

Carnivorous Plants and Man-Eating Women: Vegetal (New) Womanhood and the Botanical Gothic

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IN 2009 a team of British botanists published an invited review for the *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society*, which explored the topic of carnivorous plants—both real and imagined—from the Victorian era to the contemporary moment. Entitled “Murderous Plants,” the article ran with the deeply telling opening line, “Carnivorous or insectivorous plants have long induced fascination in men.”¹ Whether the omission of “and women” on the end of that sentence was intentional or not, we may never know—but it is certainly not without precedent, in the literary realm at least, to claim that a predilection for tussling with carnivorous, murderous, or man-eating plants in the latter years of Victorian England has been overwhelmingly displayed by male subjects. Popular adventure tales pertaining to the genre of the “botanical gothic” at the fin de siècle—from Phil Robinson’s “The Man-Eating Tree” (1881) to Fred M. White’s “The Purple Terror” (1898)—depict heroic combat with fictitious killer plants as a thoroughly masculine pursuit, executed by archetypes of white imperial machismo on the colonial frontier while the female characters, if they are included at all, watch helplessly from the sidelines. Such “man-eating plant” narratives, scholars have suggested, feed into fears in the post-Darwinian era of the advanced adaptive and predatory capacities of the vegetable kingdom, particularly those lurking in the unknowable jungles of the colonial periphery—thereby implicitly extolling the courage, and indeed the necessity, of the masculine British adventurer who triumphs over such threatening spaces.²

While it is generally true that female characters do not have a great deal of direct agency in these narratives, it would be a stark oversight to claim that femininity is of little consequence in the botanical gothic at the turn of the century. After all, this was not just a time in which the figure of the plant, and the human relationship thereto, was undergoing rapid and radical reevaluation. This was also the period marked by the

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rise of the New Woman—that is, of feminine (sexual) independence, work, and overseas travel. If, as ecofeminist thought suggests, feminine bodies and plant bodies have undergone parallel processes of devaluation, subordination, and extraction at the hand of the hegemonic heteropatriarchal order since the Enlightenment, then this article proposes investigating how this affiliation might come to bear upon the botanical gothic narratives of the turn of the century—a time in which both woman and plant were beginning to burst the shackles of their perceived “passivity,” becoming ontologically unruly and socially disruptive. How, for example, might the figure of the carnivorous or strange plant either reflect or activate anxieties around the figure of the sexually emancipated woman? Does the unexpected liveliness of the monstrous plant reduce Victorian womanhood to a comparative flatness, rendering her insignificant when compared to the greater ecological-evolutionary threats brought to the fore by imaginings of murderous vegetation? Or, conversely, can we track something like an ontological alliance between the New Woman and the strange plant—a dual framing, perhaps, predicated along the lines of monstrosity, sexuality, and “man-eating” agency?

By way of responding to these questions, this article will examine three short stories of strange or murderous plants published from the turn of the century to the Edwardian period, all of which conjure up the horror of the monstrous vegetable by way of a feminine-coded and oft-Orientalized sense of erotic excess and sexual perversion: “The Flowering of the Strange Orchid,” by H. G. Wells (1894); “The Man Whom the Trees Loved,” by Algernon Blackwood (1912); and “The Tale of the Scarlet Butterflies,” by Beatrice Grimshaw (1908). I will first parse the ways in which both the imagined carnivorous plants of the botanical gothic, and the real carnivorous plants studied in the botanical sciences, are mediated through the trope of the *femme fatale*—a rhetorical move that creates considerable lexical and semiotic crossover between the anxieties brought to the fore by the figure of the strange plant and those precipitated by the emergence of feminine (sexual) autonomy. I will then move on to consider the affective cross-species intensities and queer intimacies inherent to plant propagation during the “orchidelirium” frenzy of the late nineteenth century, reading H. G. Wells alongside Michael Pollan, Carla Hustak, and Natasha Myers in order to demonstrate the ways in which the male orchid-fanciers of the botanical gothic might be considered erotically embroiled in “improper affiliations” (to use Mel Chen’s term) with sexualized plants. In so doing, and with recourse to Algernon Blackwood, I shall demonstrate

the extent to which the monstrous plant, far from bypassing the issue of femininity, actually becomes implicitly gendered *as* threateningly female, taking on the role of a vegetal seductress that lures men to their demise, and creating a sensualized feminine plant “rival” to supplant the more conservative, moralistic Christian wife. Finally, examining the portrayal of Vaiti, the “lawless Sea-Queen” of Beatrice Grimshaw’s “The Tale of the Scarlet Butterflies,”³ I will explore the limitations imposed upon this vegetal (New) womanhood by biologically determinist notions of racial “purity” that cast both non-Western femininity and non-Western vegetality as wild, contaminative, and dangerous. Cross-pollinating currents in ecofeminism, plant theory, science studies, and ecocriticism, this article will demonstrate the ways in which depictions of the monstrous plant in the botanical gothic implicitly echo anxieties in the imperial imaginary around a malicious, exotic, and dangerously feminine degradational force, simultaneously local and other, seductive and dangerous, that threatens to derail civilizational progress and the attendant stratifications of gender, sex, and race in British culture at the turn of the century.

CARNIVOROUS PLANTS AND/AS TRANSGRESSIVE WOMEN

In her study on plant horror in fiction and film, Dawn Keetley argues that vegetal life by its very nature lurks “perilously close to the very definition of the monstrous.”⁴ This she attributes to the thesis (among others) that plants refuse easy assimilation into humans’ totalizing philosophical and taxonomical conceptual models. In harboring dual associations with growth and decay, Keetley observes, vegetal life dwells in the strange metaphysical interstices between life and death, signaling in an almost contradictory manner a superreproductive vitality as well as the onset of death and ruin on an individual or even civilizational level. While the material ubiquity of vegetation renders plants visually familiar, Keetley shows by way of philosopher Michael Marder that plants’ radical remove from normative human paradigms of temporality, desire, and embodiment positions them as inscrutably alien and affords them a sort of dread-inducing ontological uncanniness. Meanwhile, the morphological particularities of plants, many of which possess sex organs that are considered both male and female, “dramatically breach confining categories of sex and gender, reveling in a wild ‘both/and’ sexual power: they are terrifying and alluring.”⁵ As Keetley notes, this refusal of sex dimorphism as the default state in plants renders them productive of perverse and boundary-crossing sexual possibilities that, combined

with their untamable proliferative qualities, afford them—to quote Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari—a kind of “unearthly erotic appeal” that disrupts dominant sexual paradigms.⁶ Following Noël Carroll and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in their claims that monstrosity is predicated upon a refusal to be classified, and Michael Marder in his insistence that plants “silently deconstruct” human metaphysical systems by proliferating in the spaces in between established categories,⁷ Keetley maintains that “Plants easily become monsters, then, because they *are* the absolute ‘other,’ because they exist on and beyond the outer reaches of our knowledge . . . [n]ever completely accounted for by humans’ attempts to categorize them (although we have certainly tried).”⁸

