

## BAD PLANTS

MALAS HIERBAS

MAUVAISES HERBES

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**Abstract:** “Bad plants” represent the seemingly unexpected and startling forms of plant power overlooked by many modern, industrialized societies that treat vegetal beings as mere resources instead of animate, world-shaping forces. Since science fiction and fairy tales often explore more openly animistic visions of non-human life, such texts provide ample possibilities for reconsideration by critical plant studies of our human-plant relations both cultural and ecological. For example, both Jack McDevitt’s 2001 science fiction novel, *Deepsix*, and Ludwig Tieck’s 1799 fairy tale, “Faithful Eckart and Tannhäuser”, feature “bad plants” that bring human beings violently back into the plant cycles they assume they have left behind with advanced culture and/or technology. In McDevitt’s case, we find sexualized predatory flowers on an alien planet, and in Tieck’s, flower-filled caves containing Venus herself living deep in the forested mountain. The wildly sexual blossoms lure human beings back into their botanical cycles, thereby expressing and, simultaneously, hiding our ecological embeddedness that is actually quite mundane. The lurid visions of “bad plants” contain potentially profound, if convo-

luted, ecological truths about our full dependence on, and ongoing immersion within, the activities of the domineering green photosynthesizers.

**Keywords:** Critical plant studies; Science fiction, Fairy tales; Forests, Brothers Grimm; Ludwig Tieck; Anthropocene; Alien plants

**Resumen:** Las “malas hierbas” representan las formas aparentemente inesperadas y sorprendentes del poder de las plantas que muchas sociedades modernas e industrializadas pasan por alto al tratar a los seres vegetales como simples recursos en lugar de fuerzas animadas que dan forma al mundo. Dado que la ciencia ficción y los cuentos de hadas a menudo exploran visiones más abiertamente animistas de la vida no humana, estos textos ofrecen amplias posibilidades para que los estudios críticos sobre plantas reconsideren las relaciones, tanto culturales como ecológicas, entre humanos y plantas. Por ejemplo, tanto la novela de ciencia ficción del 2001 de Jack McDevitt, *Deepsix*, como el cuento de hadas de 1799 de Ludwig Tieck, “Faithful Eckart and Tannhäuser”, presentan “malas hierbas” que devuelven violentamente a los seres humanos a los ciclos vegetales que creen haber dejado atrás con una cultura y/o tecnología avanzada. En el caso de McDevitt, encontramos flores depredadoras sexualizadas en un planeta alienígena, y en el de Tieck, cuevas llenas de flores que contienen a la mismísima Venus viviendo en las profundidades de la montaña boscosa. Las flores, salvajemente sexuales, atraen a los seres humanos hacia sus ciclos botánicos, expresando y, al mismo tiempo, ocultando nuestra vinculación ecológica, que en realidad es bastante mundana. Las escabrosas visiones de las “malas hierbas” encierran verdades ecológicas potencialmente profundas, aunque enrevesadas, sobre nuestra total dependencia y continua inmersión en las actividades de los dominantes fotosintetizadores verdes.

**Palabras clave:** estudios críticos de plantas; ciencia ficción, cuentos de hadas; bosques, Hermanos Grimm; Ludwig Tieck; Antropoceno; plantas alienígenas

**Résumé:** Les « mauvaises herbes » mettent en lumière le pouvoir inattendu et surprenant des plantes, bien souvent négligées dans nos sociétés industrielles qui traitent les végétaux comme de simples ressources et non comme des êtres capables de transformer notre monde. La science-fiction et les contes de fées, grâce à leur vision plus animiste de sujets non-humains, présentent une base d'étude idéale nous permettant de reconsidérer les relations culturelles et écologiques entre les plantes et les hommes, suivant une approche critique du monde végétal. Citons par exemple le roman de

science-fiction de Jack McDevitt, *Deepsix* (2001), ou le conte de fées de Ludwig Tieck, « Faithful Eckart and Tannhäuser » (1799), qui introduisent le lecteur à ces « mauvaises herbes » dont la force ramène les hommes dans un cycle de renouveau de la vie végétale, ce qu'ils pensaient impossible dû aux avancées culturelles ou technologiques de leurs sociétés. Pour McDevitt, ces « mauvaises herbes » se présentent sous la forme de fleurs prédatrices sur une planète extraterrestre; quant à Tieck, des cavernes remplies de fleurs protègent Vénus, au fin fond de montagnes boisées. Les bourgeons, ouvertement sexualisés, attirent les hommes alors forcés de retourner d at least in part, in the forest ans un cycle botanique, démontrant les rapports à la fois usuels et cachés entre ces deux mondes. Ces interprétations remarquables de « mauvaises herbes » contiennent de profondes, et parfois troublantes, vérités écologiques sur notre immersion et dépendance envers l'univers photosynthétique qui nous entoure.

**Mots clés:** Études critiques végétales; Science-fiction; Contes de fées; Forêts; Frères Grimm; Ludwig Tieck; Anthropocène; Plantes extraterrestres

## 1. Introduction: Bad Plants

In their introduction to *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vision*, editors Katherine E. Bishop, David Higgins and Jerry Määttä write that “the way we think about vegetation is not simply central to the way we think about ourselves or even humanity; the way we think about vegetation may also be key to our continued existence” (4). After all, plants provide our food, the food for the other animals that we eat, and many important substances and materials like caffeine, medicines, dyes, wood, hemp, and cotton. They are also the original ingredients of most fossil fuels. Our cultures take the shape of our relationships to plants, whether industrialized farmers or forest-dwellers. Furthermore, vegetation impacts and shapes most of the local climates and lands occupied by humans, impacting water flow, cooling the air, and holding soil in place. Not to be understated is another vegetal contribution to the Earth’s current ecosystems: plants, algae, and phytoplankton also produce oxygen that we need for respiration<sup>1</sup>. Breathing remains relevant even in the Anthropocene’s anthropocentric revelry in human technological prowess that appears to put us “outside” of the rest of the world’s living systems fueled by plants. As the editors of *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira, write, “plants are perhaps the most fundamental form of life, providing sustenance, and thus enabling the existence of all

1 Regarding the fact that phytoplankton produce half of the atmosphere’s oxygen, see Gavin MacRae.

animals, including us humans” (VII). Similarly, the plant philosopher Emanuele Coccia notes that “for the vast majority of organisms, the world is the product of plant life, the product of the colonization of the planet by plants, since time immemorial” (8-9). We exist in a blooming plant-based world of green life.

