

## TURNING INTO A POTTED PLANT: A PLANT STUDIES' APPROACH TO HAN KANG'S SHORT STORY "THE FRUIT OF MY WOMAN"

CONVERTIRSE EN UNA MACETA: UNA APROXIMACIÓN DESDE LOS *PLANT STUDIES* AL CUENTO DE HAN KANG "EL FRUTO DE MI MUJER"

SE TRANSFORMER EN POT : UNE APPROCHE DES *PLANT STUDIES* DANS LA NOUVELLE DE HAN KANG « LE FRUIT DE MA FEMME »

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**Abstract:** Plant studies, a recent branch of cultural studies, is taking a new look at the ontological status of plants and, implicitly and explicitly, redefining the status of the human in the larger web of life. Scientists have discovered that plants are not merely passive objects, but active agents with amazing capabilities: they are mobile and intentional, capable to make intelligent choices, to communicate with each other and with their environment, they are a "who and not only a what" (Michael Marder). This essay takes a look at these major claims of plant studies and argues that using anthropomorphic terms for the newly discovered capabilities of plants is a philosophical choice with serious consequences for our understanding not only of the vegetal world, but also of our position within it. It allows us to step beyond our hierarchical and zoocentric attitude and understand ourselves as part of the larger web of relations. The essay then de-

monstrates the role of plant studies for literary studies by interpreting Han Kang's short story "The Fruit of My Woman".

**Keywords:** Plant Studies; Plant mobility; Intelligence; Communication; Anthropomorphism; Conception of the human; Han Kang.

**Resumen:** Los *plant studies*, una rama reciente de los estudios culturales, examinan el estatus ontológico de las plantas y redefinen, implícita y explícitamente, el estatus del ser humano dentro de la red más amplia de la vida. Los científicos han descubierto que las plantas no son simplemente objetos pasivos, sino agentes activos con capacidades sorprendentes: son móviles e intencionales, capaces de tomar decisiones inteligentes, de comunicarse entre sí y con su entorno, son un "quién y no solo un qué" (Michael Marder). Este artículo analiza estas afirmaciones clave de los *plant studies* y argumenta que el uso de términos antropomórficos para describir las capacidades recientemente descubiertas de las plantas es una elección filosófica con serias consecuencias para nuestra comprensión no solo del mundo vegetal, sino también de nuestra posición en él. Esto nos permite ir más allá de nuestra actitud jerárquica y zoocéntrica y entendernos como parte de una red de relaciones más amplia. El artículo demuestra el papel de los *plant studies* en los estudios literarios a través de la interpretación del cuento "El fruto de mi mujer" de Han Kang.

**Palabras clave:** estudios sobre plantas; movilidad de las plantas; inteligencia; comunicación; antropomorfismo; concepción del ser humano; Han Kang.

**Résumé :** Les *plants studies*, un courant récent des études culturelles, réexaminent le statut ontologique des plantes et redéfinissent, implicitement et explicitement, le statut de l'humain dans le réseau plus large de la vie. Les scientifiques ont découvert que les plantes ne sont pas simplement des objets passifs, mais des agents actifs avec des capacités étonnantes : elles sont mobiles et intentionnelles, capables de faire des choix intelligents, de communiquer entre elles et avec leur environnement, elles sont un « qui et pas seulement un quoi » (Michael Marder). Cet article examine ces affirmations majeures des *plant studies* et soutient que l'utilisation de termes anthropomorphiques pour décrire les capacités récemment découvertes des plantes est un choix philosophique avec des conséquences sérieuses pour notre compréhension non seulement du monde végétal, mais aussi de notre position au sein de celui-ci. Cela nous permet de dépasser notre attitude hiérarchique et zoocentrique et de nous comprendre comme faisant partie du réseau plus large de relations. L'article démontre le rôle des

études sur les plantes dans les études littéraires en interprétant la nouvelle « Le fruit de ma femme » de Han Kang.

**Mots clés :** études sur les plantes; mobilité des plantes; intelligence; communication; anthropomorphisme; conception de l'humain; Han Kang.

## 1.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new branch of cultural studies has emerged which, like animal studies, contests the common Western tradition of regarding humans as the apex of all life on earth,<sup>1</sup> this time by taking a new look at the ontological status of plants and, implicitly and explicitly, are undertaking yet again a redefinition of the status of the human within the larger web of life. It is plant studies, a late, but burgeoning field of studies which has attracted not only scholars in botany, neurobiology, geography, religion, linguistics, philosophy, cultural and literary studies, but also poets and artists. Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patricia Vieira define it "as a broad framework for reevaluating plants, their representations, and human-plant interactions" (Gagliano et al. xvi). Hannah Stark argues that plant studies debates "the place of plants in human systems of meaning, including their cultural life, their discursive framing in academic and popular understandings, and their philosophical meaning" (180), and that it "continues the destabilization of the category of the human and its hierarchical relation to other forms of being" (181).