The categorical slipperiness of plants, and the monstrous and erotic possibilities that this liminality affords, play a key role in the emergence of the botanical gothic in the late nineteenth century. The publication of Charles Darwin’s *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) and, soon after, *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1877) has been identified by scholars as a pivotal moment in the creation of the fictitious “man-eating plant” trope that swept cultural and literary narratives at the turn of the century.⁹ Exposing an almost animalistic range of desires, movements, and intentionalities that a plant might foster unbeknownst to its human cultivator, from the capability to digest insects to the existence of something resembling a vegetal nervous system, Darwin’s scientific findings uprooted the plant from its more habitual anchoring in the cultural imaginary as an inert, sessile, and passive body; as Prior notes, “Plants capturing and consuming animals for food provide a striking instance of reversal of the prevailing order of things.”¹⁰ Muddying the once-hardened boundaries between botany and zoology, such discoveries set the stage for a sustained imaginative engagement with the vegetal that capitalized on its potentially monstrous potential. After all, if a plant could evolve to kill and consume an insect, who was to say in the wake of Darwinian theory that it could not, theoretically, evolve to hunt and eat a human?

At much the same time as it precipitated wild imaginings of animalistic and even man-eating capabilities covertly harbored by the unwitting plant, Darwin’s descriptions of carnivorous Venus flytraps, sundews, and pitcher plants invoke a certain convergence of violence and sexuality that is, markedly, filtered through the language of a transgressive femininity. Such associations were by no means illegible prior to Darwin’s publications, of course; in his 1866 poem “The Sundew,” from *Poems and Ballads*, Algernon Charles Swinburne describes the titular plant as being “pricked at the lip with tender red,”¹¹ thereby collapsing an

evocation of eroticized femininity (reddened lips) into the more threatening image of bloodstains trailed by an unhappy victim. Jonathan Smith notes, moreover, that within the realm of Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants*, "Like the femmes fatales of *Poems and Ballads*, insect-eaters lure their victims with enticing looks and tempting fragrances and empty promises of nectar, only to drown, dissolve, and dismember them."¹² This association between carnivorous plants and sexually threatening femininity, mediated through the trope of the femme fatale, is further discernible in Grant Allen's "Queer Flowers," a short essay published in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1884. Allen refers to the "deliberately deceptive and alluring blossom" of such plants and highlights "a sort of fiendish impersonal cruelty about its action which sadly militates against all our pretty platitudes about the beauty and perfection of living beings."¹³ Allen's interest in these "queer" carnivorous flowers does not seem to rest so much upon their actual biological habits as on the ways in which they confound common understandings of how plants *ought* to behave. He cites, to this effect, our "human ideal of a central typical blossom," which "looks, in short, we think, as a flower ought to look." To these exemplary specimens he contrasts a carnivorous plant, "these Bohemians of the vegetable world that make up what we all consider the queerest and most singular of all flowers."¹⁴ While these "queer" flowers remain ungendered from the perspective of pronouns, we might note that the pollinators Allen describes, from the "artistically minded bees" to the wasp, an "irascible and ill-balanced creature," are invariably gendered male—despite the fact that, biologically speaking, the females are the more prolific foragers. In so doing, we might tentatively suggest that Allen is capitalizing upon the cultural link between femininity and flora in order to frame the deadly flowers as female by default, as they lure the unsuspecting male insects into their beautiful yet deadly environs. A weightier foundation on which to base this claim, however, might be the striking crossover between the language used to describe a "queer" flower—that is, a lexicon of uncategorizability, of militating against expectations, of striking out against "our pretty platitudes about the beauty and perfection of living beings"—and that which is used to describe the controversial New Woman figure of the late Victorian era.

As a figure synthesizing novel ideas around feminine sexual independence, abandonment of tradition, educational and professional opportunities for women, and travel, the nebulous New Woman figure was often as hard to pin down in real life as she was satirized in the literary and cultural sphere. Talia Schaffer notes that the New Woman was

often treated as “purely imaginary caricature,”¹⁵ with rhetoricians capitalizing upon her very fictionality so as to distort her into an exaggerated threat to established culture coded in the subversion of gender norms. Accordingly, Linda Dowling notes, “the heroine of New Woman fiction expressed her quarrel with Victorian culture chiefly through sexual means,” disrupting cultural and sexual landscapes with her “curiosity and fey experimentalism.”¹⁶ Much like Allen’s queer flowers, then, the ambiguous New Woman figure is seen by her critics as threatening in her excesses and unruliness; she blurs the distinction between the sexes with her mannish dress, disorders societal expectations with her nonnormative sexual behaviors, and becomes ontologically subversive in her refusal to correspond with what she reasonably “ought” to do as a woman within society. Lyn Pykett points out that the New Woman was even seen to be “man-eating” in her threatening conduct,¹⁷ a formulation that applies equally to the murderous plant imagined in the botanical gothic and the promiscuous feminine figure who causes the demise of her male partners. (We might cite, for example, Sue Brideshead’s undergraduate in *Jude the Obscure* [1894] as a casualty in this respect.) It is also noteworthy that the depiction of the New Woman, much like that of the carnivorous plant, taps into cultural anxieties of a downward evolutionary spiral. If animalistic plants inspire fears of a “devolution” in humankind by activating fears of highly evolved vegetables that might, theoretically, displace humans from their position atop the evolutionary chain, then the nonnormative sexuality of the New Woman gives rise to parallel concerns about degeneration unfolding on the reproductive plane. Dowling identifies specific alarm to this effect around “what [critics] feared was a profound rejection of procreative sex”—and, “since they assumed that the New Woman could achieve sexual equality only by controlling her fertility, the unavoidable resort to abortion or infanticide” (445, 447). The concern with the New Woman, then, was not just cultural; it was also evolutionary, triggering fears that the fate of the human species might be compromised by the sexually dangerous and nonprocreative feminine behaviors of these transgressive women. The fear of the predatory plant thus comes to be coded in a remarkably similar set of anxieties to those advanced by New Woman: namely, fears of civilizational regression, of taxonomic unruliness, and of the “man-eating” femme fatale both vegetal and feminine that poses a perilous threat to established social, sexual, and cultural norms.