Vegetal forces are, however, taking on new forms in the Anthropocene’s fossil-fueled, radical, and rapid alterations to ecological systems<sup>2</sup>. In the wake of the massive changes wrought by the unceasing extractive practices of colonization, industrialization, and the resulting climate change, many plants are endangered, nearing extinction, or already gone<sup>3</sup>. Some plant species, especially agriculturally relevant variants, thrive as humans cultivate them and alter their forms and relations with collaborative species such as the essential fungal-vegetal interactions that are at least partially replaced by providing petroleum-based fertilizers<sup>4</sup>. Still other botanical species are rapidly evolving new forms in response to human actions and so becoming “resistant”, “invasive”, or “power weeds”<sup>5</sup>. These biological and cultural changes have been transforming the powerful living vegetal beings in their manifold green variations across the planet as well as the diverse cultural and literary representations of them. My question in this essay relates to how plants as powerful forces (not vegetal beings as seemingly passive backdrop) are portrayed in the Anthropocene, particularly in representative science fiction and fairy tales from English and German-language traditions. In that these two genres more frequently portray the nonhuman as animate than do most literary forms, they provide exemplary possibilities for studying textual depictions of animated vegetal power. As Bruno Latour writes of the need for rethinking animism, “one of the main puzzles of Western History is not that ‘there are people who still believe in animism’, but the rather naïve belief that many have still in a de-animated world of mere stuff” (7). When botanical beings appear actively animate, however, they are often portrayed as what I ironically term “bad plants”: whether that be as predatory, sexualized, fast-growing and uncontrollable bodies, or as beings exemplifying ancient powers of threatening “nature”.

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2 While definitions and delineations of the Anthropocene as a geological era continue to proliferate and debates rage about its actual scope, I follow the coiners of the term, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 who posit the industrial revolution and development of the steam engine as its beginning; see also Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill. For ecocritical and cultural discussions of the debate regarding the beginning point of the Anthropocene, see Dipesh Chakrabarty; Timothy Clark; Gabriele Dürbeck, Caroline Schaumann, and Heather I. Sullivan; Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and François Gemenne; Rob Nixon; and Timothy Morton.

3 Regarding the percentages of endangered plants and the current extinction rate of plants in the Anthropocene in North America and in Germany, see Emily Grebenstein and Josef H. Reichholf.

4 For information on the fungi-plant relations under the ground, see Merlin Sheldrake’s 2020, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make our Worlds, Change our Minds & Shape our Futures*, and Suzanne Simard’s 2021, *Finding the Mother Tree*.

5 On “weeds”, see Richard Mabey’s discussion of the label in *Weeds*; on “Superweeds”, see H. Claire Brown’s discussion in *The New York Times Magazine*.

“Bad plants” readily evince horror, as Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga make clear in their 2016 volume, *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous in Fiction and Film*. Keetley and Tenga explain that the horror of plants results from the fact that “plants embody an absolute alterity” (6) fueled by their menacingly “wild, purposeless growth” (13), even as they are often portrayed as mere passive backdrop to human activities. With this essay in critical plant-studies, I present wild forms of plant power that place human beings into —instead of outside and in control of— botanical life cycles. Critical plant studies broadly reconsider the plethora of vegetal imaginings; the 2022 German volume edited by Urte Stobbe, Anke Kramer, and Berbeli Wanning, *Literatures and Cultures of the Vegetable: Plant Studies — Cultural Research of Plants*, for example, states that such approaches “no longer encounter plants with the attitude that goes back to Aristoteles, indicating that they [plants] stand in the hierarchy *under* human beings and animals, and are readily available for the use of humans” (19-20)<sup>6</sup>. Like most critical plant studies scholars, I join the justifiably celebratory acknowledgments of the enormously beneficial yet often overlooked or barely recognized impacts of botanical life. While building on this enthusiastic vegetal emphasis as my basis, I nevertheless shift the focus to “bad plants” in that green life functions according to its own power and its own living requirements which can run contrary to human wishes. Indeed, our vegetal enablers should not be taken lightly, nor should they be seen as merely magnanimous beings existing solely for our benefit or manipulations. Plant life, the vast green force spread across the Earth enabling most large living creatures, has power beyond our individual human ken with its creation of the greatest amount of biomass, its eons-long contributions to the evolution of so many other species who depend on vegetal matter for their existence, its formation of entire regions (like forests, heath, grasslands, ocean forests, peat swamps, etc.), and its fueling of human cultural expansion with agriculture, wood, and the use of fossil fuels. Particularly relevant examples for exploring portrayals of vegetal power in the Anthropocene are the many dark and magical forests of fairy tales, the seductive goddesses in fields of flowers, and the wildly predatory possibilities of alien plants in science fiction. Such genres with their speculations or possible folk heritages often allow for the most realistic, ecologically speaking, inclusion of human beings *within* plant systems. Indeed, understandings of monstrous or mystical plants *re-claiming* humans in their living systems and thus overriding modernity’s technological and colonial belief in our existence outside of the mere vegetal realm (sometimes

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6 The title in the original German is *Literaturen und Kulturen des Vegetabilen: Plant Studies — Kulturwissenschaftliche Pflanzenforschung*; all translations from this volume are mine. Original: “Sie begegnen Pflanzen nicht länger mit der auf Aristoteles zurückgehenden Haltung, dass sie in der Hierarchie unter den Menschen und den Tieren stehen und zum Nutzen des Menschen frei verfügbar sind” (Stobbe, Kramer and Wanning 19-20).

called “nature”) are often troublingly relegated to seemingly “trivial” categories of narratives or to “other” cultures. In fact, the seemingly “bad” aspects of “bad plants” may well derive more from misunderstandings of plant-human relations typical to many industrial cultures than from the green beings themselves. With “bad”, I thus mean to emphasize the problematic sense that the vegetal is passive or controllable which means that when plant power appears it often takes on monstrous forms.