It is commonly assumed that the first book-length inquiry into unknown aspects of plants was already published in 1973, Peter Tompkin's and Christopher Bird's *The Secret Life of Plants*. The two authors claimed that plants are sentient and feel emotions, a statement that was mostly scorned by other scientists as mere humbug. According to Michael Pollan in his excellent introduction to plant studies in *The New Yorker*, the book "presented a beguiling mashup of legitimate plant science, quack experiments, and mystical nature worship that captured the public imagination at a time when New Age thinking was seeping into the mainstream" (Pollan, "The Intelligent Plant" 92). However, more serious research followed in neurobiology and botany as well as in philosophy and cultural studies, and radically new thoughts about plants appeared in popular science and nature writing. Highly influential have been books whose telling titles already point towards a new approach to plants such as Michael Pollan's *The Botany of De-*

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1 See for example the seminal books by Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, and Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*; Jacques Derrida's essay "The animal that therefore I am;" or Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* and *When Species Meet*.

sire (2001), Matthew Hall's *Plants as Persons* (2011), Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking* (2013), Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patricia Vieira's *The Language of Plants* (2017), Randy Laist's *Plants and Literature* (2013) or Prudence Gibson's *The Plant Contract: Art's Return to Vegetal Life* (2018). Michael Pollan's above mentioned essay "The Intelligent Plant" (2013), Kat McGowan's "The Secret Language of Plants" (2013) or Michael Marder's provocative article "If Peas Can Talk, Should We Eat Them?" (2012) also contributed to the debate about the relevance of plants and their relationship to humans. Since then, a constantly growing number of publications have added to the extensive research in plant studies. What unites these studies is their opposition to the idea that plants are merely the backdrop of human life, passive objects without a voice of their own, brainless and therefore unintelligent and incapable of learning. Instead, scholars are now discovering their mobility and agency, their capability to make intelligent choices, to communicate with each other and with their environment, and are now maintaining that plants can think and reason and even possess consciousness. In short, that they are "not only a what but also a who," as philosopher Michael Marder puts it (Marder, "If Peas Can Talk" np).

My focus in this essay is on the role that a new concept of plants plays in fiction and in literary criticism. How can literature represent plants as active and intelligent, but at the same time as totally different from humans? How can we leave behind the literary use of plants as mere symbols or as aesthetic objects? The function of literature, or at least one important function, is to tell stories and, preferably, new stories that incite our curiosity and wonder. Literature can fictionalize the hard facts of scientific data by giving them a shape that is just as understandable intellectually as emotionally. Good narratives appeal to our imagination; they allow us to think and feel ourselves into a world that is normally hidden to us and thus to expand our mental and emotional horizon. Science fiction, speculative fiction, and of course fantasy make ample use of these methods. Even realistic fiction introduces us to different characters, social milieus or states of mind we are not familiar with. However, most of these texts work with human or human-like protagonists, fewer with beings so radically other as plants<sup>2</sup>. It constitutes a dilemma for authors to write about non-anthropomorphic beings in the only language at their disposal which is anthropomorphic. They must use human words to enter worlds that, as even Michael Marder admits, we can never fully access. How then do authors represent plants which they recognize as autonomous subjects, but whose intelligence,

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2 In his famous essay "What Is It Like to be a Bat", Thomas Nagel convincingly argued that a human being can only try to imagine the life of a bat; he or she will always be restricted by the resources of the human mind. This limited access to another species' mind is especially true for our grasp of plants.

mobility, methods of communication lie beyond our concepts of these terms? Do they invent new genres or redefine symbols and metaphors? Do they help us understand the scientific insights of plant studies better, to think about plants in new ways? There are popular narratives like Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) which heavily anthropomorphize nature. He believes, for example, that trees feel pain, and nurture their young —caring for them like a human mother would. Criticized as kitschy and not based on scientific evidence, he has nevertheless attracted worldwide attention and ardent followers.

I am not interested in stories that just transfer human concepts onto trees and fungi, but in texts that find new ways of representing the truly other in nature. One such text is by the South Korean writer Han Kang, who gained international fame with her first novel *The Vegetarian* which was translated and published in Great Britain in 2015 and which won the Man Booker International Prize for Fiction. It was not only praised as “mind blowing”, “spellbinding”, “brilliant”, “Both terrifying and terrific” (blurbs), but it also attracted much scholarly attention as a complex exploration of patriarchal violence and toxic gender roles carried out on a woman's body. *The Vegetarian* is about a young woman who rebels against her social environment by refusing to eat meat, finally any food, and by dreaming of turning into a tree. It ends with her transportation to the hospital, but her will to become a plant remains intact.

