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Matthew Hall, *The Imagination of Plants: A Book of Botanical Mythology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 330 pp., $95 (cloth), $33.95 (paper).

Matthew Hall's *The Imagination of Plants* offers a generously illustrated treasure trove of plant mythology selected from across world from ancient times to the present. This is not all; the backbone of the book is formed by a series of discursive essays in which Hall identifies thematic links between his selections, and makes a series of interventions that will be of equal interest to specialist and general readers alike.

Passages are drawn from editions easily accessible to readers for further reading, and range from the mythologies of European Antiquity to the Vedas, the *Popol Vuh*, and more recently *recorded* indigenous wisdom of (for example) Australia, New Zealand, and North America. Without simply listing the range of people and places covered in the book, it is fair to say that Hall's collection is generally representative, rather than exhaustive, in its coverage of plants in the global imaginary.

The introduction, following Val Plumwood, argues against anthropocentricism (in part) through a resituating of humans in relation to plant-life (xxix), this being the rationale for gathering together "a body of narratives in which the plant in question is presented as much as possible as an agent" (xxv). This is not, however, as Hall rightly stresses, an "unthinking collation of different accounts with no regard to the historical and cultural context" (xxix), in the manner of J. G. Frazer. This is a book which, as Hall hopes inspires reflection in the reader on accounts both novel and familiar, and will prove a helpful starting point for many new investigations of plant-human relationships (xxxi).

Chapter 1, "Roots," follows Hall's argument in *Plants as Persons* (2011, following Lynn White, Jr.) regarding the superiority of the human over other animals and vegetation in the Genesis narrative. These selections reflect "expressions of human-plant kinship" (3) of various kinds, resonating with modern scientific knowledge of our common origins in "a single-cell ancestor 1.6 billion years ago" (4). Hall notes the *kinship* with plants expressed in these mythologies, through which they express our common origins, these being

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found in Norse myth, the Upanishads, Egyptian mythology, and the stories of Dreaming beings amongst Australian Aboriginal peoples. By drawing attention to the "care and respect" entailed in kinship relationships, Hall writes, these mythologies challenge our view of plants as "a set of resources for our exclusive use" (12).

"Gods" are the focus of chapter 2; Hall here notes the accusations of primitivism in classical and biblical texts made against those who venerate plants in and of themselves. This chapter and its accompanying selections, in support of David Haberman's challenges to Mircea Eliade's reading of plants as *symbolic* of natural life on earth (which is all there is, after all), shows that these trees, as the-thing-in-themselves, are the *embodiment* of this life (38–9). Trees such as world trees thus exemplify "the living power of botanical life" and cannot be "backgrounded as simply symbols for human truths" (39).

The concept of "Metamorphosis," discussed in chapter 3, is "far from fantastical," being the "basis of the life cycle on planet earth" (69). Humans are born from trees, maize, and blossoms in various traditions, but perhaps more often become plants in death, especially in Greek mythology. Drawing connections back to the first chapter's focus on kinship, this selection draws attention to the "sharing of a fundamental substance" between plants and people, and the shared vulnerability of vegetal and human forms (77).

"Legend," chapter 4, is a necessarily looser gathering, drawing together the "inauthentic stories of fantastical plant natures and characteristics from faraway places" (110) to illustrate how knowledge of this kind circulated and developed in and beyond Europe. Amongst other things, this section of the book includes an account of the birth of geese from shells of the Barnacle Tree, and those of various trees and plants with healing properties and the physical forms (and other characteristics) of human beings. There is, as Hall's introduction to this chapter suggests, considerable scope for overlap between myth, legend, and the other themes that subdivide the book.

Ploughing a parallel furrow to the author's *Plants as Persons,* to which this collection is a welcome companion, "Sentience," chapter 5, continues Hall's challenge to the Western philosophical tradition of plant passivity. Here, "plants transcend the purely vegetative to become perceptive, communicative, sentient creatures" (143). Sometimes plants act with purpose, sometimes they show

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"perceptive and sensory abilities" (144), and at times they bleed, while some possess the power of speech.

There is overlap here, too, with chapter 6's "Violence," which offers examples for thinking-through our human relationships with plants; if we acknowledge the sentience of plants, "Can we continue to kill them with impunity?" (189). The myths collected here, from the killing of the cedar forest guardian Humbaba in *Gilgamesh* to the origin myth of the Acoma, is not so much a caution against doing *no* violence to plant-life, which Hall agrees is impossible given human reliance "on the plant kingdom for food, energy, and shelter" (198). They encourage us, rather, to hold "both sentience and violence in mind whenever we approach a plant to use its leaves, roots, or shoots" (199). As the book's epilogue reflects, allowing plants to speak for themselves will be of fundamental importance in better understanding them and ourselves, and, this reviewer reflects, potentially vital to the survival of human societies in this century.

The roots of the myths represented in *The Imagination of Plants* are deep, and Hall's work as a collector and curator, teasing themes of nature and history from this tangled bank, are generous and thought-provoking. This reviewer, more accustomed to the gloomy woods of the European medieval tradition and its forerunners, found the inclusion of indigenous knowledge especially valuable—the collection is particularly appealing because even its lacunae (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa) will encourage further ventures down the garden path.

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