## 2. McDevitt’s Alien Plants in *Deepsix*

In Jack McDevitt’s space novel, *Deepsix* (2001), large, heavily sexualized, and predatory alien plants attempt to devour the protagonist Priscilla Hutchins, called Hutch<sup>7</sup>. In order to demonstrate the broader relevance of this passage for our questions about plant power, I briefly summarize its scene of vegetal revelry when “bad plants” attempt to overcome a human being. As a well-known space pilot, Hutch is shepherding some wealthy tourists to the surface of Maleiva III for a quick visit before the planet is swallowed by a rogue gas giant. This trip allows them a chance to experience the leftover cultural remnants from a seemingly extinct sentient species, the native fauna and, most interestingly, the planet’s flora, before it is all destroyed. Of course, the visit inevitably goes awry as gravitational forces cause surprise floods to strand them on the shifting, collapsing world. As they wander on foot across the dangerous surface having various adventures while seeking a site where they can be rescued, Hutch encounters “a field of magnificent purple blossoms” resembling “giant orchids, supported by thick green stalks” (McDevitt 230). She is “lured by the exquisite beauty of the giant blossoms” (231) and takes time to enjoy the “sense of well-being attendant on the forest” filled with delicious smells (231). This flower-festooned site is, first of all, a vegetally-dominated landscape. It is also a site of alluring alien flowers who draw in the unsuspecting people, creating a feeling of well-being, as one might expect from fields of flowers. This allure is actually a seductive form of predation, of unexpected flower power, as it were, of animated vegetal beings. Despite her rule of remaining with a partner at all times for safety, Hutch slips away alone for a moment of peace to relieve herself in this lovely field of flowers —what could go wrong, after all? Feeling sad that these beautiful blooms will all soon go extinct, her admiring feelings are likely influenced by the subtle impact of the flower’s powerful chemical scents, a vegetal ruse to which humans are also susceptible. Hutch reaches toward one bloom, stroking “the pistil with her finger-

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7 For work on plant sexuality and its wild array of representations, see Joela Jacobs, especially her essay, “These Lusting, Incestuous, Perverse Creatures: A Phytopoetic History of Plants and Sexuality”.

tips. Caressed it and felt it throb gently under her touch” (231). The result is bliss: “A tide of inexpressible well-being rose through her” and she pulls the pistil to her face, luxuriating in “its warmth”, and then, “the flower moved” (231). What follows this clear indication of animate, moving plants is an overt scene of seduction: Hutch “[f]elt a tide of ecstasy sweep through her [...]. She rocked slowly in the flower’s embrace” (231-32). Overcome by the floral manipulation of animal/human hormones and sensations in this scene that places human beings fully into the realm of vegetal activity, Hutch takes off her clothes and presses herself against the flower until she is overcome with ecstasy: “The blossom moved with her. Entwined her. Caressed her [...]. The outside world faded. And she gave herself to it” (232). Luckily, she is shortly thereafter rescued from joyous obliviousness by her companions, who pull her out of the flower covered in (digestive-juice caused) burns as the “other flowers swayed in sync” (232). These are bad plants, indeed, and in harmony. The rest of the novel follows Hutch and her friends while they manage to avoid further vegetal embrace and are finally rescued from the roiling surface of the planet in a dramatic space operation. One almost hopes Hutch brought a few seeds with her.

The relevance of this one scene of animated alien-floral seduction that is also predation is not just the titillation and drama or the strangeness of another planet’s creatures; instead, it resonates with a very common kind of story to be found in many myths, folk tales, fairy tales, and a wide array of cultural beliefs (mostly non-industrial, ancient, religious, and/or pastoral), as well as in much of recent plant science about human inclusion within botanical machinations. Indeed, humans do exist as part of the plant world despite our seemingly masterful rationality and technology. As Michael Pollan notes in *Botany of Desire*, plants are continually manipulating us (and so many other beings), inviting us and other species to participate in their sexual cycles with their lovely flowers, sweet fruits, bright colors, and intense scents; we are actually always part of these cycles even if many industrialized, or perhaps even “western”, cultures perceive us to be on the outside as master manipulators and technology-driven farmers. Pollan notes that once plants began making flowers, these seed-producing beings “remade life on Earth. By producing sugars and proteins to entice animals to disperse their seed, the angiosperms multiplied the world’s supply of food energy, making possible the rise of large warm-blooded mammals” (108-9), adding, in fact, that “without flowers, we would not be” (109). This assertion of flowers as the basis of our human existence takes on more relevance in the rest of this discussion.

There are three aspects revealed in McDevitt’s scene of flower seduction in *Deepsix* that are crucial to my study of “bad plants” more broadly. First, these animated flowers

are alien and isolated in a distant place, on a strange planet and thus placed far from and outside of human culture. They represent, in other words, not a daily experience with earthly vegetal beings that *seem* inert as we typically experience them in our bodily existence of eating, breathing, and burning fuels, but rather a separation between plant power and humans, such that the encounter with animate flowers appears only as an exotic and even dangerous scenario. Second, and in direct, paradoxical contrast to the first aspect of separation, the science-fictional aspects of this lurid scene serve to draw human beings *back into* plant cycles, but now as a monstrous and exceptional encounter of vegetal predation. Such a division between plant power and human lives, as well as the exotification of encounters serving to amplify the divide, marks a significant development away from many older, indigenous, or non-industrial cultural traditions that avidly and obviously acknowledge the actual interconnections of plant-human cycles fulfilling our nutritional and material needs and shaping our experience of seasonal rhythms with the vegetal cycles of flowering, greening, and then fading in the winter. Examples of stories that portray human beings within plant cycles and systems include religious origin stories beginning in gardens and ancient myths like Persephone who, like plants, retreats “underground” for the winter. Additionally, as per Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Native American stories describe plants as our “older cousins”, who long preceded human beings and enabled our lives, as do ancient Celtic tales of life with trees as discussed by Diana Beresford-Kroeger in *To Speak for the Trees: My Life’s Journey from Ancient Celtic Wisdom to a Healing Vision of the Forest*. One might also mention ecological science here as another kind of narrative now (once again) including human beings within patterns of floral lives<sup>8</sup>.

The third aspect of McDevitt’s novel with relevance for “bad plants” is how the scene embodies the tension between the first aspect of separating human beings from vegetal power systems and the second one of reintegrating them (violently): such moments are often presented with sexualized, seductive overtones along with a moralistic, purportedly “rational” perspective suggesting that humans should know better and should remain superior to, and apart from, vegetal power. This third aspect of making vegetal-human encounters into wildly exceptional and sexualized experiences often draws our attention away from the fact of our mundane dependence on the endless activities of the green. Instead of seeing real ecological connections, we focus on sup-

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8 For a broad discussion of the sweep of human history in relation to plants, specifically in terms of how their sexuality as it is seen or ignored, see Lincoln and Lee Taiz, *Flora Unveiled*. This book makes clear how our human cultures always take on their specific forms according to what kinds of relationships we have with plants.

