman and the popular literary examples of male criminals, Mr. Hyde being an example, the New Woman Criminal was “attractive, successful, and alluring” (4). She is simultaneously empowered and desired, her emancipation bringing her life and her illegal proclivities into public spaces as she kills while still being adored: a femme fatale. This figure becomes a disruptive body whose attractive exterior, like a deadly flower, hides the poison within.

The connection of murderous women and herbal poisons is, like the connections between women and plants themselves, founded in a historical connection, but is turned into fantasy through the figure of the New Woman Criminal. The connection between women and poisoning is notable, too, because it is “within the limits of acceptable feminine behavior, reinforcing rather than subverting the traditional feminine role” (Hallissy 3). If the woman’s role is domestic, then her murderous actions must also be contained within the domestic space. By poisoning, a woman can “control” others and cause “entrapment or confinement in a woman’s sphere of influence” as she weakens or kills people within their homes or hers (11). But the connection between women and poisonous herbs goes beyond simply the means of criminality. As in *Silas Marner*, the medical healer “in the Middle Ages is not readily distinguishable from female medical irregulars” who healed with the resources of their gardens (61). These “female medical irregulars” were considered to have dangerous connections to the supernatural, but literally their only connections were to the dispensation of medicinal herbs. However, these medicines when dispensed by a woman were considered witches which were “long connected with poisons” (64).

Plants, which were potent and medically powerful, suddenly became viewed as dangerously potent and poisonous in the hands of a woman. With popular texts such as Edward Bulwer Lyton's *Lucretia, or The Children of the Night* being called "unpardonable" in reviews due to the female main character committing so many egregious poisonings, and with books geared towards women gardeners such as Rosalind Northcote's *The Book of Herbs* containing an entire chapter on herbs and magic, the connections between women, plants, poison, and the supernatural were still a part of *fin-de-siècle* society (Hughes 500). In her depiction of a powerful and dangerous female criminal who is connected to the supernatural and medicine and who kills with poison, L.T. Meade articulates the history of women and potent herbs by joining in the contemporary context of the New Woman and the "poison panic," elevating the connection through the figure of Madame Sara and the vegetal becoming that she represents.

Madame Sara's Vegetal Violence

L.T. Meade's *femme fatale*, Madame Sara, creates mystery and intrigue through her highly specialized knowledge of plants which eludes the series' detectives. The reader follows Madame Sara from her return from Brazil to England through the tale's detective figure. Dixon Druce, a manager of a company that oversees the financial conditions of British retail agencies, is an adept detective. Serialized investigative stories like this are often defined by the presence of a detective as a main character, the reader following along as crimes are investigated and solved. In the famous stories of Sherlock Holmes, the narrator is Dr. Watson, Holmes' assistant and friend, but the presence of a strong, masculine detective is a defining feature of the Sherlock Holmes stories. Meade's stories instantly set themselves apart by giving Dixon Druce a less mysteriously powerful position and a much more understandable and culturally relevant one.

Druce deals with finances and the booming industry of retail, something simultaneously understandable to *fin-de-siècle* readers and also just enough beyond their normal purview so as to make him interesting. It seems significant, too, that Druce is tasked with protecting British capitalism on a domestic and the global/imperial interests of the country. He seeks to protect masculine business in a story in which Madame Sara seeks power over men, threatening the inheritance and finances of men and attempting to remove their autonomy over their financial sources. Madame Sara, then, threatens the male capitalist world that Dixon Druce stands for professionally as well as personally.

Druce is a cultural artifact who exists in a surprisingly insular and masculine world that favors demure and socially conservative women. Women like Beatrice who are a form of financial investment. As an heiress, Selby's connection to Beatrice ensures future financial gains for him, their marriage becoming a capitalist contract as well as a relationship. Madame Sara, though, resists this identity as product or investment, preferring to be the investor. In the first story of the series, "Madame Sara," readers are introduced to both Dixon Druce and Madame Sara. In the story, Madame Sara is working for the good of another, the motives for her criminal actions shady and convoluted. She works to poison two sisters so that their brother might inherit a large inheritance their father left to whichever sibling outlived the others, rather than dividing it up. She is connected to people the brother owes money to, and so she ingratiates herself with the sisters and works to manipulate and kill them. The sisters are introduced to Madame Sara as a well-respected cosmetologist and beautifier early in the story when Druce runs into an old friend who is returning to England with his new wife, Beatrice, and his wife's unmarried older sister, Edith. Both women are introduced in the context of Druce's male friend, Jack Selby. Beatrice is married to Jack and is "quite a child" compared to her sister (Meade 4). Beatrice, who is "just

twenty” is said to be “fresh and round and young-looking” (3, 4). Edith, on the other hand, unmarried at “nearly thirty” acts like a mother to her younger sister but is “handsome, too” even if Jack does describe her as vain (3, 4). This is all the introduction these women receive at the start of the story save for a brief mention of the quite large inheritance they share with their brother. This inheritance is what is at stake in the story as if both sisters die, their brother inherits everything, and an acquaintance of Madame Sara’s happens to know someone the brother owes money to. The reader is told their age, a generalized description of them, and a few superficial details of their personality. What we do learn about them aligns both Edith and Beatrice with a more conservative lady and not a New Woman. Beatrice has married a man 14 years her senior but beyond the numbers of age, is presented in this brief introduction as the picture of childlike innocence. Even with an appreciation for nineteenth century marriage habits, Selby’s immediate noting that his bride is “young-looking” while explaining away that his sister-in-law, a woman who is still younger than him, is “handsome, too,” seems to imply with the use of “too” that Edith is considered an old maid now, but is still pretty for her age (4). Both women’s value seems to come from their appearance, but Edith is criticized for caring too much about hers because she is “vain as a peacock” (4). This is ironic, though, because both women are heiresses and stand to inherit a significant sum of money and yet it is their appearance that is discussed and valued. Both women, though, are traveling with Selby, not daring to take advantage of modern mobility options without male accompaniment. The introduction of these two women, proper by conservative social standards, might go unnoticed if it wasn’t immediately followed by the introduction of Madame Sara.