I will turn to another text by Han Kang, a 1997 short story, the English translation of which was published in 2000 with the title “The Fruit of My Woman”. In this story, a precursor to the novel, a young woman actually does turn into a plant, albeit not into a freestanding tree, but into a potted plant on the balcony of the apartment she shares with her husband. I have chosen this short story for my investigation into a woman's metamorphosis because of its sharp focus on social relations with a reduced set of characters—a husband and his wife—and its single setting, an apartment in the city, which allows me to concentrate in detail on the gradual changes the woman goes through. It allows me to answer central questions such as *why* the woman turns into a plant. What literary strategies does the author employ to describe and evaluate the woman's metamorphosis, and *how* is it experienced by her as well as her husband? Can plants really “speak” and make intelligent choices? Or is the representation of their “language” just a human fantasy, revealing a failure to move beyond anthropocentric narratives when it comes to the lives of plants? Finally, is the woman's loss of humanity a triumph or a defeat?

Critics so far have focused on a Deleuzian reading of becoming in the story (Kim), another sees the woman's desire to turn into a plant as a yearning to connect with her

deceased mother's body in the soil (Bose), a third detects the trauma of violence and neglect in her development, and the vegetal becoming of the wife as an escape from patriarchy, not a means of liberation (Finck). In my reading of the short story, I will link major insights of plant studies with a narrative on the development (or loss?) of a human consciousness which dissolves into a plant's specific being. I will explore, in short, if and how narrative fiction can allow us to imaginatively enter the intrinsic nature of plants with the help of plant studies insights, and if these new insights will lead us to rethink our own ontological status in the world. Before analyzing Han Kang's "The Fruit of My Woman", however, I will outline some central issues of plant studies to then connect them to my reading of the story.

## 2.

My first inquiry is into plant mobility. Everyone knows that plants are sessile: they are rooted in the earth and cannot escape when being attacked. They certainly do not have feet or wings to move around. Nonetheless, two arguments contest the common idea about plant immobility and its purported disadvantage. For one, plants have evolved methods to have their seeds carried by the wind or by animals and thus distribute their genes. This happened "with the advent of angiosperms, an extraordinary new class of plants that made showy flowers and formed large seeds that other species were induced to disseminate" (Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* xx). Some evolved burrs that attach themselves to animals. Flowers exude scents that attract insects who transport pollen to inseminate other blossoms. Squirrels pick nuts and hide them in places away from where they found them, birds and other animals carry seeds in their scat. Although plants are rooted, parts of them do move around to procreate. They even possess ways of moving in their immediate environment. According to philosopher Matthew Hall, Charles Darwin "was the first person in the history of modern botany to recognize intelligent, purposeful movement in the plant kingdom" (139). In his book *Power of Movement in Plants* (1880), says Hall, he described similarities between the movement of plants and animals which he attributed to internal signaling and communication processes. He observed that the radicle (the embryonic root of the seed) could sense objects and move away from them deliberately, i.e., it could sense and choose.

Another contentious point linked to the idea that plants can move "purposefully" is the claim that plants are intelligent although they have no brain. A brain is generally assumed to be fundamental for rational thought which is the requirement for intentional actions. Without a brain, so the common logic, plants are unconscious objects because

they do not have the capacity to remember, to learn, or to make decisions. Recent plant neurobiologists, however, have challenged the centrality of the brain for a definition of intelligence. For example, Stefano Mancuso, an Italian botanist, is convinced that not having a brain is even a clear advantage when it comes to the survival of a plant. He argues that with its molecular design it "can lose up to ninety per cent of its body without being killed" (cf Pollan, "The Intelligent Plant" 94). Plants have also developed a very intricate sensory apparatus, "between fifteen and twenty distinct senses", among them smell and taste, sight, touch, and sound (94), which help them to create optimal living conditions as sessile beings. They sense many elements in their environment, such as "gravity, moisture, light, pressure, and hardness", and also "volume, nitrogen, phosphorus, salt, various toxins, microbes, and chemical signals from neighboring plants" (95). These capabilities are located at the tips of roots which allow them to make choices and develop specific responses to their immediate surroundings. Therefore, "[...] perception, awareness, and active assessment are crucial elements in the behavioral repertoire of the plants" (Hall 144), elements that we usually associate with intelligence. Darwin understood the morphology of the radicle as a brain, but at the same time, he reduced plant capabilities to a simple vegetable level (141), or to a lower form of existence. Nevertheless, he provided important clues for some plant neurobiologists today, who have moved away from what they regard as zoocentric, or even as "brain chauvinism" (Ryan np), which accepts the existence of intelligence only from a human or an animal perspective.