posedly troubling and surprising sensuality. (Re-)joining plants and acknowledging their actual power is, it seems, itself “bad”, particularly in its recognition of how plants draw us into their cycles with fruits, seeds, and green power. That is, realizing that we are plant-dependent despite our “advanced” human culture frequently leads to tales of what appears to be “bad plants”; such tales reject ecological reality with falsely moralistic notions of human exceptionalism. This tendency to differentiate human bodies from plant cycles and to make their connection into something frightening, dangerous, sexually problematic, and, often, “feminine” or “immoral” might well be one of the more profound but overlooked mistakes of so-called “modern”, industrialized culture even though this process of distinction clearly began much earlier. This mistake differs in interesting ways from what the botanists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler describe as “plant blindness” where so many contemporary or, perhaps, “modern” humans overlook the vegetal in order to focus their attention primarily on themselves or more human-like and mobile animals<sup>9</sup>. Instead, we have here an intellectual form of perceived separation that is reinforced rather paradoxically by exposing the human to horrifyingly physical and sensual immersion in the active (and thus now “exotic”) plant world. This strange paradox of seemingly exceptional contact appears to transform our mundane dependence on plants into a rare and distant event that is morally tainted and seemingly both avoidable and escapable. And yet, we remain dependent on food, oxygenated air, caffeine, and plant-based fuels.

Robert Pogue Harrison provides a well-known formulation of this plant-human separation in his 1992 book, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, where he writes that in both the modern imagination and “primeval antiquity” it was clear that “the forests were *first*”, before human culture (1); and that civilization emerges only by overcoming plants, that is, from clearing out the trees. From Gilgamesh onwards, we find portrayals of cultures clashing with forests. Additionally, the reverse is also true: the downfall of civilization brings the return of the trees. In other words, one either has high civilization separate from forests (and vegetal power as I term it) or one lives within the trees in a “uncivilized” culture. That such assumptions are tainted by racist and colonial notions is clear. Harrison continues his historical sweep, noting that with Christianity came the additional sense that “forests represented the anarchy of matter itself, with all the deprived darkness” of pagan worship (61). There is, in another words, a long tradition extending back well beyond the beginnings of the Anthropocene, a tradition in the “West” of seeking to segregate and deny plant power as something foreign to (advanced) human spaces. Of course, “passive”

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9 On “plant blindness”, see Wandersee and Schussler.

garden species, agricultural forms, and plantations continue to surround us but always seem under our control. The return, or revealing, of plant power appears in such views as ancient and outdated, alien, or uncivilized/barbarian and “bad”.

In science fiction, we find many other examples of this problematic forest-versus-civilization plot critiqued by Harrison, such as in two novels from 1962: the American Brian Aldiss’s *Hot House* and the British J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World*. Both novels depict the collapse of human society bringing with it, or caused by, the return of the hot jungle where—with racist, colonial framing—human culture decays. In contrast, Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1972 novella, *The Word for World is Forest*, portrays the forest world of Athshea populated by green-furred people who live in harmony with the trees as a model for ecological morality. The Athsheans must contend with the colonizing and clear-cutting “yumens” who decimate the forests while claiming thereby to bring civilization to the forest planet. Yet, even Le Guin’s text includes claims that these forest people do not “progress” and so remain static with their green lives in the forest, an idea suggesting that vegetal systems hinder humanoid progress despite, or due to, utopian stability until challenged from without. Sue Burke’s novel from 2018, *Semiosis*, finally presents overtly dominant plants that openly and directly guide all human choices. However, even this insightfully radical novel presents plant power as a force occurring on a far-away planet (though the 2019 sequel, *Interference*, finally brings the powerful and dominant alien, a rainbow bamboo, to Earth where the inevitable take-over occurs). For all its excellent insights into plant manipulation of other species either through collaboration or force, Burke’s texts still relegate the vegetal realm of influence as something that is originally alien rather than as a mundane, earthly force.

While science fiction examples abound, I turn now to European fairy tales where forests continue to dominate the imaginative, if very earthly, realms as places of (historical) freedom, magic, transformation, and dark, mysterious power. To experience all these aspects of forest potential, one must exit the village or city and enter the liminal tree zone, and yet forests are also familiar spaces necessary in the daily life of the woodsmen, hunters, villagers, noblemen, and foragers portrayed in many fairy tales. Fairy tales thereby offer a bridge between, on the one hand, the forest (and thus plant realm) as an external space/force to human culture and, on the other hand, the forest as an actual earthly realm encompassing us humans in its living shelter for so many species, cool temperatures, and necessary resources. Some fairy tales also present the sexual dangers of plant powers, even as others reflect an apparently much older tradition of fertility goddesses associated with plant cycles that embody typical life processes rather than immoral floral seduction.

### 3. Tieck's Fairy-Tale Forests

My fairy tale example of “bad plants” is from the German romantic, Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), who translated French fairy tales into German for quick cash as a poor student and then composed his own now quite well-known literary fairy tales<sup>10</sup>. He wrote during the earliest stages of the Anthropocene in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century before many realized what the rapidly expanding industrialization, extraction, deforestation, and the colonization of peoples, animals, and plants would do to global ecosystems, much less how the expanding burning of fossil fuels would lead to climate change<sup>11</sup>. His fairy tales, like many during this time of rapid globalization and cultural transformation, reflect an unsettling sense of a world undergoing change. Tieck wrote numerous stories emulating or paraphrasing various oral tales of yore; many of them feature various forms of startling vegetal power in the form of exuberant green growth embodying ancient forces or, of course, dangerous females associated with plants. This essay explores his less well-known tale, “Faithful Eckart and Tannhäuser” (1799), briefly noting several connections to his other more well-known texts, “The Rune Mountain” (1802), and “The Elves” (1811). All three tales from around 1800 portray powerful plants associated with various alluring female figures<sup>12</sup>, but his own creative tales, “The Rune Mountain” and “The Elves”, both express a worrisome sense of impending “modernity” emerging in the final scenes in the form of devastation to small-scale pastoral fields and gardens. We thus see in these two tales the damage to traditional pastoral (plant-based) communities when his protagonists follow either a lust for mines and minerals, as in “The Rune Mountain”, or the revealing of the elves’ animating power enlivening the plants in “The Elves” that leads to crop failure when the magical beings depart. These agricultural losses as an overriding theme in Tieck’s texts are not often discussed as such, though Anke Kramer offers an excellent ecocritical reading of the elves in terms of their positive impact on plants and the ensuing “ecological illness of humans” when they depart in her contribution to the 2022 German volume on critical plant studies<sup>13</sup>. Tieck’s third tale also features prominent vegetation themes, but of a quite different type.