Selby explains to Druce that the “sisters have an acquaintance on board” the ship they are on (Meade 4). Madame Sara is simply on board the ship as well, not traveling with the sisters

under the masculine protection of Selby. Instead, she is immediately displayed as a woman who is powerful and beyond the reach of male power in this story. But whereas Beatrice and Edith are given a few lines of approving dialogue about who they are, Madame Sara's introduction is extended and filled with both confusion and a tense uncertainty that belies some disapproval. Madame Sara is "strictly private" about much of her life, so Selby admits that he knows relatively little about her (5). Rather than simply telling Druce what he does know about Madame Sara, Selby engages him in the conversation saying, "you will be amazed when I tell you what her calling is" (5). Once Druce implores him for more information, Selby explains that Madame Sara is "a professional beautifier" who "declares that she can make quite ugly people handsome" (5). Her profession immediately connects her with the female identity of the era while simultaneously beginning to build her identity as a New Woman Criminal. Madame Sara's power comes from consumer behavior and the consumer desiring increased beauty. Because women of this era were "increasingly encouraged to exercise power via image and consumption," the power of a New Woman Criminal being linked to both image and consumption presents Madame Sara as very definitive of the genre (Miller 70). Her alignment with the ideals of the New Woman, though, makes Madame Sara an enigma to the men. They wonder at her age as "she openly confesses that she is very much older than she appears" but she "looks about five-and-twenty" (Meade 5). Despite not knowing her age, Selby explains that Madame Sara is beautiful, a "most lovely woman herself, very fair, with blue eyes, an innocent, childlike manner, and quantities of rippling gold hair" (5). Once again, the description of childlike appears to describe one of the women in the story. However, instead of being accompanied by examples of childlike behavior, this instance is coupled with a more detailed description of her physical appearance than either Selby's wife or sister-in-law received and a

confusing account of both her unknown age and her hazy origins. Selby goes on to explain that Madame Sara has travelled the world but claims to be “a mixture of Indian and Italian” (5). Her proclaimed heritage seems to be at odds with the blonde haired, blue eyed, northern European description of her. But, like all things concerning Madame Sara, it is shrouded in uncertainty. Selby does go on to explain that Madame Sara sells cosmetics, is a dentist, and also performs minor surgery in her shop. Coming from Brazil, likely in search of plants or cures for her shop, Madame Sara’s purpose seems clearer than her appearance, displaying her focus on her craft and the work that she does.

In fact, Madame Sara coming from Brazil is important, here. During the nineteenth century, South America and Brazil in particular served as a large source of both foreign plant species appreciated for their beauty and exoticism, but also plants which became a part of the medical landscape of England. William Pies, a physician, “described the important use of indigenous drugs” from Brazil while Carl Friedrich Phillip von Martius, a prominent naturalist, noted “a total of 92 different [plant] species [which] were described as medicinal” (Breitbach et. al. 180, 181). Marianne North, a British gentlewoman, also visited South America, notably Brazil, and painted in order to document hundreds of plant species (Ross). For both male and female naturalists, Brazil had a wealth of plant life which informed not only botany but medicine. It is, then, notable that Madame Sara is returning from Brazil. Such a journey immediately places her amongst naturalists and physicians seeking information in the natural world of South America, though the importance of her journey seems lost on the male figures of the story. In fact, their plant literacy is so low that they seem to understand very little about her from the moment of her introduction on.

This introduction of Madame Sara is met with interest by Dixon Druce who tells Selby “you must introduce me tomorrow” (5). Selby consents and says, “I should like your opinion of her” (5). Beatrice and Edith, his wife and sister-in-law, he does not ask for an opinion on and Druce does not make any comment on beyond inquiring about the money and property they stand to inherit. The two women are almost ignored. But in this dismissal is approval. Neither women garner extra thought or extra time. They are not controversial and are, instead, almost a part of the scenery of Selby’s life as he is catching up with his old friend. Madame Sara, though, requires attention and the input of another man. As if her worth or place is yet unproven, Selby seeks out Druce’s opinion on the woman whom he has suggested is shrouded in mystery even as he describes her in greater detail than his own wife. The attention they pay her, though, belies how she has begun to shift outside of culturally acceptable modes of femininity. It is important to note that during this time period “women’s bodies have shifted from being the property of individual men (such as fathers or husbands) to being social property, in need of constant maintenance to meet the new cultural standards of femininity” (Miller 84). This includes seeking out cosmetics such as what Madame Sara sells, but as she would have access to her own products, the maintenance she needs, then, is likely social maintenance to push her back into a more subdued and passive femininity. After all, her only traveling companions are an Arabian man whose non-white identity and role as her assistant prevent him from reifying Madame Sara as a properly accompanied lady, and “two Brazilians” who are not discussed further at the moment (Meade 5). These Brazilians are, most likely, aids who helped Madame Sara on her quest for plants in Brazil, but this fact is not something Druce or Selby are aware of, seeing them only as non-white others that accompany her. Madame Sara, in a quiet way, is subverting masculine superiority and so Selby and Druce give her attention and display minor anxiety over their

opinions about her, revealing the need to correct her behavior to be more in line with polite and conservative values. A correction which Madame Sara rejects by her mere existence.

When Druce finally has a chance to interact with Madame Sara, she never lets him get the upper hand in the situation. At first, she questions the meeting itself, asking him “was it really accidental?” (Meade 7). After pushing him for opinions on both her shop and her age she invites him to visit her shop but also informs him “I do hold secrets. I should advise you, Mr. Druce, even in your professional capacity, not to interfere with them” (8). As she tells him this “The childlike expression faded from her face” and “there seemed to ring a sort of challenge in her tone” (8). The challenge and the loss of that childlike comparison make it clear to Druce and to the reader that Madame Sara is not a woman who seeks beauty for the approval of the men in her life. She has power, but it is power that she does not feel compelled to share with men and so she covers up her own emancipated existence with beauty and a look of “childlike innocence,” all of which fades into a confrontational “challenge” when Druce merely comes to speak with her, not doing anything to threaten her yet. As the story continues on, her power becomes more and more clear, but it also becomes clear that it is only being exercised over the other women in the story. Edith, who seems to love Madame Sara as much as her sister Beatrice does, tells Druce “Madame Sara is uncanny and terrible” (9). In an era where “proliferation of cosmetics and other feminine beauty products signifies how the feminization of consumer capitalism shifted the terms of women’s oppression, so that women became increasingly sexually commodified under the auspices of an image-centered consumer culture,” Madame Sara has weaponized the image driven women and their consumer power for her own gain (Miller 84). Edith calling Madame Sara “uncanny” is apt, as rather than a senseless killer or someone driven to kill by dark desires, Madame Sara seems driven by the desire to corrupt the women she caters to. Madame Sara

“manages to criminalize or corrupt her female clients at the same time that she victimizes them, by encouraging them to disobey their husbands and doctors” (86). Edith, not beholden to a husband, seems to be able to see past Madame Sara’s sway and, while still under her thrall, recognizes the criminal use of power taking place. What exactly is happening is still shrouded in mystery at this point in the narrative, though.

