

INTRODUCTION

A Botanical Mythology

THE EARTH WOBBLER UNDERFOOT, the topsoil is broken and the tip of a small, gleaming sword pierces the surface. Between the circle of feet, the sword rises up, revealing a skeleton arm, then a whole skeletal body. The leader of the men looks astonished, but a few seconds later, the same thing happens—a wobble of earth and a skeletal warrior emerges. A second later, another emerges, then another, and another, until a whole army of skeletons has sprung up. The skeleton army attacks the gathered men and an epic battle is waged until the men finally win by turning the skeletons on each other.

This is the memorable skeleton army scene from the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts*, a classic Hollywood movie based upon the mythological poem *The Argonautica*, written by Apollonius in third-century-BC Rhodes.¹ The cinematic version of Jason and the Argonauts utterly transfixed me as a child, almost twenty-five years after its release. Like the hero Jason, my eight-year-old self couldn't contain his amazement on seeing the skeleton army erupt from beneath the earth. In the few minutes that it took for that one scene to play out, the imaginative and inspirational nature of myth had taken hold of me. The idea of the skeleton men springing from the teeth of the Hydra that were sown in the earth by King Aeëtes (who was desperate to get his hands on the golden fleece) was almost hypnotic in its power. This was my introduction to the powerful world of myth.

In English-speaking nations, our understanding of this world is inextricably linked to ancient Greece. The term myth stems from *mythos*, the Greek for *word*. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle was the first to employ *mythos* in the sense of plot or “the organization of words and actions of a drama into a sequence of narrative components.”² This is the idea of myth as “story.” Myth as story is still the sense that prevails today. In his seminal work, *Mythography*, William Doty charts the linguistic development of myth and mythology:

Mythos—“word” or “story”—could be combined with an equivalent Greek noun for “word,” namely *logos* (related to the verb *legein*, “to speak”). The result: *mythologia* (English: *mythology*), literally “words

concerning words.” However, historically, apart from its place in mythology, *logos* gained the sense of referring to words comprising doctrine or theory, as opposed to *mythos* for words having an ornamental or fictional, narrative function.³

When Greek rational thought, from Plato onward, began to contrast rationality (*logos*) with the mythological (*mythos*) thinking of Homer and other epic storytellers, myth fell down on the side of the ornamental and the fictional.⁴ Likewise, the distinction between myth and history saw myth fall on the side of the purely imaginative. Such distinctions surface in the work of scholars of myth. For the anthropologist E. B. Tylor, myths were primitive explanations of the world at odds with modern science—primitive ideas that were to be abandoned in favor of logic and scientific method.⁵ In cultures such as ours, where science is the dominant form of knowledge, such a view of myth is well established. For Tylor, as for many others, the word *myth* is synonymous with *untrue*.

We are not bound to viewing myths as entertaining but ultimately misguided interpretations of the world. Scholars have questioned the opposition between rationality and mythology, and the understanding of myth as *untrue*. William Doty acknowledges the *fictional* or narrative character of myth, but emphasizes the important social role of myth, “that of modelling possible personal roles and concepts of the self.”⁶ A positive view of myth is that it is fundamental to cultures, and has a significant role in shaping religious beliefs, philosophies and worldviews. In her short history of myth, Karen Armstrong argues that myth is not an inferior mode of thought to our cherished logic and reason, but is:

a game that transfigures our fragmented, tragic world, and helps us to glimpse new possibilities by asking “what if?”—a question which has provoked some of our most important discoveries in philosophy, science and technology.⁷

For Armstrong, the source of mythology is the imagination, and the role of myth is to extend the scope of human beings, using stories to force us beyond our own experience, to create a sense of belonging and to show us how to behave in the world. Myths then are “stories about something significant.”⁸

Such a view of myth draws heavily on mythographers such as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. Both have argued that myth has played a central role in the development of human society and culture, the description and

presentation of human knowledge, the construction of relationships, and ultimately our identity as human beings.⁹

It wouldn't be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.¹⁰

All this was expertly and succinctly summarized by Claude Levi-Strauss, in his seminal study of mythology—"With myth," he wrote, "everything becomes possible."¹¹