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10 With fairy tales, I mean both the literary, written versions of either seemingly folk-based oral tales and the creative works of authors playing with the genre, as defined by Jack Zipes in *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*.

11 Actually, many people in Europe and the United Kingdom were already noticing the loss of forests as England used the trees of the British Isles for fuel and ship building (see Maitland). In Germany, Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s administrative work included overseeing forestry, leading him to have to grapple with their own decimated forests already in the late eighteenth century. He already spoke of the need for “sustainability” (*Nachhaltigkeit*) in forestry; see his *Amtliche Schriften* and: Waltraud Maierhoffer and Jost Hermand.

12 For discussions of the long-term tendency to associate plants with females (fertility!), see Lincoln and Lee Taiz. In the era of Tieck’s writing, many male poets and philosophers described females as passive, vegetal vine-like beings, and men like active animals.

13 See Anke Kramer’s chapter in the volume edited by her and Urte Stobbe in 2022.

As his earliest of these three tales, Tieck's "Tannhäuser" does not yet address the diminishment of pastoral agriculture due to emerging forms of apparent modernity, but rather focuses on the ancient and ongoing power of forests and flowers. He nevertheless features the ever-more commonly portrayed divide between human and plant realms, like McDevitt. Unlike "The Rune Mountain" and "The Elves", "Tannhäuser" is not a primarily new story imagined by Tieck, but rather is composed of three known older tales woven together into one strangely dark and long narrative of death, sex, and flowers. The three stories are linked by the shared focus on the flower-festooned and music-filled cave of Venus found deep in the mountain surrounded by a vast forest. Significantly, this tale shares with McDevitt's *Deepsix* the three typical characteristics of plant-power portrayals: the fact that vegetal power exists as a separate, distant realm into which humans (meaning, apparently, only men) enter at their own peril; the re-inclusion of humans into the world of plant power with terrible consequences; and the association of the vegetal with darkly sexual and, here, typically female forces as a means of implying further separation from what one might ironically term "rational" culture.

Regarding this supposedly "rational" divide between plants and human beings, I turn briefly to the preeminent environmental philosopher and ecofeminist, Val Plumwood. In her 2001 book, *Environmental Culture*, she states that: "Dominant forms of reason —economic, political, scientific, and ethical/prudential— are failing us because they are subject to a systematic pattern of distortions and illusions in which they are historically embedded" (Plumwood 16). In other words, what has been deemed "rational" in terms of human treatment of "nature" is based on a deluded belief of hyperbolized autonomy from the ecological systems undergirding all other living things. Plumwood writes:

It is the special form of failure such monological and hegemonic forms of reason are subject to that they misunderstand their own enabling conditions —the body, ecology and non-human nature for example, often because they have written these down as inferior or constructed them as background in arriving at an illusory and hyperbolised sense of human autonomy (17).

Since vegetal power is, indeed, one of our primary "enabling conditions", the tendency to draw a clear divide between the plant world and the human realm is part of the "monological and hegemonic" systems that have, according to Plumwood, led to our current environmental crises. Plumwood suggests that we need instead a form of rationality that more accurately responds to and builds on our actual living existence as part of ecological systems together with non-human beings. I thus seek here to highlight and contextualize the supposed plant-human separation evidenced in these science fiction

and fairy tale texts with the idea of “bad plants” as expressions, however troubled, of still resonating plant power.

Tieck’s fairy tale offers another form of this plant-human divide, but also a possible connection to a different and more integrated understanding of plant-human cycles. The unusually long fairy tale is composed of two parts, as indicated by the title, “Faithful Eckart and Tannhäuser” (I use here “Tannhäuser” for short). The first part narrates the old legend of Faithful Eckart, who serves his Duke so well in war and peace that he becomes highly acclaimed but then feared by his master. The duke has Eckart’s sons brutally slaughtered and then exiles him. Eckart retreats in despair to the forest, where he later saves the duke yet again in the wake of another war. As the old duke lies dying, he apologizes for the murder of Eckart’s sons and asks his apparently still faithful servant to become the guardian to his own sons. Eckart agrees with no spite, but, unfortunately, his guardianship fails when he loses not only them but also his own life at the moment in the tale when Tieck integrates the second story, the Pied Piper (a *Spielmann*), who plays magical music that lures men (again, never any women) into the beautiful world of Venus’s realm deep in the mountain. The duke’s boys cannot escape the alluring music permeating the magical forest far from human/moral culture, drawn as they are by its rich and verdant temptations. Most importantly for our discussion are two features: the forest realm itself as the site of this peril, and the fact that there are irresistible flowers down in the mountain that are not only part of Venus’s power but a significant aspect of her draw. Following the Piper/*Spielmann* into Venus’s mountain, the duke’s boys sing of the woods, the trees, the flowers, the grass, the fields, the forests:

“Away to the mountains!” they cried; ‘the deep woods  
Where the trees, winds, and waters make music for gods:  
Sweet, strange, secret voices are singing there now,  
And invite us to seek their blest Eden below [...]”  
Trees, streams, and flowers danced in the rays;  
Through earth, air, heavens, were heard the lays;  
The grass, fields, forests, trembling join’d  
That magic tumult wild and blind (Tieck 80)<sup>14</sup>.

This is a strangely “blessed Eden” existing underground where trees and water make music; and although Tieck has Tannhäuser later refer to the beings in the cave as “demons”, there is otherwise never a description of anything but blissful sensuality surrounded by flowers. Before the men encounter the alluring females directly, we hear of

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14 Original (the J. Burns translation varies significantly here): “Wir wollen in die Berge, in die Felder, / Uns rufen die Quellen, es locken die Wälder, / Gar heimliche Stimmen entgegen singen, / Ins irdische Paradies uns zu bringen! [...] / Die Blumen scheinen trunken, / Ein Abendrot nieder gesunken, / Und zwischen Korn und Gräsern schweifen / Sanft irrend blau und goldne Streifen” (Tieck, *Klassiker*, 167).

the “deep woods” and then the dancing blooms and musical plants. The tale suggests a dire warning to beware the active vegetal powers, but typical of Romanticism, it also appears to be an option seriously worth considering—at least for the young men. For Eckart, it is deadly. All his efforts to save the duke’s sons go awry when he, too, starts dancing and following the piper’s wildly floral music. Though Eckart briefly resists long enough to fight to his death, he cannot overcome this botanical delirium so he must stand forever as a guardian spirit at the entrance to Venus’s mountain cave trying to prevent anyone else from entering. His efforts, it appears in the rest of the story, are to no avail. Regardless of the romantic ambiguity about alternative life paths, the powerful vegetal realm here is far from “civilization”, connected to ancient forces (Venus, for the Christian versions of the tale), and dangerously ridden with floral seduction that reintegrates men, at least, into plant cycles. The standard and tedious implication that women, in contrast to male human beings, are always already part of such cycles demands more attention, but there is not space here to address properly the well-known gendered aspects of plant portrayals. McDevitt, at least, complicates the situation by having the Hutch, a woman, experience the predatory and sensual flowers.