Even when Druce visits Madame Sara’s shop, the woman’s actions and true extent of her use of power are not revealed. Instead, Madame Sara’s Frankenstein-esque laboratory reveals her medical knowledge as well as her vegetal ties. When Druce accompanies Edith to Madame Sara’s shop, Edith introduces Druce to the space by saying, “we are on the threshold of a magicians cave” (Meade 12). Like a Wise Woman or a *venefica*, Madame Sara’s medical abilities are conflated with magic, a woman’s healing ability still being treated as supernatural rather than scientific, a connection which scholars like Rosalind Northcote revive. Northcote devotes an entire chapter in *The Book of Herbs* to the history of magical herbs, exploring and citing why “some herbs were magical” (Northcote 176). By reconnecting herbs to magic, especially in a book written to “lady-gardeners,” Northcote revives the historic connection which Meade also takes advantage of (6). Of course, through this connection and her healing, Madame Sara is “a challenge to nineteenth-century medical professionalization, a trend that had led to the dwindling of midwives and other traditional female medical providers in the Victorian era” (Miller 98-99). She resists the masculine professionalization and herbal defoliation of the medical field, serving in a position almost like an apothecary. The actual features of her shop are very similar to the features of an apothecary’s shop or the storefront of a pre-Victorian medical practitioner. She has “stoppered bottles” of medications, “brushes, sprays, sponges,” fine tipped

tweezers, and other tools one would expect to find in a shop where someone is dispensing medicines and performing minor surgeries and dental procedures (Meade 13).

However, Druce does not see the shop that way. As he lists off these instruments of healing, he finds ways to mystify them and create an image that is more like the lab of a mad scientist than a doctor's shop. He describes her "array of extraordinary looking articles and implements" (13). The bottles of "strange medicaments," alongside "delicate needle-pointed instruments of bright steel", seemingly centered around a chair for "administering static electricity" where she kept "dry-cell batteries for the continuous currents and induction coils for Faradic currents" (13). Druce describing the tools in such mystifying terms and the currents in such cold and scientific terms creates a space that is alien and unfriendly when the space itself is not inherently unwelcoming. The "strange medicaments" are the medications and tinctures that Madame Sara uses or prescribes in her profession. But by calling them "strange medicaments," Meade is able to convey Druce's disquiet at Madame Sara's profession. Druce cannot fully take the medications that Madame Sara has seriously. Instead, he must undermine their potency by depicting them as odd and painting the bottles of medication in such a way that it makes them seem potentially dangerous, as well. He continues this attitude as he discusses the tools she uses. Rather than simply recognizing Madame Sara's tools as those of a practiced medical practitioner, Druce treats them like alien implements. Her "needle-pointed instruments of bright steel" and "tiny lancets" are not sharp, shiny tools for unknown purposes (13). Instead, they are the precision tools of a professional. Just as the batteries and induction coils, seeming to bring in images of Faraday cages and currents better suited for the lab of a mad scientist, are simply the power source she uses for hair removal and other beautification procedures. Just as the villagers in *Silas Marner* view his healing as mystical and rooted in the supernatural due to his femininity,

so too does Druce mystify Madame Sara's work, presenting it not as a legitimate medical business, but as something foreign and unknowable.

Plant bodies in multiple forms surround Madame Sara in her shop from the "scintillating" perfume bottles at the front door to the scented air in the shop which is entered through a valuable "mahogany door." The text playfully juxtaposes the forms of plants, as scents and as solid beings from the door to the "polished oak square table" that holds Madame's instruments and, in a separate room, a "wooden operating table" (Meade 13). These solid wooden pieces and sharp instruments belie the "innocence" of Sara's profession, speaking the codified language of the abortionist. Dixon is suitably horrified although Sara proclaims herself "innocent." What dangers are unspoken hangs in the air like the flowery perfume that draws in her victim, playfully named "Bee." Madame Sara herself plays the flower that draws Bee to her seemingly to benefit her. Of course, in reality, Sara has disguised Bee's death as life, perverting the standard Victorian cultural relationship between women and plants. If in the Victorian era plants and women became deeply linked in literature, it was to bring "a botanical process into collision with a social arrangement" (King 4). By using floral language to describe the maturation of a young woman's sexuality, her sexual "bloom" and the bloom of flowers became synonymous. In texts of this genre, mentions of flowers or vegetal bodies is almost always a metaphor for human bodies. What was already a trend in the era, using plants as metaphor for human existence, became a rule in this literature. But in L.T. Meade's *The Sorceress of the Strand*, plant power is far less amenable to courtship and reproduction. Madame Sara, her actions, her treatment, and her agency are all representative of a female connection to herbs or medicinal plants and, therefore, her agency is plant agency. Even her physical body is plant like. The mystical and uncanny agelessness of Madame Sara seeming to mirror a perennial plant which regenerates and

re-blooms every year despite the age of its root rhizome. The mystification of Madame Sara's medical prowess is the mystification of herbal medicine. The continuing ability of Madame Sara even in the face of a masculine professionalization of medicine is the continued presence of plants in urban and rural spaces despite the cultural rejection of their potency and relevancy. Madame Sara's struggle and her identity are rooted in vegetal experiences, however her vegetal power is linked to her own survival and her eternal youthful bloom obscures her age and resilience. This New Woman criminal body is entangled with the "wicked green" existence of potent vegetal bodies.

The connection between the two is proven in this first story when Madame Sara proves to have access to and knowledge of herbs that is entirely beyond the scope of the men in power. When Madame Sara finally completes her control over Beatrice, killing the young woman, she does so using poison. The poison is plant based and, as Vandeleur, the local medical jurist, explains, "an exhaustive analysis and examination" uncovered "a powerful poison, unknown to European toxicologists" (Meade 22). The true source of the poison is never uncovered, but Vandeleur is, at the end of the story and just in time to save Edith's life, able to ascertain that Madame Sara's poison is "very like hyoscine, one of the worst toxic-alkaloids known" (34).