AFFECTIVE ECOLOGIES AND IMPROPER AFFILIATIONS IN
 “THE FLOWERING OF THE STRANGE ORCHID”

This lexical and semiotic convergence between depictions of threatening vegetality and those of transgressive femininity finds articulation in H. G. Wells’s “The Flowering of the Strange Orchid.” Originally published in 1894, this text takes as its starting point the “orchidelirium,” a “sinister and decadent passion” for collecting and cultivating exotic orchids that swept England’s upper classes in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Wells’s protagonist, an unremarkable man named Winter-Wedderburn, acquires an unusual orchid seedling from the Andaman Islands. Anticipating fame and fortune if his orchid proves to be valuable, Wedderburn invests all his energies into attending to the plant—while his female companion, an unnamed character who sits somewhere between distant cousin and housekeeper, distrusts the plant and claims that she does not “like the look of it.”¹⁹ Suspicious of the orchid’s foreign origins, she declares the peoples of the Andaman Islands to be “most disgusting wretches” and “horrible natives” (24), as if the purported savagery of the colonial periphery might breach the bounds of the imperial domestic space via the introduction of foreign plant life into English greenhouses. The rootlets of the orchid, meanwhile, are ominously likened to “white fingers . . . trying to get at you” (26–27), foreshadowing a darkly animalistic vegetal agency and a destabilizing ontological status—as well as potentially, we might now conjecture, invoking the pale hands of a beckoning lady.

The relationship between Wedderburn and his flower soon becomes an intense affair. Lynn Voskuil notes the reciprocally transformative nature of such a cross-species encounter. “The variable forms of orchids,” she observes, “were perceived . . . to affect their growers in different ways, with fancier and bloom both shaped by the mutually constitutive ecological relationship.”²⁰ In accordance with this, Wedderburn becomes incrementally more involved with his orchid as it creeps closer to blooming. As he anticipates the moment of its unfurling, he is “singularly busy in his steamy little hothouse,” “with some regularity meditating on the approaching flowering of the plant,” and talking “about orchids generally, and this orchid in particular, whenever he felt inclined” (26, 29, 27). The orchid does not just occupy his greenhouse but also his mind, his desires; his involvement with the plant alters his disposition and his very sense of self. From the perspective of the plant, meanwhile, Wedderburn’s loving cultivation is what allows it to fulfill its teleological

desire to grow, to develop its deadly rootlets, and to blossom as an expression of sexual maturation. Both parties are, indeed, impacted by their mutual encounter.

By way of digging deeper into this co-affecting relationship, we might take the lead of Michael Pollan, who maintains in *The Botany of Desire* that it is not just we humans who cultivate plants—it is also the case, Pollan argues, that plants cultivate *us*. By making themselves beautiful, or tasty, or even consciousness-altering, he claims, plants “draw[] other creatures to them by stirring and gratifying their desires.”²¹ Put otherwise, plants manipulate humans into helping them reproduce at scale. For Pollan, this relationship takes on something of a transactional character; the extraction of human labor for vegetal reproductive ends suggests a “grand co-evolutionary bargain with a willing, slightly credulous animal.”²² Wedderburn, or indeed any horticulturalist, in this “plant’s-eye view” is little more than a mechanistic drone, analogous (or indeed inferior) to a pollinating insect, carrying out the orchid’s wishes to be cultivated while uncritically convinced they are his own. He is duped into working for the orchid; his supposed intentions are actually the obscured intentions of the plant itself.

Pollan’s transactional framing, however, risks overlooking the more intimate textures of the affective and multisensory partnership in which orchid and orchid-fancier are embroiled. In their article “Involutionary Momentum,” Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers examine Charles Darwin’s studies of “sexual deception” within orchid fertilization, a morphological idiosyncrasy by which orchid species can mimic the appearance of pollinators and emit a chemical signal that resembles the insect’s sex pheromones. As a result, visiting insects try to copulate with the orchid’s decoy vegetal “mate,” stimulating in so doing an “ejection” of pollen triggered by a minute, highly sensitive mechanism hidden within the orchid.²³ Rejecting the idea that such processes are grounded solely in adaptationist logics, Hustak and Myers ask, “What if the topology of insect/orchid encounters were conditioned not just by a calculating economy that aims to maximize fitness but also by an *affective ecology* shaped by pleasure, play, and experimental propositions?” (77–78). For Hustak and Myers, attention should be paid to the affectively charged landscapes that are generated by an insect’s sensing engagement with the “excitable” orchid, vibrating in the “thickness of the space between bodies” (86, 78). They note, furthermore, that Darwin himself was fascinated by such activity, and carried out experiments in which he would try to mimic the insect’s movements on the orchid and thereby stimulate the

ejection of the pollinium. In so doing, Hustak and Myers argue, Darwin becomes curiously insectlike himself: “As he *leans into* and gets *involved in* the event of pollination, he participates by remodeling himself as insect pollinator. In each of his experiments, he finds new ways to *simulate* the insect and *stimulate* the flower. . . . Moving in time, space, and sensory relations with orchids and insects, Darwin took up the roles of pollinator and pollinated” (90). Hustak and Myers’s Darwin, then, is hardly the mechanistic facilitator of plant-human transactions alluded to by Pollan. Instead, entangled affectively and sensorially in his “erotic explorations of orchids,”²⁴ he participates in a queer interspecies assemblage, dislocating his ontological separateness as a human as he experiences the diffuse eroticized pleasures of becoming-orchid, or becoming-insect, by way of his intimate affective embroilment in vegetal sexual processes.

These affective nuances contouring the encounter between botanist and plant find clear resonance in the relationship between Wedderburn and his orchid. If Darwin was enmeshed within a queerly erotic interspecies assemblage as he studied his insect-pollinated flowers, we might certainly conjecture that Wedderburn is in a similar situation, having inserted himself as a lively and loving affective agent into the intimate sexual processes of his own strange bloom as he coaxes it into reaching sexual maturity—both stimulating the flower and being stimulated in turn. Indeed, when his orchid finally blossoms, it is steeped in an erotic pleasure that traverses both bodies. The plant is described as the protagonist’s “new darling,” evoking a feminine sensuality and a distinctly sexual affiliation. Wells describes “a rich, intensely sweet scent, that overpowered every other in that crowded, steaming little greenhouse,” giving rise to an “ecstasy of admiration” (30). The overwhelming sexuality of the bloom (for a flower is, after all, effectively the plant’s genitals) elicits a parallel erotic reaction in Wedderburn as he gazes in heady stupefaction at its suggestively yonic “heavy labellum . . . coiled into an intricate projection.” The encounter is intense, intimate, and mutually affecting. Wedderburn’s pleasure, of course, is not to last; the scent soon becomes “insufferable” (30), his vision blurs, and he swoons away into unconsciousness. He is later discovered by his housekeeper, with the deadly plant’s rootlets draining the blood from his body. She kills the plant and saves her companion’s life.