In terms of Tieck’s tale of the Venus mountain<sup>15</sup>, we face not only gendered aspects but also the above-mentioned fact that the magical allure occurs within the forest and then among the underworld flowers. Before turning to the flowers, I first address the location in the forest, where so many fairy tales take place. Indeed, a large number of the Brothers Grimm stories, like most of the Northern European tales and the North American stories that follow in their wake, take place, at least in part, in the forest<sup>16</sup>. These include such famous examples as “Little Red Riding Hood”, “The Little Tailor”, “Snow White”, “Hansel and Gretel”, “Rapunzel”, “Hans, My Hedgehog”, etc. Sara Maitland writes in *From the Forest: A Search for the Hidden Roots of our Fairy Tales* that “one of the central aspects of the northern European fairy tale is that it takes place in the forest” (16). But she also writes that it is “surprising how seldom this is noticed” (16), and she notes that over half of the Brothers Grimm tales in the 1857 edition (the seventh edition) “explicitly mention forests as the location of some part of the story” (16). Furthermore, “the forest is the place of trial in fairy stories, both dangerous and exciting” (8). In the forest, characters are challenged and/or transformed before they return to the status

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15 There is much debate without clear evidence about the origin of the name of the “Venus flytrap”, an issue with much relevance for this paper. Some refer to its lovely white flowers as the origin of the name, others to a group of eighteenth-century botanists like Peter Collinson (1694-1768) who thought that the leaves looked like female genitalia. I could not verify the actual etymological research. See John R. Schaefer.

16 See English-language volume edited by Jack Zipes and the German-language volume edited by Heinz Rölleke.

quo at the end of the fairy tale; I suggest that the magic and the typical fairy-tale transformations derive from the ancient knowledge of actual vegetal power itself that is now being *re*-discovered by many in contemporary plant science<sup>17</sup>.

Forests also become entwined with emerging questions of national and cultural identity and changing laws and rights regarding the shared commons of the woods during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Harrison dedicates an entire section in *Forests* to such issues in relation to the Brothers Grimm, noting how the association of forests with freedom transforms in the Romantic imagination so that: "Forests came to be viewed as having genetic as well as symbolic connections to memory, custom, national character, and ageless forms of popular wisdom" (165). Their meaning also undergoes changes when the landed aristocracy claims land ownership and the rights over forests that exclude everyone else, as well as with the development of industrialized forestry by the Germans so that trees are eventually reinterpreted in cultural practices from being part of the living forest to a necessary and humanly-controlled wood product (Martin Heidegger famously describes this as thinking of forests as merely "standing reserve")<sup>18</sup>. While these many associations are frequently studied, the uncanny aspects of forests specifically as *vegetal zones* with blatant plant power instead of just dark, wild spaces rich with resources, distinct from "civilization", are not as often addressed. Walking through photosynthetically oxygenated air, we may forget our debt to all the green beings even though to enter a forest is to experience directly the uncontained green dominance of botanical life creating living zones. Many fairy tales retain the emphasis on the power of plants while also, just as often, providing a sense of forests as a separate space that we enter, get transformed, and then leave. One might say that fairy tales bridge the seemingly ancient beliefs regarding plant power and the more modern, or at least, post-medieval beliefs deeming the woods and the plant realm more broadly to be irrelevant and even immoral except as resources. The magical transformations occurring in forests appear mostly positive in the Brothers Grimm and other more folk-based tales, at least for the protagonists deemed to be "good", whereas Tieck's literary tale presents a darker, inescapable site that brings pleasure, sin, and exclusion from society. He thus presents the now standard tendency to widen the culturally assumed (but incorrect) gap between plant spaces and human lives even while returning his characters to plant power with a terrible vengeance. From mundane entanglements with green life to exotic, sexualized, and distant encounters that threaten human beings

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17 There is still debate about this science; for those who agree, see Gagliano; Kimmerer; Simard and Robert Macfarlane's *Underland* chapter 4 on "The Understory (Epping Forest, London)".

18 On the development of German forest laws dictated by the aristocracy, see Richard Gray; on Heidegger, see Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*; and see Heidegger's "Die Frage nach der Technik."

(men) unless they escape vegetal power, the cultural meanings attributed to plants shift in rather anti-ecological ways.

#### 4. Alluring Flower Fields inside the Venus Mountain

The third story that Tieck melds into his singular and long fairy tale, beyond Eckart's tale and the Pied Piper/*Spielmann*, is presented in part two, which takes place four-hundred years later. It is the story of Tannhäuser, the renowned singer, whom Wagner features in his famous romantic opera of the same name (*Tannhäuser: Romantische Oper*), written in 1842 and first performed in 1848. This story is based on a fifteenth-century legend of the singer<sup>19</sup>. Tieck's Tannhäuser inevitably ends up in the Venus mountain (despite Eckart's spirit) living a luscious and sinful life for seven years. He describes his long journey through the forest through which he wanders, wavering between feelings of freedom reveling in the "sweet flowers" and despair. Finally, he reaches the mountain's entrance and ignores Eckart's warning: "I pushed on. In passing, I found my way led through subterranean passages in the mountain" (91)<sup>20</sup>. There, delights await him along with music: "A swarm of the mad heathen deities, with the goddess Venus at their head, ran forward to greet me; —all demons [...]", who were the "long-famed beauties of the ancient world" (91)<sup>21</sup>. There are not only heathen goddesses, but also, most significantly, abundant and odiferous flowers deep under the mountain:

Tones of music burst forth from nature's inmost heart, and with their undulating freshness restored the ardour of our desires, while soft mists and dews stole over flowery fields, giving new essence to their ravishing odours [...]. The luscious charm of virgin beauty burned in the flowers, and in the forms of girls bloomed the fragrant charm of the flowers; their colours seemed to enjoy a peculiar language; tones uttered new words; the world of sense was enclosed, as it were, within the glowing bloom of those luxurious flowers (91-92)<sup>22</sup>.