Without knowing exactly what she used, hyoscine becomes a stand in to try and ascertain the nature of the poison that Madame Sara created. Hyoscine, though, is a secondary metabolite of plants from the *Solanaceae* family (Muranaka et al.). This means that the plants from the *Solanaceae* family produce a handful of substances that work secondarily to their growth. Some protect the plant from predators and others are used in intra-species plant communications. In this family of plants, though, known as the nightshade family, one of the substances produced secondarily to their growth is an alkaloid known as hyoscine. This alkaloid production is so

intrinsic to the plants that the name of hyoscine was inspired by the naming of some of the plants in this family, namely *hyoscyamus niger*, commonly known as henbane. Just as *atropa belladonna*, deadly nightshade and henbane's cousin, defines the alkaloid atropine, so too does the presence of hyoscine define *hyoscyamus niger*. This alkaloid, which Vandeleur defines as "one of the worst toxic-alkaloids known," was described in Robert Eglesfeld Griffith's *Medical Botany* as "a valuable sedative and narcotic, when administered in small and repeated doses" (485). Griffith also explains that henbane can be used topically for "planful, glandular swellings" (485). For its use as a topical analgesic as well as a sedative, henbane, or a plant related to it with similar properties, would realistically have been used by Madame Sara in her medical practice. The substance, unknown and foreign to Vandeleur and Druce, is one that is seemingly mundane for Madame Sara and that gives her power in this story. This unknown plant alkaloid, hidden in the teeth both Beatrice and Edith had treated by Madame Sara, was released when normal eating eroded the plant-based sap, gutta percha, Sara cleverly had placed over the poisonous substance within the tooth. Vandeleur saves Edith and ascertains how Madame Sara delivered the poison, but never the poison itself. This suggests both her connection to plants and her potency. Madame Sara and plants are partnered and exist as one in her person. She is knowledgeable and capable and expertly uses something very similar to hyoscine. Engaging the newly piqued cultural understanding of the vast array of toxic plants, Madame Sara is the ultimate female poisoner with access to plants even the expert men lack the plant literacy to identify.

Early on when Druce tours Madame Sara's workplace she tells him "knowledge is power" before letting him see what she confesses to be her "secrets" (Meade 13). What Druce sees is, to him, perhaps dark magic, illegible through reason or his existing skill set. Later, when Madame Sara is near tears and asking for information about the death of Beatrice, her "brimming

tears dried as though by magic” when she discovers she will not be able to get any more information from Druce (25). He sees her as “uncanny.” Her poison is “unknown to European toxicologists” (22). To the men of this story everything about Madame Sara seems shrouded in magic and intrigue when in reality it is shrouded in plant literacy. The nightshade family is filled with herbs like deadly nightshade and also henbane which could be used for vasodilation and pain management. Considering the history of deadly nightshade being used in eyedrops to give women beautiful, dilated pupils and henbane to ease pain, it would make sense that Madame Sara would have either these plants or another member of the same herbal family in her shop (Griffith 484). What is used as medicine, she is also able to weaponize into poison, much like her own medical knowledge can be used to heal or kill.

As in Taylor’s “The Seed of the Sun,” the dangerous plant in Meade’s tale is unknown to male specialists. This is an important feature of the story and displays how notable Madame Sara is. She is knowledgeable and educated, yes, but so is Vandeleur, as are the toxicologists who were unable to identify the substance used. Yet Madame Sara knows what it is and uses it. This shrouds her knowledge and power in mystery, but it also shows her as more than simply human. After all, they understand the gutta-percha she used to stop the poison into the women’s teeth, a rubber-like sap derived from Malaysian trees. Selby was in Brazil collecting herbal samples, as we can suppose Madame Sara was as well. But these men and these specialists are not privy to the knowledge that Madame Sara has. It is as if they are not to be trusted with the information. Madame Sara, a woman and a New Woman Criminal, has been gifted with special information from a non-standard source, as these men have access to the standard sources. Like her agelessness, Madame Sara’s knowledge goes beyond the human scope and, with the poison being herbal in nature, it suggests that Madame Sara’s knowledge is vegetal. As if the plants

themselves have shared knowledge with Madame Sara, accepting her into their ranks and gifting her with special information and special connections. Because of the nature of this exceptional knowledge, defining her physical appearance and defining her actions in this story, it seems that Madame Sara is more vegetal than human. She is privy to private knowledge that specialists do not have, as if it is something innate rather than just something simply learned. Madame Sara, rather than studying under the tutelage of plants, has been allowed to become plant. This moment of poisoning, both the successful murder and foiled attempt, represent how Madame Sara has become vegetal. Her actions are, therefore, vegetal actions. Her knowledge is vegetal knowledge. Her power is vegetal power, occupying commodified space with her anarchic will, resilience, and distinct skill at disrupting commerce to take resources for herself, in this case the marriage market on which Bee is to bring her money to her husband.

This vegetal moment represents Madame Sara's zenith of power within this first story, reaffirming her vegetal connections. As she told Druce, "I am a doctor" (13). Her shop of medical tools proves it, should anyone still doubt her. Her success at performing both beautification procedures and basic medical procedures such as the tooth filling, she gave Beatrice, which was used to hide the poison, prove that she is medically capable. Madame Sara's expert handling of potent medical herbs in order to use them for murderous means proves that she is aware of and connected to plants. This vegetal knowledge coupled with her existence as a whole and her place in society both as a literary figure and as a character in the story create an identity for Madame Sara in which, like a flower's bloom stands for both the blooming of a literal flower and the blooming of a woman's sexuality, she stands for both women and plants simultaneously as both fight to find a voice and an agentic voice in society.

Herbal Growth for the Sorceress of the Strand

As Meade continued to write Madame Sara, she also continued to display the vegetal connection that Madame Sara has. In the story “The Blood Red Cross,” Madame Sara works with a woman who was sent to prison for a “very daring attempt at poisoning,” but escaped and is now working with Madame Sara to blackmail a young woman for a set of pearls (Meade 53). Perhaps the most notable and pervasive vegetal presence, though, after the story “Madame Sara,” is the story “The Talk of the Town.” In “The Talk of the Town,” the second to last of the *Sorceress of the Strand* stories that Meade published, Druce runs into Madame Sara again when he and his medical investigator friend, Vandeleur, discover that a Professor Piozzi was almost poisoned shortly before he was to present scientific findings of his which were certain to shock the scientific community. Over the course of the investigation, Druce discovers that Madame Sara has befriended Piozzi’s bride to be and has learned of Piozzi’s discoveries. Her goal, it seems, is to delay his presentation of findings so that she can patent his designs before him, profiting from his research herself. In the end she is foiled, but just as with every other story she eludes capture and legal ramifications for her actions.