Seducing Wedderburn with its “deliberately deceptive and alluring blossom” in much the same way as the queer carnivorous plants described by Allen, Wells’s strange orchid similarly activates the trope of the sensual but deadly vegetal femme fatale. Indeed, the perverse

femininity of the orchid is evoked even in its murderous methods. In poisoning Wedderburn with a lethal scent, the orchid's tactics recall such feminine poisoners as Giulia Tofana—a figure whose crimes of killing over six hundred men using the deadly belladonna plant, as Price notes, were of great interest in Britain at the time due to the 1847 discovery of a “sisterhood of poisoners” in Essex who used similar methods to murder their husbands or children.²⁵ Even more transgressive with regard to the orchid's sexuality, perhaps, are the leechlike rootlets sucking the blood from Wedderburn's neck. Despite having been published before Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), such an act almost seems to anticipate the murderous eroticism of the vampiric kiss—influenced, perhaps, by Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) or the popular “penny dreadful” serial, *Varney the Vampire* (1845-1847). It is noteworthy, moreover, that both of these titles—and indeed *Dracula* later on—rely on the trope of the feminine virgin who is pierced by the libidinous vampire's bite. At no point is a *man* permitted to be penetrated by the monster. This is where “The Flowering of the Strange Orchid” moves into unusual territory. As the orchid latches onto its victim, it is the male Wedderburn that is made penetrable and feminized under the sexually violent embrace of the vampiric vegetable. Given Wedderburn's earlier conjecturing upon the orchid's morphology, in which he muses upon whether the plant might not actually be insect-pollinated—“The puzzle is, what are the flowers for?” (40)—we might therefore suggest that the flower's purpose is to lure in such vulnerable men as Wedderburn, such that he is cast into the role of the excitable, sexually charged insect embroiled in an affective ecology designed to satisfy the sexual, violent, and consumptive pleasures of the perverse plant. The monstrous orchid here moves from being a metonym of feminine seduction to an agent of masculine libidinous penetration—mirroring, it might not be too much of a stretch to say, the blurring of masculine and feminine sexual attributes as they coalesce and shift within the plant body as well as anxieties that women's sexual liberation would dangerously destabilize existing gender dynamics.²⁶

Wedderburn's relationship with the deviant plant can thus be understood in terms of what Mel Chen terms an “improper affiliation,” or a queer social or cultural formation that encompasses “an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative.”²⁷ From this angle, Wedderburn's obsession with the plant is not just threatening on the basis of its foreignness but also in its queer ontological and gendered transgressions. The housekeeper criticizes his “worshipping” of the “horrid orchid” (31), suggesting a sense

of unease toward Wedderburn's attachment to the sexualized plant; an attachment that overrides the habitual hierarchies of animacy as well as the confines of heteronormativity.²⁸ Her discomfort surrounding this improper affiliation, moreover, might be further traced back to a sense of fear at the disruption it has introduced in their domestic makeup. Wedderburn and his housekeeper are far from a normative household, both being unmarried and distantly related. Nonetheless, their relationship is a respectable one; they enjoy each other's company, share in discussions, bicker, and eat meals together, seeming to more closely approximate the contented companionship of husband and wife than the stratified dynamic of master and servant. To have Wedderburn suddenly infatuated with a sensual and feminized orchid, then, threatens to derail this rather comfortable setup. Perhaps one could go so far as to suggest that Wedderburn's improper affiliation with the orchid is not just evocative of a threatening vegetal femininity by virtue of its sexually violent, gender-subverting queerness; it might also be conducive to a sense of *envy* on the part of the housekeeper, with the plant akin to a rival for her partner's attentions and thus a threat to the normatively gendered dynamic of the home.²⁹

We might situate this imperilment of domestic conventions as enacted by way of the queer, feminized vegetal body within the context of John Tosh's work on the so-called "flight from domesticity." As female subjects in late Victorian England voiced "new rights and new freedoms based on an ideology of sexual equality,"³⁰ Tosh notes that men came to see the household as a feminine, even feminizing sphere that stymied possibilities for rousing male–male homosocial interactions and rendered sexual relations with women, not a pleasure, but "a privilege to be paid for conforming to domestic conventions."³¹ As such, many men became disillusioned with the rigidity and emasculating tedium of home life. Reluctant to seek out marriages and thereby become confined by domestic requirements, men turned to the emphatically masculine sphere of the empire: fantastical foreign spaces that were imagined to be an outlet for heroism, bachelorhood, fleeting erotic pleasures with colonial women, and manly adventure free from feminine domestic demands. "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid," then, exhibits something of a corollary to this phenomenon. Here, it is not the male explorer who ventures off into unknown lands to escape the boredom of domestic life and the stifling nature of protracted female companionship; instead, it is the foreign plant body, threateningly gendered female and transplanted into the local space of the home, that seduces the male subject

away from his domestic duties. To put it another way: if, in Tosh's formulation, it is the allure of far-flung colonial environments and the possibilities for performances of machismo and conquest therein that constitute a rival to the English wife or female partner, then in Wells's narrative it is the foreign vegetal subject, laying down roots importunately in the Victorian home, that violently wrenches the male from succumbing to the mundane pleasures of domesticity—catapulting him into the thrill of adventure, yes, but rendering him incapable nonetheless of enacting the desired sense of virile agency over the colonial subject.

FEMININE (VEGETAL) RIVALRIES IN "THE MAN WHOM THE TREES LOVED"

This sense of domestic rivalry with an outside eroticized, feminine vegetal force also plays out in Algernon Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912). Blackwood narrates the story of Mr. and Mrs. Bittacy, a married couple who live on the edge of a forest that is in possession of a terrifying and mystical energy. The collective vegetal force of the trees outside the window begins to have a peculiar effect on Mr. Bittacy, slowly "taking him over,"³² while his Christian wife fights desperately with the forest to keep him present. Eventually, Mr. Bittacy succumbs to its power and Mrs. Bittacy is left with nothing more than her husband's bodily husk, with something akin to his inner essence taken away by (or willingly surrendered to) the trees outside.

Blackwood's framing of the forest as a darkly enigmatic power, unassemblable into Christian theology, might be attributed to an experimental pantheism: a nondeistic spirituality rooted in the worship of nature that was of particular interest to Blackwood himself. Equally, we might ascribe this vast vegetal energy to ecophobic anxieties around the radical unknowability of the natural environment, especially those situated in foreign lands; indeed, Mr. Bittacy is said to have cultivated his strange susceptibility to the feelings of trees while stationed in India. Of particular relevance to this study, however, is the particular *sensuality* with which the forest is described as it works itself into Mr. Bittacy's body and soul. Mr. Bittacy's connection with the trees is depicted as peaceful and comforting, but it is not without a peculiar eroticism; he describes, for example, "the soft, moist tenderness that a south wind left upon their thinning boughs," speaking "all day of their sensations: how they drank the fading sunshine, dreamed into the moonlight, thrilled to the kiss of the stars" (64–65). If the mutually erotic pleasures of Wells's strange orchid are expressed in the plant's deadly vampiric kiss and