A HUMAN-CENTERED WORLD

As someone with an interest in the perspectives of nonhuman beings, my own take on mythology is that many myths, and their accompanying scholarly interpretations, are human centered. Regardless of the theoretical interpretation of what myth *is*, from William Robertson-Smith's view of myth as ritual, to Kenneth Burke's understanding of myth as metaphysics, many myths are framed and presented so that the human heroics (or at least gods in human form) are at the center of the narrative. A number of key figures in the history of mythography, including Campbell, Otto Rank, and Lord Raglan, have explicitly foregrounded the human hero as the principal subject of mythology. Myths such as the fall of Phaethon, Odysseus's journey home after the fall of Troy, and the account of the enlightenment of the Buddha are all treated as myths of the human hero.

The power of these human hero stories has partly enabled these myths to persist into the modern day. Human hero myths fascinate humankind and they permeate and penetrate all aspects of human life and society. This influence extends into some of the most powerful contemporary cultural forces, advertising and mass media.¹² Where I was entranced by Jason and the Golden Fleece, young children of the past decade have been introduced to the human-hero mythology through hugely popular children's literature and cinema, such as *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*. The human hero on a voyage of self-discovery is also the basis of the modern novel (have you read *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Great Expectations*?), of a large proportion of the output of Hollywood movie studios (remember *Casablanca*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Thelma and Louise*, or *The Life*

Aquatic?) the resurgent television drama (just watch *Breaking Bad*) and (sort of) popular music (listen to Björk, Nick Cave, Daedalus).

It would not be too much an exaggeration to say that the myth of the human hero is our primary narrative. In such myths, the dynamic human beings are placed front and center in their quests, often independent of nature and elevated above it. The other elements of the natural world, when they appear, are secondary to the human; they are largely the backdrop against which the human narrative takes place. The Ionian Sea is the setting for Odysseus's journey to Ogygia, the Bodhi tree is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, and the sun is the backdrop for Phaethon's deadly fall. The natural world is there, but it is eclipsed by the human (largely male) hero. This observation is in line with eco-feminist accounts of human culture, in which the human reason, connected with the male, is valued over a nonreasoning nature, connected strongly with the female.¹³

Myths in which humans are first and foremost have undoubtedly influenced our relationship with the natural world. We live in a world that has been made to serve humanity at every turn, a world in which our primary interaction with nature is to treat it as a set of resources, a backdrop, an instrument for the satisfaction of human desires. The human-centered view of mythology neatly mirrors, and no doubt informs such a human-centered, or anthropocentric, world. The anthropocentric worldview found in hero mythology underpins a situation in which human beings and their welfare are the sole focus of modern society and are regarded as the primary source of value in the world.

A worldview in which everything revolves around human wants and desires ultimately rests on the idea that we should only show moral concern for human beings. Humans alone possess the "advanced" characteristics deemed worthy of respect, such as intelligence, language, and reason. In this view, the natural world is not a focus of ethical behaviors. Instead, it is relegated to a footnote, cast as a passive collection of resources for us to use as we wish in the ongoing drama of human society. Depicted as "lacking" these human attributes, animals sit significantly lower in a hierarchy of nature. Plants are at the bottom of the hierarchy; passive, insensitive, and unthinking.

The problem with this anthropocentrism, as many leading environmental thinkers have pointed out for decades, is that it lurks behind our society's rampant disregard for nature and the widespread and ongoing degradation of natural ecosystems.¹⁴ Human society is obsessed with the mythology of the heroic, superior human hero that uses the natural world as his or her dramatic backdrop. A thousand car advertisements will testify to the fact that in our

understanding of both mythology and modern life, the human hero is active and dynamic, the rest of the natural world is backgrounded and largely passive, available for use as we heroic, “superior” humans see fit. Not only is this a planet now at risk of ecological collapse, it is a duller, less vibrant world in which the presence, abilities, and needs of other species are obscured behind a cloud of human exceptionalism.