Something that makes “The Talk of the Town” stand out among other stories about Madame Sara is that this time she is attacking a man and using the woman in his life for leverage instead of the women suffering both the manipulation as well as the violence. Even after crossing paths with her many times over, Druce still views Madame Sara as a supernatural entity. In fact, he says, “there is such a thing as being haunted by an idea or by a personality. About this time Vandeleur and I began to have nightmares with regard to Madame Sara” (Meade et. al.). To Druce, Madame Sara is a specter that haunts his life so completely that he and his friend have dreams regarding her. Vandeleur does not see her as human either, instead seeing her as an

animal as he says, “hunting her as a recreation is as good as hunting a man-eating tiger” (Meade et. al.). While Druce sees her as supernatural, Vandeleur views her as inhuman, feeling as if hunting her is a blood sport. The irony in his metaphor being, of course, that as much as they hunt her, they continue to fail to catch her. Madame Sara continuing to be viewed as inhuman or mystical continues the precedent set forth in the first story, “Madame Sara.” Like plants being used to heal became mystified over the course of the nineteenth century, Madame Sara is mystified and pushed away so as to establish a firm boundary between what is acceptable, male dominated professional medicine, and what is unacceptable, women herbalists.

With or without the approval of Druce and Vandeleur, though, Madame Sara continues to work towards her advantage. This time Druce and Vandeleur find her attached to “a case of poisoning, the agent being used in all probability cocaine, or some allied alkaloid” (Meade et. at.). Vandeleur was able to save Professor Piozzi’s life, but Vandeleur and Druce still have to keep him protected so that he can lecture on his scientific breakthroughs. The poisoning represents Madame Sara’s dual identity as both female and vegetal body. Of all the items of Piozzi’s breakfast to poison, she poisons his milk. Milk is representative of female reproductive potential. It is a consumable substance that is quite literally created by female bodies after reproduction and, while its purpose is the nutrition of children, the harvesting of cow’s milk for consumption meant that it was also produced and sold for mass consumption. Piozzi is poisoned by a liquid that is directly taken from a breast. The inhuman source seems to matter less, too, when Madame Sara’s own inhuman portrayal is considered. It is in this feminine beverage whose purpose is to care take, that Madame Sara places “some poisonous alkaloid of the Erythroxyton group” (Meade et. al.) The Erythroxyton group, better known as the erythroxytonaceae family of plants is home to the coca plants and, in particular, *Erythroxyton coca* from which cocaine is

derived. Once again Madame Sara is using some, as Vandeleur calls it, “poisonous alkaloid” of an herbal family which also contains a plant commonly used in medicine or minor surgery. Cocaine and derivatives of its herbal cousins were used in Victorian and *fin-de-siècle* medicine as a quick and effective analgesic, especially when surgeries were to be performed on mucous membranes (Small). Though the abuse of it was not a foreign concept, cocaine and its herbal cousins were primarily tools of healing which allowed medical professionals, such as Madame Sara, to treat issues with the nose, sinuses, or mouth without the patient having to be etherized. Yet, to Vandeleur this is simply a “poisonous alkaloid.” Similar to the alkaloid in “Madame Sara,” Vandeleur relies on the scientific or Latin names for the substances, seeming to obfuscate their herbal source in professionalized language that served as a comprehension barrier for the laymen. Madame Sara, though, not only understands these substances, but uses them in medically unintended ways. Placing a plant derivative in milk, a plant derivative that is likely used in her medical shop as an herbal tool for her trade, represents exactly who Madame Sara is and what she stands for. She is a woman, yes, but she is also a doctor and she is also, in quiet and often mystified or obfuscated ways, vegetal.

As in the other stories, Madame Sara avoids suspicion and capture as she entralls the women, child-like and good women who are simultaneously terrified and enraptured with her. Her final violence, though, is still toward Piozzi himself and not his bride-to-be. As Piozzi stands to give his lecture, he becomes affected and falls ill. As the man is rushed off, Vandeleur, in a scene with the flourish and intrigue that often define detective fiction, reveals Madame Sara’s final attempt to poison Piozzi. The scene is as follows:

"You see this," said Vandeleur, pointing to the great palm that towered over the table at which Piozzi had stood. "And you see this," he repeated, seizing one of the branches and shaking it.

The long, tapering, green leaves rattled together with an odd metallic sound.

"Look here!" said Vandeleur, and he pointed to the fine tips of one of the leaves. "This plant never grew. It is made – it is an artificial imitation of the most surprising skill and workmanship. The pot in which it stands has certainly earth at the top" – he swept away a handful – "but there below is a receptacle which is generating carbon monoxide gas."

He bent and broke one of the branches (Meade et. al.).

In this scene Vandeleur not only reveals Madame Sara's continuing vegetal connections, but also reveals his own disregard and violence toward vegetal life. Before Vandeleur even has confirmation that this plant is artificial he is "seizing one of the branches and shaking it."

Vandeleur seems to be enact on this plant the violence that he wishes he could enact on Madame Sara. In his frustration, the plant body becomes her body when after he has already discovered the means by which she delivered the poison gas, "he bent and broke one of the branches." The final breaking of a branch allows him to show that it is hollow, but as he has already discovered that the plant is artificial and the "metallic sound" of the leaves served to prove his theory, this final act feels like a violence toward that plant that is not actually a plant. As if it were a violence towards a woman that is not actually a woman but is a metaphor for women and plants in society.

In her use of an artificial plant to deliver a toxin, Madame Sara plays upon both the New Woman cosmetologist's use of artifice to disguise appearances and the New Woman poisoner's plant literacy that allows her to fake what others fail to read as real. Even as a technically lifeless thing, the artificial plant stands in for Sara's vegetal power, her ability to plant herself in unexpected places. This physically inert fake plant has more personal agency than many vegetal bodies in Victorian literature which act as mere symbols for people. This plant is not a metaphor for something else nor is it used simply to define a human. Like the herbs growing in urban areas that Maude Grieve found, occupying space in a vegetal act of resistance, this plant image has

infiltrated a scientific discussion and occupies space in the room. The artificial plant acts as a plant, exhaling gases and, of course, Sara's will. Just as late Victorian killer plants were alien and beyond the realm of the natural, this plant is beyond the realm of the natural and is man-made (Chang). And, like those killer plants demanded agency by threatening human life, so too does this faux plant threaten human life, attempting to choke out Piozzi with carbon monoxide. By deploying the characteristics of plants, moreover, Sara defies the sentimental gendered Victorian expectations through her relative activity in this attempted murder, against the grain of the narrative of the passive female poisoner. She had to seek out the creation of this fake plant. She had to orchestrate its placement. And, unlike the stopping in the teeth, the poison gas must be turned on in order to affect Piozzi, suggesting a level of attention and activity which resists the concept of a passive female poisoner. She also is using a tool, namely a plant, to invade the human body with her will. The plant body's exhalation drifts into a human body as Piozzi breathes in the gas. Ironically, such a small thing as a plant or a woman seems capable of crossing an array of boundaries. Piozzi's body becomes a transcorporeal site as Madame Sara's vegetal will chokes him. It is not just a physical offense, but a social one as he becomes taken over by the plant, seeming to echo concepts of plant overgrowth as his lungs overflow with the poisonous gas. The irony of the moment is doubled as Piozzi's gendered power is undercut by the plant he has failed to see as false.