Wedderburn's "ecstasy of admiration," then Blackwood presents a more diffuse, mystical evocation of feminine vegetal sexuality and the mutual ecstasies thereof. Moving temporarily away from the discursive regimes of the sexualized human body, Mr. Bittacy describes the textured pleasures of rain, shade, and morning dew as they are sensed by the networked and collective vegetal body. He "hunger[s] especially in the dusk to catch their 'mood of night'" (67), a formulation that seems to gesture toward a nebulous vegetal sexuality that settles over the forest at sunset and in which Bittacy yearns to participate. It is as if he wishes to disconnect from his human ontology in order to experience the erotic pleasures of the sensing vegetal body. If Wells's Wedderburn follows the lead of Darwin by participating in a queer interspecies assemblage through his entanglement in the plant's sexual practices, inadvertently embroiling himself as an affected and affecting agent in the orchid's nonhuman erotic exploits, then we might see Mr. Bittacy as engaging in similar acts of affective intensity and intimacy in his improper affiliations with the forest. He describes cutting the plants free of parasites, tending to them, and "loving" them in acts evocative of cross-species kinship and queer erotic pleasures (52). Whether he specifically attends to their pollination processes, we do not know; but that he participates intimately in concert with these lively vegetal subjects, that he "*moved with and was moved by them,*" is beyond all question.³³

Despite the trees' radical alterity to human embodiment and being, Blackwood describes the forest as being in possession of a distinctly feminine character. The forest makes Mr. Bittacy "happy and at peace; it nursed and fed and soothed his deepest moods. Trees influenced the sources of his life, lowered or raised the very heart-beat in him" (58). By occupying a role somewhere between mother, nurse, and lover, the trees begin to actively supplant the feminine position held by his wife. Mr. Bittacy's own gendered subjectivity even shifts in response to this immense feminine force; as Mrs. Bittacy watches her husband stride into the woods, Blackwood notes that, "while she trembled at his energy, she admired the virile passion he displayed" (64). Mr. Bittacy's masculine desire, tempered throughout a long marriage, now blazes up commensurate with the powerful femininity of the forest—an affective response, possibly, to the forest's "ten thousand soft lips of green," its profound fertility, its feminized (but not humanized) nourishing and loving qualities. The rivalry between Mrs. Bittacy and the plants, echoing that of Wedderburn's housekeeper and the orchid, is plain; she "ache[s] with suspicion, fear, jealousy" as she actively competes with the forest to regain

his attentions (65). Her conservative Edwardian values, her Christian faith, and her wifely loyalty, however, cannot compare to the distributed erotic pleasures and excessive agencies of her all-powerful vegetal feminine rival. While Wedderburn's housekeeper is able to intervene at the last moment, Mrs. Bittacy does not enjoy such success. The trees eventually steal away what we might reasonably assume to be her husband's soul, leaving behind a bodily "shell, half emptied" (98). Much like Wedderburn, Mr. Bittacy has been penetrated and his life-force drained by the unknowable and overwhelmingly feminine gothic plant—although this does transpire on a more metaphysical plane than Wedderburn's corporeal experience. Indeed, if Wedderburn's blood is drawn from his veins in order to merge with the murderous orchid's vegetal body, then, in a remarkably similar turn of events, Mr. Bittacy's essence has been mined from his body in order to merge with the vegetal soul. In both figurations, the plant is all-consuming, extractive, and feminizing, a foreign force subverting the more habitual anthropocentric logics of human–plant interactions as well as disrupting the normative gendered dynamics of the domestic household in a manner that both echoes and subtly repositions Tosh's work on the "flight from domesticity."

FEMININE AND VEGETAL EXCESSES IN "THE TALE OF THE SCARLET BUTTERFLIES"

This brings me, finally, to Beatrice Grimshaw's "The Tale of the Scarlet Butterflies" (1908). As a self-professed New Woman figure and an Irish writer traveling and working in the Pacific islands, Grimshaw existed a world apart from the masculine, English-rootedness of Wells and Blackwood.³⁴ She was also, it must be noted, a staunch white supremacist and subscribed to "social Darwinist" theories, which maintained that Europeans had reached the highest stage of their development while considering Polynesians and Melanesians to be evolutionarily inferior. It is for this reason that Grimshaw's female protagonist, Vaiti, is of such unique interest. Vaiti is a threshold figure, rife with contradictions; as a biracial woman descended from a Cook Islands princess and a disgraced English nobleman, she is "doubly dowered . . . with the instinct of rule,"³⁵ and undercuts in her very characterization the racial stratifications in which Grimshaw herself was so invested. Vaiti is married to an English naval officer, Tempest, with whom she sails the high seas as the female captain of a ship full of men; she is a "lawless Sea-Queen" who "has a reputation of being half a pirate" (586, 581). Her broken, pidgin English

nudges her into the symbolic category of the colonial subaltern, while her extraordinary command over her ship and crew, vulgar tongue, imperialistic attitude, and sartorial excesses consistently undermine this classification by framing her first as a figure of masculine British machismo, then of feminized Pacific Islands royalty, and back again. Grimshaw writes, “All the nautical frippery worn on board the *Sybil* was worn by her. Tempest would sooner have dressed himself in a whale-tooth necklace and a red-edged bath towel, Samoa fashion, than have worn anything that in the faintest degree recalled a uniform” (582). Here, the biracial Vaiti is in closer proximity to the role of the white British man than even Tempest, who is symbolically recast, in a complete subversion of the expected order, into the stereotypical role of the whale-tooth-wearing native. Even then, however, Vaiti is inconsistent. Described as being in possession of both a sensuous beauty and a “curious, half-evil charm” (581), she is known across the islands for her threatening feminine allure and garners accusations on more than one occasion of being a witch. Vaiti thus blurs the boundaries of masculine and feminine, English and Polynesian, royalty and outlaw, pirate and sorceress—as such, she operates within the shifting interstices of race, class, and gender that refuse the homogenization of either/or. In this regard she mirrors, in her very portrayal, the amorphous waterscapes over which she presides.

Vaiti’s encounter with strange vegetation comes in the form of a set of magical yam roots, which had been loaded onto her ship, the *Sybil*, during a trip to Iorana. A crew member mistakenly eats one and enters into a trance, hypnotized by the plants. Having commanded that the crew leave the dangerous roots alone, Vaiti and Tempest depart the ship to attend a soirée given by the British government in Motua. Vaiti arrives late and makes a grand entrance clad in an extravagant white dress that appears to be made up of enormous live butterflies. As the resident magistrate approaches Vaiti to examine the beautiful insects, however, he is alarmed to realize that they are not actually butterflies at all. Instead, they are the flowers of an as yet undiscovered and impossibly valuable species of orchid, which had bloomed from the hypnotic yam roots in an unexpected burst of sexual vegetal intensity. Adorning her bosom, skirt, and hair, “quivering,” “dancing,” “trembling,” and “gathering” in concert with her movements, the orchid-butterflies become akin to an extension of Vaiti herself, doubling her erotic appeal with their ontologically transgressive, magnetic beauty (586). The magistrate exclaims, “You are worth, as you stand, some ten thousand pounds”

(587), thereby melding Vaiti and her orchids into one immensely valuable, commodified package.