PLANTS IN THE ACTIVE VOICE

For the great environmental thinker Val Plumwood, countering this anthropocentric position requires us to undertake the immense challenge of “(re)situating humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms.”¹⁵ A significant contribution to this challenge requires a leveling of the playing field between humans and nonhumans so that human beings are not the only heroes in the mythology that underpins contemporary culture. Redressing this balance is itself a mammoth task. It requires a radical change in the way in which humans understand nature, remaking nature in the “active voice”—that is, recognizing and theorizing nature and her species as volitional, purposeful, and mindful.¹⁶ To do so, other natural species need to be the focus of dynamic and heroic stories. As the basis of the natural world, we need plants in particular to step out of the shadows of human instrumentalism. Plants urgently need to become the focus of our modern myths.

There are many accounts of plants that present them primarily as instruments or objects for human use or pleasure. Each year, hundreds of books are written about plants that present their stories almost entirely from the human perspective—whole volumes dedicated to the horticultural beauties, delectable garden delicacies, or plants as the objects of philosophical musings.¹⁷ When plants in mythology are written about, those plants are often presented as symbols for human characteristics, or constituents of human dramas.¹⁸ As chapter 1 explores, such a view of plants is ingrained in the European philosophical and religious heritage.

In order for nonhuman species to become heroes rather than supporting acts, we require a culture of stories that allows plants, from the garden anemone to the majestic kauri tree, to impress their mindful, active, unique natures upon our human imagination. We need a body of narratives in which the plant in question is presented as much as possible as an agent—an “independent centre of value, and an originator of projects that demand my respect.”¹⁹ We need to tear ourselves away from looking longingly at our own human reflections

(like Narcissus) and pay proper heed to the plants that make possible our life on this Earth.

Fortunately, to build up such a body of stories we need not start from scratch; we need not begin penning a new *Odyssey* in which the hero is an animal or plant rather than a human being. In the world's mythological canon, although mythography, and common understanding, has privileged the human, there are in fact a multitude of stories and tales in which the human hero and human drama is not the be all and end all.

In the course of writing my first book, *Plants as Persons*, I became aware of a myriad of myths and stories that presented the most unlikely of subjects—plants—as more than just the silent servants of humanity. In the texts and traditions of cultures from all over the world, I stumbled across myths that demonstrate, explore, and present plants (and through them the wider natural world) as sensitive, communicative, and intelligent. This is a far cry from the numerous presentations of plants in mythology as predominantly symbols of human truths.²⁰

AGAINST ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The philosopher Michael Marder has asserted that using human terms and concepts, such as intelligence and sensitivity, to describe plants is a form of anthropomorphism.²¹ Marder writes:

Taken together, the projections of the human onto the plant and of the plant onto the world are tantamount to a metaphysical transposition of the human onto nature as such, the transposition, where the domesticated and homologous fragments of vegetal life are used as the means in the narcissistic self-recognition of the human in the environment. (Let us recall, in this context, that the concept of narcissism is, itself, derived from the name of a mythical character—Narcissus—that was bestowed upon a flower, thereby completing the enchanted circle of the anthropomorphization of plants and the vegetalization of the world.)²²

Marder's accusations of anthropomorphic self-projection are a familiar attempt at "delegitimizing any new or old animating sensibility."²³ The concept of anthropomorphism is itself ambiguous, bearing both the concepts of attributing to nonhumans characteristics that humans have, and attributing to nonhumans characteristics *only* humans have. The first sense assumes that there

is no overlap between the characteristics of humans and nonhumans and the second sense is simply question begging.²⁴ Both ignore the continuities between human and nonhuman life and rest upon an understanding of human and plant natures as hyperseparated.

This charge of anthropomorphism is often thrown around when the continuities of human and more-than-human lives are highlighted, and as Plumwood astutely points out:

That has become its major function now, to bully people out of “thinking differently.” It is such a highly abused concept, one often used carelessly and uncritically to allow us to avoid the hard work of scrutinising or revealing our assumptions, that there is a good case for dropping the term completely.²⁵

In addition to its carelessness, Marder’s view also conveniently ignores those cultures that have constructed ethical relationships of care and respect for plants from acknowledging continuities between the human and the more-than-human worlds. For example, in many Indigenous cultures, relationships between humans and more-than-humans rest upon a recognition of the continuities between human, animal, and plant life (explored in chapter 1) and this recognition of similarities and continuities is often expressed in human terms (what other terms do we have?).