Madame Sara seems to push back against history itself, turning the Victorian language of flowers and gendered perceptions of botany as a genteel pastime for ladies on its ear. Rather than using plants for polite, feminine society, she takes advantage of contemporary poor plant literacy and fools them with her fake plant so that only through close study can the men involved even recognize that the plant is not alive. Madame Sara transforms something that represents

passivity, a plant which does little more than exist and grow, into a tool for killing. Like the killer alien plants of Chang's monstrous plants, man-eating sundews and flytraps, Madame Sara has transformed something that is not vegetal, a fake plant, into a plant, or at least what is believed to be a plant for the majority of the story, and has given it deadly vegetal agency which perverts the plant's purpose in life. The plant, something which produces oxygen naturally, has been fabricated and transformed into something which produces a deadly gas. Like Madame Sara, a woman and a healer who kills, the plant has become a deadly anathema of what it socially and ecologically should be. This deadly act is, of course, carried out at the will of Madame Sara who, turns the discourse of bloom around, using her own artifice to construct a plant prosthesis to do her will. In the end, Madame Sara lives to plant again, escaping prosecution, and heightening anxieties about New Women and plants.

She is a site where these anxieties can coalesce pleasurably. She is a woman who is unnaturally young and beautiful despite being of an advanced age, a paragon of the powerful but desirable woman that flies in the face of anti-New Woman propaganda. Madame Sara is also directly and historically tied to the vegetal world. As a criminal, she often relies on herbal poisons and plant bodies in order to kill. But these herbs that she uses as poisons also tie her, with her advanced medical knowledge, to a history of female herbalists and healers who, like Madame Sara, were aligned with the supernatural and considered dangerous because of their knowledge. Where these historical women were not necessarily to be feared as potential poisoners, Madame Sara is, seeming to fulfil a prophecy that was written slowly over the course of English history which suggested that powerful women or who heal and ally themselves with plants will surely turn out to be dangerous.

In this way we can see Madame Sara as an active and transforming character in multiple ways. She is transforming herbalism into a dangerous practice. She is transforming life to death. But she is also transforming herself by becoming plant. In this situation Madame Sara's education and practices allow her to become plant but this happens simultaneously with plants becoming Madame Sara. Because "vegetative growth knows neither an inherent end, nor a limit, nor a sense of measure or moderation," Michael Marder suggests that it is inherently "monstrous" (Plant Soul 87). Reminiscent of Elizabeth Chang's monstrous plants killing humans to take agency through fear, Marder suggests that plants, often seen as passive and unmoving in their rooted state, are not passive or unmoving at all. Thanks to a constant state of replication, growth, and proliferation, plants exist in an almost anarchic state, their intention on public display as they grow and replicate simply for the sake of growth and replication. Plants, due to their growth without intention beyond the act of growing are, therefore, able to take up space "without appropriating it," pushing back on the British Imperialism of the nineteenth century (Marder "Resist Like a Plant" 29). The vegetal anarchy of taking up this space seeming to echo the sexual anarchy of the New Woman. The interests of plants and women align well enough that they are able to become one another in the form of Madame Sara. "Life is de-centered" for a plant and so vegetal life is able to grow into Madame Sara, occupying her person without appropriating her will or agency (Marder "Resist Like a Plant" 29). Madame Sara is still herself. However, thanks to the growth of potent plants, remaining present in the land even when society pushed them away, Madame Sara is able to become plant. She is able to become occupied by a vegetal presence so that, like a monstrous plant, she can take agency for New Women and for plants through fear, rather than needing it to be generously bestowed upon her. Through this

partnership of becoming, both woman and plant are able to become more than they are singularly.

Becoming Woman and Vegetal

Herbs and plants appear in unexpected ways in Meade's stories. Once there, their bodies grow and expand to exercise their own anarchic energy in the narrative. Detection and investigation serve as a tool to unearth herbal secrets. However, even the agent of global industrial capitalism, Druce Dixon, and his fellow experts cannot always recognize the plants which Madame Sara handles so expertly. They are not Sherlock Holmes whose extensive list of expertise includes botanical toxicology. They are corporate men who lack the plant literacy and plant connections that Madame Sara has. Madame Sara reverses the directional flow of the classic metaphor, standing in for vegetal bodies as vegetal bodies stood in for women in Victorian literature. In fact, she seems to step beyond the metaphorical and act as a plant, becoming vegetal and enacting vegetal will. This, then, becomes a significant moment for seeing both plants and women as agentic figures.

Plants and women have been connected since the Middle Ages, both becoming frightening when the two are linked. The long nineteenth century marked a time in which plants underwent massive social changes. They lost the respect and standing they had at the start of the century when they were connected with a masculine tradition of apothecaries and herbal healing. After losing that standing, plants became studied only for either their appearance or their value to the field of Botany. Botany, though, lost social favor as it became an acceptable pastime for women of the landed gentry. Relegated to the margins and metaphorical stand-ins for women's bodies, plants over the long nineteenth century suffered a huge loss of social standing and lost their place in English culture. This loss, though, was not because they lost all connection to

humans. It was because they lost their connection with men. Plants remained connected to women throughout the long nineteenth century, seeming to resist obsolescence through this feminine tie. By the early twentieth century and World War I, the feminine tie is exactly what pulled domestic herbal bodies back from the near obsolescence that they faced in British society, having become valued not for their potency but only for what they could provide as inert participants in an industrialized capitalistic society.