In Grimshaw, then, we see an instance of the botanical gothic that turns the trope of the strange plant on its head. If, in Blackwood and Wells, we encountered plants initially presumed to be passive, suddenly taking on a threatening and entirely surprising sense of intentionality, then in Grimshaw we see rather the opposite case. Instead of the inert springing perilously into life, we see the butterflies—which were variously fluttering, trembling, and vibrating when viewed from afar—suddenly snapping back into passive vegetality, prompting the guests to question whether they are “alive or dead” (586). Moreover, unlike Mrs. Bittacy in Blackwood, or Wedderburn’s housekeeper in Wells, Vaiti is not depicted as being in tension with, or even in competition with, these strange plants. On the contrary, we even might go so far as to draw a sense of kinship between the two. After all, there are many layers of deception that coalesce in the orchid. The flowers themselves are disguised as butterflies, doubtless aiming to lure pollinating insects by way of the sexually deceptive behavior outlined by Hustak and Myers. With their “shining dark eye-spots” (586), the flower-butterflies are additionally disguised as animal predators: a plant imitating an insect imitating another animal. The root itself, meanwhile, introduces yet another layer of deceit in its resemblance to an innocuous yam, which conceals both its hypnotic capacities and its extraordinary flowering. Flitting between animality and vegetality, familiarity and strangeness, beauty and peril, life and death, without ever completely dissolving one into the other, the orchid finds a surprising overlap with the amorphous “beauty and curious, half-evil charm” of Vaiti herself.

Indeed, Vaiti even becomes strangely plantlike while she is clothed in the orchids. As she struts through the party, she gathers in the jealousy of the local women “as so much honey” (586). Certainly, this phrase evokes an image of Vaiti luxuriating in the sticky sweetness of others’ admiration, a delight made all the more pronounced by the racial disparity between the women; as a descendant of Pacific islands royalty with “The blood of those many English ancestors of hers” coursing through her veins (587), Vaiti (doubtless a mouthpiece for Grimshaw’s own prejudices) projects a dual sense of racial superiority over the Motu peoples that finds articulation in her excessive sense of dress. However, this phrasing equally signals Vaiti’s own becoming-orchid, with the women buzzing about her like insects, captivated by the beauty of her attire. Just as a bee might hum about a flower, drawn in by its sugary nectars while

unwittingly aiding the plant's reproductive desires, so too do the women find themselves drawn to Vaiti by the "quivering, dancing, flame-like creatures that hovered about her breast" (586)—unwittingly "pollinating" or "cross-fertilizing" Vaiti's vanity with their envy, and creating the conditions for her narcissism to grow and flourish into new forms. Here, Vaiti is flower, insect, and eroticized woman all at once, enticing her admirers with her vegetal-enhanced beauty and drinking in their envy as a deceptive orchid would extract the affective labor of its pollinators. If, in previous botanical gothic stories, female characters have been altogether threatened, if not supplanted, by the overwhelming feminine sensuality of the strange plant, then with Vaiti we see something closer to an alliance; the sensual exuberance of the orchid only serves to exaggerate the feminine sexual excesses embodied within Vaiti herself. Vaiti's loveliness as she wears the orchids is described in terms of surplus: she is "so unnecessarily handsome, this lawless Sea-Queen, and so audaciously conscious of her beauty and her power, that she made everyone else feel like a farthing rushlight beside a blazing jet of gas" (586). As an eroticized feminine vegetal body, Vaiti becomes *more* beautiful, *more* sensual, *more* narcissistic than she was even before her encounter with the orchids. She does not try to compete with the feminine vegetal force by drawing upon conservative values, as does Mrs. Bittacy, nor does she evince suspicion toward the improper affiliation with the orchid, as does Wedderburn's housekeeper. Instead, Vaiti melds her own fortes with the strange powers of the blooms; she is strengthened by their ontological transgressions and affective intensities, just as she bolsters their vegetal appeal with her own wildly feminine sensuality.

This is corroborated in the story's concluding episode. Vaiti returns to her ship to discuss the prices at which she will sell the orchid roots (for the only force stronger than Vaiti's vanity is her greed)—but she sees to her fury that half of the party has boarded her ship and eaten them out of jealousy. Unaware, of course, of their hypnotic properties, the entire group is now lying in a stupor brought on by the roots' strange powers. Vaiti capitalizes upon the party's state of hypnosis and commands them all to sail the vessel into open waters. When they return to consciousness, she demands a handsome payment in exchange for returning them to shore, making even more profit than she would have done selling the roots themselves. It is worth noting here that the trope of the hypnotic, trance-inducing plant is a relatively common one in botanical gothic tales (one might look to R. D. Chetwode's *The Marble City* [1897], for example, or Frank Aubrey's *The Devil-Tree of El Dorado*

[1895]), and it is generally the male explorer characters that are reduced to a passive, even emasculated state of lethargy after consuming strange or uncanny vegetation—signaling, perhaps, a sense of anxiety that the ecological excesses of the colonial space might strip frontiersmen of the masculine agencies they were so eager to exercise upon their “flight from domesticity.” It is by way of contrast to the torpidity of her hypnotized crewmen that Vaiti appears all the more wickedly powerful, wielding her dangerously feminine plantlike agency as a triumphant weapon over her piteously emasculated, entranced, and helpless male subjects.³⁶

Vaiti, then, is the only feminine figure in these texts who can really be considered a *match* for the uncanny agency of the strange plant. Responding to the plant’s multilayered deceptions with her own trickery, she always appears to be one step ahead, exploiting both the idiosyncrasies of the plant (its hypnotic properties as well as its bestial flowers) and the weaknesses of the men around her in order to advance her own vanity and greed. Her excessive beauty and identitarian uncategorizability reverberate in concert with the taxonomic unruliness and intense sensuality of the orchids. Rather than competing with or becoming powerless before the plants, as we saw in previous texts, Vaiti becomes a more intensified, more disruptive version of herself by virtue of the encounter. She becomes not only more beautiful and more seductive but also more of a witch, more of a pirate, more liminal, and more threatening as she manipulates the orchids’ power to her own gain. We might even say that she “outsmarts” the strange plant, in a way that both Wedderburn’s housekeeper and Mrs. Bittacy are unable to do.