The girls, the music, and the luscious blooms are fully entwined in Tannhäuser's narrative that he later relates to a stranger encountered after having departed the Venus moun-

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19 See Cora Lee Nollendorfs on the history of the Tannhäuser legend and Tieck's version of it.

20 Original: "Ich drang hindurch. Wie in einem unterirdischen Bergwerke war nun mein Weg" (Tieck, *Klassiker*, 179).

21 Original: "So kam mir das Gewimmel der frohen heidnischen Götter entgegen, Frau Venus an ihrer Spitze; sie sind dorthin gebannt von der Gewalt des Allmächtigen, und ihre Dienst ist von der Erde getilgt; nun wirken sie von dort in ihrer Heimlichkeit" (Tieck, *Klassiker*, 180).

22 Original: "Düfte schwangen sich bezaubernd um mein Haupt, wie aus dem innersten Herzen der seligsten Natur erklang eine Musik, und kühlte mit ihren frischen Wogen der Begierde wilde Lüsterheit, ein Grauen, das so heimlich über die Blumenfelder schlich, erhöhte den entzückenden Rausch.... In den Blumen brannte der Mädchen und der Lüste Reiz, in den Körpern der Weiber blühte der Zauber der Blumen, die Farben führten hier eine andre Sprache, die Töne sagten neue Worte, die ganze Sinnenwelt war hier in Einer [sic] Blüte fest gebunden" (Tieck, *Klassiker* 180-81).

tain in order to seek redemption from the pope. It turns out, however, that this man is not a stranger at all, but rather his old friend, Friedrich von Wolfram, who is now married to the beautiful Emma, both of whom are alive and happy. Included in Tannhäuser's story is the apparently delusional memory that, in their youth, Friedrich and he were both vying for Emma's love. Tannhäuser claims to have been overcome with jealousy and, in a fit of madness, to have killed Friedrich, leading him to run away into —of course— the forest and, eventually, the Venus mountain. Before he left home, Tannhäuser believed that Emma had died of despair, as did Tannhäuser's parents, leaving him bereft. Imagine the strange revelation of finding himself at their home, confessing his actions to his former friends. The confused pilgrim finally departs to Rome, but then returns despondent to Friedrich's house after the pope rejects his request for redemption in that, apparently, seven years with Venus are too many. During his brief return, Tannhäuser kills Emma and kisses Friedrich, thus dooming him, too, to the quest for Venus and her flowers. The odd fact that it is Venus, of all the goddesses, who lives in a deep underground cave filled with flowers, is a question relevant for critical plant studies and, especially, for a study of "bad plants", as I discuss below.

First, however, I note how many interpretations of this somewhat neglected Tieckian tale of "Tannhäuser" ignore the plants and focus instead on the question of his apparent madness or inability to decipher reality from dream, which are very similar to the analyses of Tieck's famous fairy tale, "Blond Eckbert", that also involves magic, madness, and murder. Some scholars like Cora Lee Nollendorfs look at "Tannhäuser" in terms of the historical implications of the tale and the subconscious; others use Freudian readings to explore the erotic tale and the exotic life in the Venus cave. There are discussions of its seemingly typical romantic turn away from society and to "nature" as well as contextualization of the fairy-tale tradition of German romantics transforming "folk" tales or ancient stories into literary tales, though most dismiss it after noting its reworking of the legend<sup>23</sup>. I ask instead about the role of plants, specifically, the forest and then the lovely fields of flowers festooning Venus's lair in the cave deep under the mountain. Why are there flowers inside the mountain? Why is it Venus, the Roman goddess, rather than one of the many pagan goddesses associated with the underworld and, of course, plant life?

What readers will notice is that Tieck's "Tannhäuser" shares all three aspects of McDevitt's "bad plants". First, Venus's cave is clearly distant from human residences and family, making it another example of the separate world of vegetal power. If McDe-

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23 See H. A. Korff and Larry D. Wells.

vitt creates this distance by placing the alien plants on another planet, Tieck places it in the underworld inside of a mountain that is itself located in the deep forest. Second, humans are brought back into the sway of vegetal power with two major implications: that humans rejoin the life cycles of seasonal growth as is seen also in other tales, legends, and myths featuring females in the underworld, as noted below; and that this experience is dangerous. Third, the danger and alienation is exacerbated and made more bizarre by the sexualization of the vegetal realm with the alluring image of Venus and her minions. Note again how Tannhäuser describes Venus's world specifically in terms of its sexualized flowers: "The world of sense was enclosed, as it were, within the glowing bloom of those luxurious flowers" (Tieck 92)<sup>24</sup>. In order to understand this emphasis on the powerful sway of underground flowers, we need some more cultural and historical context. Indeed, Tieck's "Tannhäuser" is not the only fairy tale associating Venus with the delicious underworld; Joseph von Eichendorff famously adopts this motif from Tieck in his own literary tale, "The Marble Statue", from 1819, though Eichendorff allows his young protagonist named, ironically enough, "Florio" to overcome and leave behind the "wicked" Venus. Other tales from the Brothers Grimm and their "folk" collection from the seven editions published between 1812-1857 feature similar female figures in the underworld<sup>25</sup>; however, they are not hypersexualized and isolated experiences. Instead, the Grimm tales with their "folk" heritage of the oral traditions actually connect to much older traditions not based on Venus's underground orgies at all, but rather on pagan goddesses of fertility. Such goddesses come in various forms and are associated with seasonal life cycles of plants and thus the underworld as winter/death. The contrast is between goddesses of fertility associated with "natural" cycles and hypersexualized and seemingly demonic flower women.

### **5. (Other) Flowers in the Underworld: The Brothers Grimm Tale "Mother Holle"**

In the Brothers Grimm fairy tale version of "Mother Holle", for example, we find an ancient crone in the underworld surrounded by fields of flowers. And the visitors to this realm are two young girls instead of the fevered young men (or female space explorer of McDevitt); the first is the typically well-behaved fairy-tale sister of much beauty and the second is the inevitably lazy stepsister. This story reveals a similar tradition to Tieck's

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24 "Die ganze Sinnenwelt war hier in Einer [sic] Blüte fest gebunden" (Tieck, *Klassiker*, 181).

25 I highlight "folk" because the Brothers Grimm claimed to transcribe their tales directly from the "German" "folk", but it turns out that not only were their sources a mixed group including well-educated Huguenot families, but also that the Brothers also famously undertook significant edits to the tales to make them palatable to the middle-class Germans buying the books. See Ruth Bottigheimer, John Ellis, and Maria Tatar. Nevertheless, the tales contain elements of older folk stories.