As plants struggled to maintain their place in society, women found their place becoming larger as social changes over the long nineteenth century found women, thanks to the tireless efforts of feminists, able to exist in society without being socially or sexually tied to men. This change in a woman's place, of course, caused a large amount of social unrest and every social advancement women made led to increased push-back and new rules that now socially visible women had to abide by. But despite the discourse that led to the creation of the conceptualization of the New Woman, women still had more rights. It is during this time of increased women's rights and before plants had found a revival at the hands of women herbalists that L.T. Meade's *Sorceress of the Strand* depicts a woman who is simultaneously a New Woman and vegetal. Madame Sara, like literary depictions of the New Woman, is a site of discourse *and* plant agency. Her power and her agency mark her as a New Woman who does not abide by the social and sexual rules that the proper, married women in the story abide by. Without age and without a man, Madame Sara exists outside of the natural world, harnessing uncanny temporal vegetal powers of regeneration and regrowth every year to simultaneously beautify and kill as she becomes an unnatural expression of New Womanhood: the New Woman Criminal.

Beautiful and brilliant, Madame Sara is an accomplished medical professional. But like the medical professionals at the start of the nineteenth century, Madame Sara allies herself with

herbal medicine, her medicine another act of resistance against the professionalized and masculine medical field of Meade's time. In allying with plants and engaging in New Woman discourse, though, Madame Sara ceases to be a "real" woman and is instead an uncanny and unreal force in the stories which stands as a site of metaphor and discourse. Thanks to her body, part of the discourse is, of course, tied to femininity. But through her connections with plants and the historical entanglement of women and plants, Madame Sara becomes a quagmire of women and herbs. Her actions become herbal actions as she takes agency like the late Victorian killer plants, taking it for herself through alien and violent means. Her body becomes a vegetal body as both her body and the body of a plant she uses to deliver carbon monoxide appear natural, only to be understood by the men of the story as unnatural. In this way, after a century of losing literal and metaphorical ground, plants re-take space in *fin-de-siècle* culture through the hands of Madame Sara as Meade reverses the classic metaphor and, in these stories, women become less like blooming flowers and more like potent herbs, occupying human space while enacting vegetal will and regenerating plant agency.

Conclusion

Over the course of the long nineteenth century plants underwent a radical evolution in social perceptions. This was facilitated by changes in medicine, modernization of society, and changes in social perceptions of botany. As medicine became centered around a sterilized hospital and medical information became the property of degreed professionals, the herb-based medicine of the eighteenth and very early nineteenth century became archaic. The modernization of society led to the changes in medicine and the loss of herbal knowledge, leading to an increased mystification of herbal medicine which strengthened past ties between herbal medicine and the supernatural. As patent pills with brand names displaced the apothecary's compounding of herbal medicine, plants became characterized as inert fixtures of popular culture. Even as botany's shift to a genteel pastime gendered as female allowed women the space to interact with plants in a scientific context, as women and plants became socially linked, men and plants drifted further apart. Despite the popularity of lavish gardens filled with imported plants which had to spend winters in a hot house, plants found their social status waning to the point of being background material, a part of the mimesis but not viewed as agentic beings. Even in medicine, however, whether the image of plants was ascribed agency or not, plant bodies still possessed it, growing and expressing their will despite the cultural conceptions of them. Through an examination of the role of plants in literature of the long nineteenth century a pattern of plant-thinking and vegetal-intention becomes clear.

In order to read long nineteenth-century literature with an understanding of plant-thinking, the potential and the limitations of plant ability must be understood. Michael Marder's "non-conscious intentionality" effectively defines and understands the opportunities of plant-thinking. Understanding plant intentionality allows humanity to better understand ecologically

minded action, but it also can serve as an example of ways that humans can interact with each other and the natural world in productive ways. To understand what plant-thinking is, humans must move away from an anthropocentric definition of life and of agency. Karen Houle notes that by expanding our understanding of life and agency, plant communication ceases to be just reactions and, instead, is actions. This kind of agentic intentionality being ascribed to plants in literature opens up multiple analytic doors. Plants become characters in the story, interacting with the narrative and the other characters and being acted upon. Plants in literature also become reflective of plants in society, chronicling the voice of plants and the relationship between plants and humanity. Such readings lead to deeper understanding of long nineteenth century literature and facilitate a more complex and ecologically minded relationship between humanity and plants.

Reading the poetry of John Keats with an understanding and appreciation for plant intentionality reveals a deep partnership between plants and humanity wherein Keats so thoroughly removes any hierarchy that plants are able to be seen as, in some ways, superior to humanity. In “Ode to a Nightingale” plants permeate the poem, their intentionality and their presence existing in harmony with the poetic narrative. The conceit of the poem, the poet railing against old age and death and wishing to be able to leave the heartache and fear of humanity behind and be peaceful and bright like the Nightingale singing outside his window, displays a strikingly vegetal purpose when plant agency is read. As the poet imagines entering the ecosystem in order to enter a world without death, his consciousness goes “past the near meadows” and into a vegetal space where he cannot tell if he is asleep or awake (76). Viewing plants as agentic characters in this poem allows the vegetal presence to become more potent and more purposeful in the narrative. Plants represent a chance to become a part of something larger

and more eternal. Rather than dying like individual humans do, Keats craves the constancy of an ecosystem in which death and decay is not an end, but simply a rebirth. Plants endlessness appears again in “Isabella: or the Pot of Basil” as Isabella’s dead lover Lorenzo finds life again in the Basil plant that his head feeds. Her love becomes displaced onto the plant, loving the Basil just as she loved Lorenzo, allowing her tears to water the plant as Lorenzo’s head feeds it. Once again, the vegetal ability to live through death is shown as superior to human life. While Lorenzo must die, the Basil can thrive and allow her love to live on. The Basil and Lorenzo’s relationship is so transcorporeal that when Isabella’s brothers take the plant and dig up Lorenzo’s head, Isabella becomes heart broken and so depressed that she dies “forlorn,” asking for her Basil to the last moment (496). Plants provide for humanity the agelessness that humans lack, adding to the narrative and to human life with their ability and agency. This pattern of plant agency and intentionality continues through “To Autumn,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and through Keats’ poetry and depictions of the world. Keats’ understanding of plants goes beyond simply appreciating the beauty of the natural world. Keats depicts a partnership with plants in which the lines between plant bodies and human bodies blur, displaying the similarities between the two. In fact, Keats often suggests plant superiority, craving the chance to lose himself in the ecosystem of vegetal life, elevating plant-thinking up to a goal humanity must aspire to reach.