VEGETAL (NEW) WOMANHOOD

In order to contextualize these findings around Vaiti’s transgressive, feminized, and altogether threatening vegetality within contemporaneous debates around the role of women and nature, one might look to the New Woman writing of the likes of Mona Caird. In *Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Caird’s feminine protagonist, Hadria Fullerton, looks with some disdain upon the passivity of vegetal “mother Nature” as she looks out the window at the English landscape:

It was the estimable and domestic qualities of Nature that presented themselves: Nature in her most maternal and uninspired mood—Mother earth submissive to the dictatorship of man, permitting herself to be torn, and wounded, and furrowed, and harrowed at his pleasure, yielding her substance and her life to sustain the produce of his choosing. . . . The calm,

sweet English landscape affected her at times with a sort of disgust. It was, perhaps, the same in kind as the far stronger sensation of disgust that she felt when she first saw Lady Engleton with her new-born child, full of pride and exultation.³⁷

Almost seeming to anticipate the later ecofeminist work of Vandava Shiva, who argues that “the ‘material’ resourcing of women and of nature are structurally interconnected in the capitalist patriarchal system,”³⁸ Hadria here identifies a parallel between the extraction of natural resources in the environmental sphere and the extraction of feminine bodies via gestational labor at the hand of the patriarchal order. Her “disgust” at the submissiveness of the earth is thus “the same in kind” as her disgust at Lady Engleton’s acceptance of her role as an agent for reproduction. Relatedly, Dowling notes that “the New Woman was recognized as a full participant in the fin de siècle revolt against nature” (450)—militating, it can be assumed, *against* this cultural perception of ladies being similar to pastoral nature in their fertility, beauty, and endless exploitability. Indeed, in 1913 suffragettes broke into Kew Gardens and attacked the delicate orchids growing under bell jars. Responding, perhaps, to Wollstonecraft’s claim in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that, owing to women’s restricted education and employment opportunities, women are transformed into something akin to “a sickly hot-house plant,”³⁹ the suffragettes’ attack on the orchids could well be seen as a rejection of women being seen as brainless and weak creatures who are cultivated by men who like hothouse plants for their beauty and nothing more. Kew’s director at the time claimed that the perpetrators had targeted plants that “for special reasons connected with culture must be grown under bell jars,”⁴⁰ thus confirming that the women specifically sabotaged those flowers that had, to return to Caird, yielded their “substance and life” to sustain the “produce of man’s choosing.”

How, then, does this contentious relationship between plants and New Womanhood play out with regard to the uniquely threatening femininity of the strange vegetable as explored in Wells, Blackwood, and Grimshaw? In the first two tales, at least, these feminine vegetal forces prove themselves to be anything but submissive; fighting against, vying for the attentions of, and even overpowering the masculine figures that they encounter, these strange plants firmly resist conventional framings of nature as passive. If the suffragettes strove to rupture their affiliation with vegetal submissiveness by destroying the hothouse plants to which they were compared, then we might suggest that the botanical gothic

takes a different route to achieve much the same end: namely, by endowing vegetation with a murderous sense of agency coded in the feminine. In all three tales, moreover, the encounter with the strange plant is conducive to some sort of improper affiliation or queer relation operating outside the confines of conspecific heteronormativity; in *Blackwood* and *Wells*, the sensual plant actively disrupts the normative gendered dynamics of a human partnership by luring away the masculine character and subsequently penetrating, feminizing, and absorbing him into the vegetal body or soul, while *Vaiti*'s orchids serve to further destabilize her already precarious gendered and ontological positioning. It could be argued, then, that the botanical gothic does the work of denaturalizing the link between femininity and vegetal submissiveness in a move that might, from the outset, be considered in line with New Woman ideals and potentially a proto-ecofeminist cadence.

Equally, however, one could maintain that both *Wells* and *Blackwood* advance a sort of link between monstrous femininity and monstrous vegetality that taps into the already-circulating fears around civilizational and evolutionary regression that were inextricably tied up in the figure of the New Woman. By obliquely embedding a specifically *feminine* sexuality within their monstrous, less-than-human, degradational, and excessive vegetal agents, these botanical gothic tales depict a dangerous feminine force that threatens to both consume weak-minded men and supplant the more traditional, well-intentioned women who struggle against it. Their feminine-coded monstrous plants thus explode established gender conventions by means of nonnormative affiliations, a degradational rejection of procreative mores via the dissolution of heterosexual partnership, and a profound refutation of Christian faith and morality—all criticisms that were also levied by moralists against the figure of the New Woman at the *fin de siècle*. From this perspective, the monstrous plant in *Wells* and *Blackwood* is subtly placed so as to become not only metonymic of ecophobic concerns around colonial ecologies but *also* a subtle nod toward, or even a caricaturing of, threatening “man-eating” feminine ideologies.

ORIENTALISM, EXOTICISM, AND THE NEW WOMAN

This brings us back, finally, to *Vaiti*. It would be facile to categorize *Vaiti* as a New Woman figure; her staunch independence, rejection of submissiveness, propensity for travel, and nonnormative gender positioning, to say nothing of Grimshaw's own New Woman sympathies, easily set up this

sort of ideological framing for her character. From this perspective, her affiliation with the strange orchids constitutes something of an alliance with the nonpassive forces of nature; she is affectively attuned with a nature that “bites back,” so to speak. This casts her as an adventuress who, much like the hypnotic plants, confounds categorization and refuses to be held down by—indeed, actively subverts—the “dictatorship of man.” By embracing the trickery and subversive agency of the strange plant, Vaiti distances herself in a parallel manner from the ultracultivated “hothouse plant” that bends, spineless, to the will of patriarchy.

Such a framing, however, risks disregarding the intricacies of Vaiti’s positionality as a racialized feminine subject in the colonial space. Much attention has been drawn to the overlap between the concerns of the New Woman and ideologies around racial “purity” and biological determinism, and Grimshaw is no exception; she peppers her texts with derogatory comments about nonwhite peoples as being in possession of both an aberrant sexuality and an inferior intellect. Schaffer notes that, despite the fact that the *fin de siècle* did see “real women who agitated for greater autonomy in everything from etiquette to employment, . . . when people wrote and spoke about the ‘New Woman’ in the 1890s, they were usually referring to a very different figure: the unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon ready to overturn the world.” While Vaiti is, as has already been established, a highly ambiguous figure that refuses easy assimilation into any clear-cut identitarian category, her depiction as a wild, half-evil witch arguably moves her closer to the “unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon” than the white, middle-class New Women who “walked without chaperones, carried their own latchkeys, bicycled . . . smoked cigarettes, cut their hair, or wore divided skirts”; in other words, the New Woman with whom Grimshaw herself identified.⁴¹ Perhaps, then, Grimshaw is not so much positioning Vaiti as a progressive pioneer of her own, white, New Woman ideology but as something else entirely. Laracy and Laracy note that, unlike her stories about Vaiti, the heroines in Grimshaw’s Melanesian novels are “all white, nearly all of mature years, and tend to be New Women. They represent her ideals.”⁴² This suggests that, for these critics, Vaiti resists the category of the New Woman altogether; she may be independent, mobile, and brave, but her racial positioning renders her unassimilable into the ideologies that Grimshaw contrives for herself. Perhaps, then, Grimshaw is indirectly steeling her British New Woman readers *against* Vaiti’s racialized feminine sensuality, her gender nonadherence, and her vegetal excesses—distancing her from imperialistic New Womanhood so as to ensure that such characters

as the “half-evil,” “lawless Sea-Queen” remain in the amorphous waters of the colonial periphery, unable to seriously contaminate the British feminine imaginary.