The language of sentience and intelligence can be viewed, not as a self-projection, but, to adapt Voloshinov’s famous line, as a *bridge* between two *types* of being, from human to the plant that is so obviously different in its outer and inner form.²⁶ This language is a form of empathy, employed in the service of building relationships of care and kinship. In essence it provides the *sameness* required for flourishing relationships in the face of obvious morphological difference.²⁷ As chapter 1 will explore, a language of sameness and continuity is also the natural expression of kinship relationships in which the “mutuality of being”²⁸ is the primary, defining, characteristic.

THE IMAGINATION OF PLANTS

The imaginative power of myth allows us to move beyond our mundane experience and guides us to a live a more fulfilling, richer life. Myths open up the possibility of new relationships, and new ways of living. They provide us with “aspirations toward becoming something other than what we are” and “ways as to imagining new possibilities as to who we are.”²⁹ The *Imagination of Plants* is a collection of the rich botanical mythology that aims to use myths to push

beyond the boundaries of our ordinary experience of plants, and to challenge the way in which we humans understand and relate to the plant kingdom and the wider natural world. This in turn is a challenge to human identity, most particularly our innate sense of superiority.

Like much of this work, this approach also takes direct inspiration from Val Plumwood, who championed a project of reanimating the world, and with it situating human beings as members of the ecological community.³⁰ In this vital eco-political quest to reanimate the world, Val recognized that the power of story is key:

We are in desperate need of stories that create much greater transparency of these [ecological] relationships in our day-to-day lives. We must once again become a culture of stories—stories that link our lives with the Great Life which some call Gaia, but all should call by names of their own devising. This is the real meaning of ecological literacy, to have stories that speak of the culture/nature boundary and of where the two cultures meet. Instead we have one discourse about the domain of culture (us) and another discourse, formulated in an especially detached and distant way, about the domain of nature (them). Our conviction that “we” live in culture and “they” live in nature is so strong that all that is left is a passionate story about consciousness, history and freedom—about us—and another story about fiercely uninvolved causation and clockwork—a story about them.³¹

Myths are an obvious source for stories about the interactions between humans and the mindful plant life we live among and depend upon. The *Imagination of Plants* discusses and presents extended mythological excerpts (what can also be called analecta, from the Greek *analektos*—gathered together) about plants in which plants are often active subjects in the stories in question. These excerpts are themselves from a subset of the works referred to in each chapter commentary, selected for their diversity and quality. The commentary itself critiques and finds common threads between these stories, with a view to redressing the bias of the human hero and the human separation from nature.

This, unashamedly, is a work of comparative mythology and is in line with what Doty terms “comparative thematic elucidation,” to describe a “type of freely associative study that consists of tracking motifs and pattern similarities no matter where they originally occur.”³² Such cross-cultural comparative analyses “can be misleading if they are considered as providing genetic explanations” but can be of great value when “they are used to establish a projective

matrix of possible realizations of a particular theme” and in particular what is unique about each.³³

The Imagination of Plants should be thought of as an attempt to demonstrate the existence of a series of ideas, motifs, and themes in myths concerning plants. The excerpted selections are an attempt to exemplify, rather than define or verify.³⁴ As such, I have no interest in providing “genetic” explanations of these myths or of reading back into these texts any presumed significance for the cultures at hand. Moreover, this work is not an unthinking collation of different accounts, with no regard to the historical and cultural context, in the manner of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. The historical and cultural context is considered, particularly that of the texts themselves, but this is not placed front and center (see Guide to the Texts for this material). The principal aim of this work is to reposition the human relationship with the plant kingdom and to foreground plants as much as possible. It looks to imagination and ideas inherent within mythology as the source inspiration for this endeavor.

This cross-cultural comparative analysis draws on a collection of myths from dozens of different cultures, from Aboriginal Australia to Zoroastrian Persia. It uses what can be thought of as classical mythological sources for ancient Greece such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, as well as other influential epics and the stories they contain, such as *Gilgamesh* (Mesopotamia), *The Kalevala* (Finland), *The Mahābhārata* (India), and the *Kojiki* (Japan).