“Tannhäuser” but one with very different implications when considering the relevance of plants. I summarize the tale briefly with a focus on the flora, and then consider its connotations: “Once upon a time”, as it were, there was a young, beautiful girl with an evil stepmother and stepsister. As usual, she is forced to do endless labor while her stepsister does nothing. The “good” sister spins using a reel endlessly, continuing even when her fingers bleed. Dipping the reel into the well water to rinse off the blood, she accidentally drops it. The stepmother insists that she go into the deep well to retrieve the reel. Dutifully, she jumps down into the water in a symbolic death, waking, however, not surprisingly for this essay, in a beautiful meadow filled with thousands of flowers. As she walks, she kindly responds to animated calls for help from plant-realm beings including baking bread asking to be removed from the oven, and an apple tree needing to be shaken before the apples go bad. She then encounters old Mother Holle, who invites her to stay and do chores. The girl works happily and with full dedication, gracefully shaking out the down blankets so that the feathers fly every morning —indeed, Mother Holle in German is associated with the production of snow. Finally, the hard-working girl feels homesickness despite the terrible life she had above. Mother Holle rewards her with well-wishes to go back up to the surface and with a gift of a rain of gold, symbolizing a return to life. The stepsister then wishes to have the same experience but refuses to answer the vegetal pleas for help, and she fails to work properly for Mother Holle. In a typical fairy-tale justice scenario, the “bad” sister receives a punishing rain of tar while the good sister marries a king. This kind of bad is not the same as the “bad” plants of power discussed here; it is, instead, the moralistic celebration of female domestic labor so typical to many fairy and folk tales.

Once again, we have a separate realm of vegetal power, one filled with beautiful flowers. But in this case, Mother Holle is an old woman, not a hyper-sexual Roman goddess of love and beauty. The powerfully alluring flowers of the vegetal realm remain as with Tieck and McDevitt, but Holle, also known as “Hulda” in other versions and related Scandinavian tales, is associated specifically with both plant life-cycles *and* human life-cycles together rather than illicit sexual experiences in distant mountains. As Wolf-Dieter Storl notes in his book on “the plant goddess”, *Die alte Göttin*, human souls go into the underworld after death until Holle sends them back up to a new life<sup>26</sup>. He writes that the tales of the Brothers Grimm retain specific aspects of this ancient myth:

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26 Storl's book is entitled *Die alte Göttin und ihre Pflanzen: Wie wir durch Märchen zu unserer Urspiritualität finden* (*The old Goddess and her Plants: How we approach our ancient Spirituality through fairy tales*). All translations from Storl are mine.

The old goddess, Mother Holle, protects not only the seeds that sprout in spring, she not only sends the animal souls up to the surface where they take on flesh and blood and bones, but she also sends human souls up in new bodies. She takes the dead in her lap and eventually sends them back to life as new children. All of nature is an everlasting cycle of life, why should it be different with humans and animals? (Storl 81)<sup>27</sup>.

To reiterate, the most important features of “Mother Holle” for this study of “bad plants” are the underworld fields of flowers as sites for *both* vegetal *and* human cycles. The tales like Tieck’s have transformed an ancient goddess of fertility and death, who takes various forms and who is relevant for all human lives, into an exotic, distant, and sexualized love goddess luring doomed men into her pagan realm.

Like Storl with his study of how fairy tales contain ancient features, Robert Pogue Harrison’s forest book addresses fertility goddesses whose origins trace back to “Cro-Magnon through the last ice age and into the Neolithic period”, a goddess who “revolved the seasons and gave the grain, replenished the herds and took the dead back into the safekeeping of her cosmic matrix” (Harrison 19). Mother Holle, or “Hulda”, is known in folklore and myths as a maiden, mother, hag, spinner, stormbringer, ruler of the Wild Hunt, and protector and thief of children’s souls. She rules over the domestic arts like spinning, cooking, cleaning, and childcare, and is a patroness of housewives. What she values above all is industriousness. Again, the older traditions of Holle and Hulda typically place these goddesses in the underworld, a mysterious world reached by falling down a well or existing inside a mountain<sup>28</sup>. According to Storl, it is the Christianization of these tales from the European Middle Ages onwards that led to the replacement of fertility goddesses like Hulde or Holle with sexualized Venus figures associated instead with demonic powers. While this historical transformation may have other causes and influences, the fact that Venus’s allure is used to overwrite the human connection to vegetal processes is most relevant for this essay. Tieck’s Tannhäuser indulges in exotic, forbidden floral sexuality instead of joining ecological cycles of living things.

In sum, Tieck and McDevitt present various forms of “bad plants” including flowers and forests that actually reverberate with apparently ancient or non-industrial, non-“western” folk ideas about shared plant-human cycles. And yet their lurid portrayals of vibrant vegetation also contribute to the transformation of such ideas into an increasing

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27 Original: “Die alte Göttin Frau Holle hütet nicht nur die Samen, die im Frühling keimen, sie schickt nicht nur die Tierseelen nach oben, wo sie Fleisch und Blut und Knochen annehmen, sondern sie schickt auch die Menschenseelen in neue Verkörperungen. Sie nimmt die Toten in ihrem Schoß auf und schickt sie schließlich als Kinder wieder ins Leben zurück. Die ganze Natur ist ein immerwährender Kreislauf, warum soll es bei den Menschen und Tieren anders sein?” (Storl 81).

28 See Storl and Turner.

divide between plants and human with darkly moralistic overtones. The wildly sexual blossoms that bring human beings *back* into their botanical cycles in fairy tales and science fiction reconnect us to plants but with a sense of horror. I suggest that we revise our understanding of this horror into a sense of (apparently disturbing) ecological embeddedness that is actually quite mundane even as it is demonized for attributing power to the non-human and for integrating human beings with living things more broadly. The actual thesis of this essay is that absurd visions of “bad” plants in science fiction and fairy tales contain potentially profound if convoluted ecological truths about our full dependence on, and ongoing immersion within, the activities of the domineering green photosynthesizers. Additionally, I suggest that plant power is not an alien, exotic force found only in dark, forested mountains or on distant planets but rather a concrete fact of Earthly life. “Bad plants” only appear threatening in the monstrous visions that reenact the false divide between our bodily lives and botanical beings in flagrant, sensationalized forms. On the other hand, lest we forget, plants are actually quite powerful, domineering in inhuman scales of time and space, and flowers are purposely enmeshing us with their colors, scents, and alluring fruits.

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