From this angle, Vaiti’s affinity with the plants takes on a specifically *foreign* feminine cadence. Keeping in mind that the strange plants in Wells and Blackwood invariably hail from exoticized spaces to penetrate both the domestic British home and the masculine British body, fear of the erotic excesses of the monstrous vegetal is not just coded in the anxieties pertaining to, or indeed a championing of, British New Woman ideologies around feminine independence and nontraditional sexuality. The fear of the excessive strange plant is equally traceable back to a fear of specifically *exoticized* deviant feminine sexuality. Edward Said famously argues in *Orientalism* that Western culture is created as a space of rationality and masculinity by way of a distorted construction of the East as a space of mystery, femininity, and excess. With this in mind, we might see in Vaiti a distinct trace of Said’s Orientalized feminine subject, imbued as she is with a “luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality.”⁴³ Tempered into a half-civilized state by her British blood, Vaiti is permitted to be the heroine of the tale—but, sexualized and exoticized from the outset by her “half-evil” Polynesian birth, she is denied adherence to British moral standards of femininity and New Womanhood. Vaiti’s alliance with the hypnotic plants—as well as the eroticized feminine vegetal forces evoked in the other two texts—might thus be considered a subterranean evocation of anxieties around, and a concurrent warning against, the nonnormative sexualized femininity of the colonial periphery. By welcoming exotic plant temptresses into the domestic British space, as do Wedderburn and Mr. Bittacy, these masculine characters make themselves vulnerable to their seductive, contaminative, and penetrative threats. By inviting the threshold figure of Vaiti into the British governmental site on Motua, the men of Grimshaw’s tale similarly become vulnerable to Vaiti’s vegetal-enhanced feminine sensuality and extorting capabilities, ending up penniless, stranded at sea, and completely at her mercy. In all these cases, the exoticized vegetal force is both destructive and extracting, blurring masculine penetrability and feminine seduction in a manner that recalls the nonbinarized sexual makeup of the plant body itself.

Grimshaw’s character of Vaiti, then, becomes both the ideal and the bogeyman for anxieties around feminine excess and strange plant-being as they come to coalesce in the genre of the botanical gothic. Dually alluring and threatening, she cuts an unruly figure of taxonomic and

sexual surplus that approximates her to the deadly excesses, queer sexual morphology, and foreign cadence of the plants themselves. As a sexualized, Orientalized femme fatale who quite literally embodies the transgressive agency of the strange plants, she can be approximated to Wedderburn's strange orchid and Blackwood's mystical forest: alluring, beautiful, and other, literally and figuratively hypnotizing the male subjects around her, and exposing the limits of binaristic thinking that posits domestic in opposition to foreign, human or animal in opposition to vegetal, female in opposition to male. She thus becomes a stand-in for the simultaneously local and global threat of the exotic, sensual, and dangerous strange plant: an insidiously feminine, yet disconcertingly penetrative, vegetal force that is capable of wreaking havoc on established social and gendered structures upon introduction, invited or uninvited, into the domestic order. Far from being a genre concerned solely, or even mostly, with performances of white masculinity and British conquest over the strange ecologies of the colonial space, the botanical gothic reveals itself to be saturated in the threats that are posed to such masculinities and imperial impulses by way of the disruptive entanglements of femininity, queerness, race, and vegetality. The character of Vaiti thus functions as the epitome of this foreign, queer, and excessively sexual vegetal (new) womanhood that is both playfully caricatured and, more covertly, deeply feared within the imaginary of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras.

NOTES

1. Chase et al., "Murderous Plants," 329.
2. See Chang, *Novel Cultivations*; and Price, "Vegetable Monsters."
3. Grimshaw, "The Tale of the Scarlet Butterflies," 586. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
4. Keetley, "Introduction," 8.
5. Keetley, "Introduction," 16.
6. Meeker and Szabari, "From the Century of the Pods," 43.
7. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 56.
8. Keetley, "Introduction," 7–8.
9. See Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*; Miller, "Lives of the Monstrous Plants"; and Prior, *Carnivorous Plants*.
10. Prior, *Carnivorous Plants*, 7.
11. Swinburne, "The Sundew," line 2.

12. Smith, "Une Fleur du Mal?" 144.
13. Allen, "Queer Flowers," 177, 182.
14. Allen, "Queer Flowers," 178.
15. Schaffer, "Nothing But Foolscap and Ink," 47.
16. Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman," 441, 439. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
17. Pykett, foreword, xii.
18. Beekman, introduction, xv.
19. Wells, "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid," 23. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
20. Voskuil, "Victorian Orchids," 26.
21. Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, xx.
22. Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, 109.
23. Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum," 88. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
24. Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, 254.
25. Price, "The Subtle Art," 26.
26. In *Vegetal Sex*, Stella Sandford has argued that the very language of a masculine/feminine binary in plant sexual morphology is inherently unstable. Plants, she explains, have a sexual form that is modular and gradational, and it is therefore problematic to assign an individual plant such labels as male, female, or hermaphrodite/cosexual. Engaging with the work of David G. Lloyd, she notes that "the identification of any plant or flower (or any 'morph') as 'male,' 'female' or 'cosexual' is not a static identification of the innate sexual being or nature of any given individual or flower but a snapshot within a dynamic population, especially where—as is common—the different sexual systems and genders shade into each other." Sandford, *Vegetal Sex*, 126.
27. Chen, *Animacies*, 104.
28. On the strange animacy and emergent vitalism of the plant in the nineteenth century, see Meeker and Szabari, *Radical Botany*.
29. I do not intend to suggest, of course, that these anxieties were harbored by Wells himself; the author was, after all, a strong supporter of the New Woman figure and exhibited no opposition to cultivating unconventional relationships in his own private life. Given that this is a somewhat early story in his oeuvre, however, we might see in his representation of the housekeeper's projections an attempt to map out or ventriloquize contemporary concerns surrounding the desiring, designing feminine actant—thereby allowing Wells, as an early-

career writer, to harness such sociocultural anxieties for commercial ends.

30. Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 171.
31. Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 177.
32. Blackwood, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," 27. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
33. Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum," 85.
34. Laracy and Laracy, "Beatrice Grimshaw," 156.
35. Laracy and Laracy, "Beatrice Grimshaw," 166.
36. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who brought these texts to my attention as well as their fascinating crossover with my own analysis of Grimshaw.
37. Caird, *Daughters of Danaus*, 172–73.
38. Quoted in Salleh, foreword, xi.
39. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 286.
40. Quoted in Mackay, "Fire and Broken Petals."
41. Schaffer, "Nothing But Foolscap and Ink," 39.
42. Laracy and Laracy, "Beatrice Grimshaw," 167.
43. Said, *Orientalism*, 187.

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