However, selections are also included from texts that may be thought of as more religious in nature. I have included excerpts from these texts as they are important sources for stories that concern our relationship with the botanical world. Texts used include the Hebrew Bible, the Zoroastrian *Bundahisn*, and the Indian texts *Rig Veda*, *Padma Purana*, and a number of the *Upaniṣads*. Another important source for botanical myths are mytho-historical texts such as the *Nihongi* of Japan, and the *Popol Vuh* of the Maya. Contemporary collections of oral stories are also important sources of myths from Indigenous cultures, including the Acoma of New Mexico, Māori of Aotearoa, and Aboriginal Australia. For the discussion of plant legends in chapter 4, nonmythological texts such as Pliny’s *Natural History* and the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* have been particularly useful.

In the seven years that this manuscript has been in development, my one constant intent has been to make this material as accessible as possible to the general reader. The selections provided are often, therefore, from translations of works already in the public domain, both to allow lengthy inclusions and to

enable the reader to freely access the full text for further reference. Although providing non-English language texts in translation may result in the loss of some of the linguistic and poetic nuances, “the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation.”³⁵ Even so, many of the excerpts from classical Greek and Latin texts are provided from translations that have strived to literally interpret the original text, e.g., Miller’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. While more poetic or modern translations are available, a literal translation provides perhaps the best foundation for our task of understanding the portrayal of plant life in myth.

In order to help the reader to reflect, meditate, and muse upon their own relationship with the plant kingdom, the excerpts of botanical mythology from this wide range of texts have been curated into six thematic chapters—Roots, Gods, Metamorphosis, Legend, Sentience, and Violence. These six chapters, and the multiplicity of myths that they contain, are underpinned by two major themes, kinship and sentience. These themes appear again and again when examining the stories of plants across dozens of different cultures and crosscut the six thematic chapters in multiple instances.

The themes of kinship and sentience (themselves inseparable) are predominant in the botanical mythology from across the world and many of the myths presented feature both. The creation stories which are the subject of chapter 1, such as the Māori stories of Tāne and Rātā, tell of human-plant kinship through shared origins, plant sentience (chapter 5), and the fact that plants are capable of being subject to violent actions from human beings (chapter 6). Many of the creation myths from across the world contain descriptions of the sacred plant species that are featured in chapter 2.

I hope that readers will derive inspiration from the myths discussed and presented; inspiration for both questioning and reimagining their own relationship with the plant kingdom. While the introductions to each chapter will provide some context, critique, and guidance, the theorizing has been kept to a minimum. I have tried to present the myths simply as stories about plants—sometimes literal, sometimes symbolic, often allegorical. The structure of this work has also been designed to give readers the chance to read and reread the botanical myths for themselves. The myths are discussed under each theme and the majority of the myths discussed (but not all) are also presented as excerpts.

Only by reading the myths first hand will the reader be able to form their own opinions of these portrayals of plant life. The textual excerpts then are fundamental to understanding the thematic presentation and critical discussion of these botanical myths. The Guide to the Texts is included at the end of the

book for those who wish for more detail about the sources. A large number of the excerpts are also accompanied by striking images of botanical or religious art, which feature scenes from the botanical myths and associated characters, such as gods, animals or the plants in question. Taken together, the hope is that these beautiful pieces of literature and art will inspire each reader to take their own approach to the myths at hand and to use them to reflect on their understanding of the plants that form part of their own lives.

I offer this material for inspiration in the spirit of Val Plumwood, who, more than a decade ago, urged her readers to

free up your mind, and make your own contributions to the project of disrupting reductionism and mechanism. Help us re-imagine the world in richer terms that will allow us to find ourselves in dialogue with and limited by other species' needs, other kinds of minds. I'm not going to try to tell you how to do it. There are many ways to do it. But I hope I have convinced you that this is not a dilettante project. The struggle to think differently, to remake our reductionist culture, is a basic survival project in our present context. I hope you will join it.³⁶