Such vegetal elevation was lost by the time of Robert Browning, though. In *Paracelsus*, the narrative that Paracelsus himself tells is one of human superiority through the favoring of human needs and viewing plants as something to be used as a tool to better define and understand humanity. Reflective of a society which increasingly saw plants as inert things to grow and study, Paracelsus appreciates plants for their usefulness to humanity but not for their agency. However, as he constructs this narrative, the plants themselves construct their own

narrative of vegetal agency through decay and rebirth. With an awareness of plant intentionality, the plants come to life in the text, foliating the spaces of the poem and constructing their own narrative which contradicts Paracelsus' narrative. Where Paracelsus sees love for humanity as the answer for social issues, the plants express an ecology in which humanity does not stand alone from the material world but, instead, inside of it, participating in the ecosystem which sees them become equal and timeless. The transcorporeal narrative that the plants in *Paracelsus* construct is similar to how John Keats presented plants, understanding that humanity and plants are a part of a larger ecology of the world in which plants and humans can learn from one another. Paracelsus, despite being modeled after a historical figure known for his appreciation of plant life and a desire to find truth and patterns in the material world, does not recognize the narrative the plants are putting forth. He seems to ignore their agency, wanting them to be nothing but tools and support for humans, putting forth a humanist view of the world despite his issues of death and inequality being solved through the vegetal equality the poem depicts. Reading plant agency reveals that even as the culture had begun to shift plants from the center of culture to the margins, the plants themselves were still present, telling their own story and resisting marginalization through their occupation of space within the narrative.

This occupation of space is highlighted in George Eliot's *Silas Marner* wherein Eliot has to go to great lengths to mystify plants and normalize industrialization. The medicinal herbs of the novel, potent and powerful, are first connected with the supernatural before being cast as dangerous temptations which must be cast aside for the inert plants of Eppie's garden. Of course, the plants in the garden are not inherently inert, but to Silas they are an appropriate plant to interact with. Feminized, domesticated, and a metaphor for the blossoming sexuality of Eppie, the garden stands in contrast to the temptation that medicinal herbs hold for Silas. Like a sexual

deviant he touches them longingly after having to give up his herbal medicine. The plants, though, hold sway over a part of Silas that is so deep that Eppie must become a plant he tends to. Such vegetal power and influence fights against Eliot's demystification of modernization. The narrative of *Silas Marner* would see anything associated with the past made mysterious and frightening. Both of Silas' professions, weaver as well as herbal healer, are seen as unusual and inappropriate in his society. The culture that Silas lives in would see him only engage in the socially acceptable role of parenthood, the queering of Silas through his mothering and fathering of Eppie being allowed while the queering of Silas through a history of feminized herbal healing proves why he is dangerous. And yet, even as this mystification of potent herbs is happening, the plants themselves have already seemed to colonize Silas himself. He is vegetal in his desires, potent plants and plant images being a constant which he returns to again and again even as he changes his behaviors, committing to parenthood and to Eppie. The repeated plant images become echoes of plant agency, the plants refusing to be relegated to the margins as they maintain their grip on Silas Marner, evolving their image as society restricts their outlets.

When their outlets were restricted further, though, plants ended up in a position of needing to demand space for themselves, enacting their agency in disruptive ways through the hands of Madame Sara in L. T. Meade's *The Sorceress of the Strand* series. Meade's attention to plant agency and the potential of plant intention through metaphor and interaction in her work makes it possible to read Madame Sara as a vegetal figure. Through the historical connections between women and plants as well as Madame Sara's medical and herbal knowledge, the moments that Madame Sara interacts with plants stand out as meaningful moments of connection. The connections run deep in Madame Sara's character and, as the New Woman in literature stood not only for women but for complex social issues, Madame Sara can be seen as

representing both women and herbs. Within her character, her actions are simultaneously feminine and vegetal. As she kills with poisons and plants, partnered with vegetal bodies as she works, Madame Sara becomes a political site upon which the desires and agency of both women and plants are written. Following a late Victorian trend of monstrous plants, plant agency in *The Sorceress of the Strand* becomes monstrous. Vegetal bodies serve as poison itself and also as a poison vector, enacting violence upon those that Madame Sara would see die or be injured. Understanding Madame Sara to be more than simply human allows for a more advanced and deeper plant agency. This kind of plant agency resists the cultural defoliation that happened over the course of the long nineteenth century and saw plants shift from sources of potent medicine to playthings to be imported and controlled.

In fact, by understanding plants as agentic in all of literature and culture, whether or not the culture acknowledges that agency, plants gain a deep potential for change and for education. Victorian literature and culture, known for lavish gardens filled with imported flowers which had to spend summers in hot houses, can easily be read to understand plants only as inert background or signs of wealth. While it may be true that plants were seen this way and while some characters within the stories will treat plants as little more than metaphors for human life, the plants themselves resist this classification. Understanding plants as complex and agentic beings capable of their own form of intentionality makes it imperative that we read the vegetal narrative alongside the human narrative in literature. This vegetal narrative tells a story of ecosystems and ecological equality which understands humanity as a part of the ecosystem no matter how many industrial advances are made. As a part of the ecosystem, humans are susceptible to plant intentionality and agency. Their role in the ecosystem also means that human actions go further than simply the boundaries of cities. Actions such as importing plants from other countries,

forcing plants to bloom multiple times a year, or cross breeding for particular floral traits becomes a series of violent acts perpetrated on plant bodies which disrupts their identity and engages in vegetal eugenics. The favoring of visual beauty and scent in flowers, relegating potent herbs to either obsolescence or the role of weed, is a kind of racism. Despite all this, though, plants remain a verdant part of the literal, cultural, and literary landscape of the long nineteenth century. Like peaceful protestors they grow in the lines of literature and placidly present a counter narrative which understands vegetal potency and the need for human/herbal partnerships. Considering the loss of biodiversity from industrial monoculture has continued into the contemporary era as has the segregation of botany into the sciences, locking plant knowledge behind the walls of an academic tower, studying plants in long nineteenth century literature also offers a unique chance to help regain plant literacy and awareness of biodiversity which has been lost. This literature, though it represents a time when plants became mystified, also represents a time when plants were still enough a part of the cultural landscape that they could be easily discussed in literature. From the casual references to herbal medicines to the sexualization of flower images, long nineteenth century literature represents a level of familiarity with plant bodies which has been lost today. As such, this literature represents an approachable and easily readable opportunity for contemporary audiences to begin to reconnect with plant lives and a biodiverse ecosystem. By reading long nineteenth-century literature with an appreciation for plants and their agentic voices, the field becomes an ecological as well as a human archive.

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