How, then, can plants be thought of as intelligent if the notion of a brain is irrelevant? Can it be read as a move away from anthropocentrism as intelligence is a human-centric concept? One aspect has to do with the plants' adaptability to different environments. Plant neurobiologists usually refer to Anthony Trewavas, a molecular biologist, who introduced the concept of plastic plant intelligence in 2002. Trewavas used D. Stenhouse's definition of intelligence as the possession of "adaptively variable behavior within the lifetime of the individual" (Hall 143). Plants with their complex sensory apparatus keep making choices to maximize their living conditions, indicating that they are constantly adapting to their changing environments. Stefano Mancuso also focuses on the plant's adaptability to defend the claim of its intelligence and emphasizes its "ability to respond in optimal ways to the challenges presented by one's environment and circumstances" (Pollan, "The Intelligent Plant" 99). His definition of intelligence is quite simple: it is "the ability to solve problems" (99). He does not equate plant intelligence with human intelligence, but rather insists that they are differently intelligent and do not need a brain. In his research, he experimented with plants by putting an obstacle

before their roots. He observed that they changed their direction well before touching the object which for him was an intelligent choice. Such a choice is not, in contrast to a machine's reaction, pre-programmed or predictable (Klein 21), but the result of many constantly evolving internal and external conditions.

As Trewavas found out, plants are even able to learn; they "are capable of basic decision making, problem solving, and reasoning" (Hall 146) in the process of which they continually correct their behavior. An important requirement of plants is, therefore, their knowledge of and interaction with their environment. They are not isolated individuals but part of a larger ecosystem in which they play an active role, or as Ryan summarizes, the "intelligence of plants manifests in their transactions with other organisms as part of self-governing socioecological systems" (np). It is a dynamic relationship among various participants who not only strive for survival, but for their well-being in a reciprocal net of relations. Such a concept of plants implies that they are no longer passive objects but active and autonomous subjects. Hall even goes so far as to speak about a plant *self* which can discriminate between self and non-self. Again, this capability is not based on the functions of a brain, but "on active, ongoing physiological processes resulting from internal communication within the plant itself" (150). All of this means that if we leave our anthropocentric perspective, we begin to see that plants learn, remember, act and make choices; however, they do this in totally different ways which scientists are just beginning to understand.

In his book *Plant Thinking*, Marder therefore invites us to radically reinterpret our relationship to plants. Using scientific insights, he speaks of the plants' subjectivity (they are "not only a what but also a who"), their responsiveness and their interactions with the environment and with one another, and he insists on their intrinsic value. This implies taking into account the singularity of each species instead of postulating the abstract conceptual unity of all plants (Marder, "If Peas Can Talk" np), regarding plants *per se*. "The challenge", he says, "is to let plants be within the framework of what, from our standpoint, entails profound obscurity" (*Plant Thinking* 9). One essential consequence of Marder's ideas is a reevaluation of human-plant relationships. He argues, "Nevertheless, the distance between us and other living creatures loses its static character as soon as the nominal categorial divisions between various 'classes' of beings are shaken and muddled, without compromising these beings' differences and commonalities" (*Plant Thinking* 9). The gap does not disappear, but human separateness and superiority dissolves. Another consequence is ethical when Marder promotes a more responsible treatment of plants as a first step towards more conscientious eating habits.



Can plants also speak? Language has long been another marker that was exclusively attributed to humans and considered a sign of our superiority, that is until animal studies showed how non-humans also communicate by sounds and gestures, proving that animals have a language of their own. Plants, however, seem to be mute. Yet, they too are said to be able to communicate, albeit in plant-specific ways, by sending out molecular and electrical signals that are not audible to human ears. In their approach to the question of plant language, Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patrícia Vieira differentiate between two modes of speaking about plants: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*. *Extrinsic* language is a language used by scientists, theorists, writers, artists and others, which includes taxonomy, ontology, or literary references. It "is imposed upon plants as a means of dissecting, ordering, or consigning them to the background" (xvii). Nonetheless, it also gives us information about the mysteries of plants and guides us to a better understanding of the vegetal world.

More interesting with regard to the astonishing insights into the life of plants is the *intrinsic* language which focuses on how the "vegetal species" themselves speak, how they negotiate "ecologically with their biotic and abiotic environment" (Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira xviii). Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira list the language of biochemistry, the multi-sensorial expressions of plants as well as ecological interactions between plants and animals, soil microorganisms and the environment (xviii). It is a language that has nothing to do with words and phrases. Again, we have to step beyond our commonly shared humanistic concept of language as a linguistic phenomenon and realize that there are other forms of articulation that are nonverbal. Gagliano et al. refer to Walter Benjamin as well as to the field of biosemiotics (Uexküll, Peirce, Hoffmeyer) in their claim that all of life expresses itself, that language is "pervasive in all life" and "more than an audible communication carried out by humans; it encompasses the complexities of intersubjective and interspecies dialogue, involving nature (including plants) and humanity" (xix). The language of plants is an expression of their physiologies which convey a message. One example that is often given is plant signaling. It means that plants emit chemicals when they are being attacked that make them unpalatable. They also warn neighboring leaves of predators, and they can attract other insects that devour their attackers. Mancuso found out that the different scents even contain information about what insect they need to defend themselves. He further argues that plants have dialects. One of his students found out that the warning scent of a plant is understood in its own habitat, but not so well in another (cf Klein 24).

Such radical ideas are not generally accepted among all plant scientists. Lincoln Taiz, a plant physiologist, believes "that the writings of the plant neurobiologists suffer

from 'over-interpretation of data, teleology, anthropomorphizing, philosophizing, and wild speculations'. Clifford Slayman, a cellular and molecular physiologist, was even harsher in his critique when he called plant intelligence "a foolish distraction", terming the clash between the two opposing groups of scientists as "the last serious confrontation between the scientific community and the nuthouse" (cf Pollan, "The Intelligent Plant" 94). One of the often-contested ideas is that of a wood-wide-web, which holds that trees are connected through an intricate system of fungi attached to their roots, and that via these fungi, trees can communicate with each other and their environment, that they "nurture" their young seedlings, and cooperate and exchange information. Some scientists argue against such forms of anthropomorphizing and point out that there is not enough evidence for a plant's "behavior" (Taylor 10). These two lines of argumentation seem to be irreconcilable. In my opinion, Pollan, after listening to both sides, comes to the most reasonable conclusion when he suggests that the "controversy is less about the remarkable discoveries of recent plant science than about how to interpret and name them" ("The Intelligent Plant" 94). It is the *how* of narration, in the scientific community as well as or especially in fiction, that determines our reading of factual data and that allows us an imaginative leap into a realm not accessible to us as humans.

The interpretation and naming of the recent discoveries is thus not arbitrary, it is a philosophical choice with serious consequences for our understanding not only of the vegetal world, but also of our relationship within it. As long as we regard plants as the silent and passive Other, we do not have to think much about their well-being or their role within the larger ecosystem. We can believe that we exist separate from them, and that we can exploit them. If we put them on the same ontological level as humans, we can step beyond our hierarchical and zoocentric attitude and see them as connected to us in a web of relations, or as partners in a complex system of constantly evolving processes. We would no longer appreciate them only for their utilitarian value or as aesthetic objects, but as active, autonomous, intelligent, and communicative beings worthy of respect and even awe. Critical plant studies is a critique of liberal humanism, because it dethrones the human and reinterprets his/her position in the world. At the end of his book *Plants as Persons*, philosopher Matthew Hall lists some of the consequences of our new insights: we should examine and reform our use of plants, we should not waste plant lives by overconsumption, we should reduce the amount of meat we consume and not use plants to drive cars. We must also provide places for plants to prosper and flourish and restore natural habitats (Hall 163-166). "These dialogue-based relationships recognize the plurality of voices in the natural world and are a work in progress toward dissolving the human-nature dualism that is at the heart of our ecological predicament"

(Hall 168, 169). I will now turn to a close reading of Han Kang's story to demonstrate how the claims and arguments of plant studies can enrich the interpretation of fiction and shed light on the necessity of a revised human-plant relationship. Can a new conception of plants help understand a woman's desire to become a plant?

### 3.

"The Fruit of My Woman" is divided into eight parts, seven of them told from the perspective of the nameless husband, and one (section 7) from the equally nameless wife who addresses her mother in an imaginary conversation. From the very beginning, the reader is confronted with an ambiguous environment in which the beauty of spring in May and its budding, fertile nature is tainted by rot and decay and the images of violence and death. The petals of the lilacs are "like severed tongues", and the "rotting white blooms are trampled beneath the shoes of passers-by" (1). "Sunlight the colour of a ripe peach's flesh oozed onto the living room floor", it being "sickly sweet, lukewarm sunshine" (2). These few examples are closely related to the woman's body when the husband remarks in the first sentence: "It was last May when I first saw the bruises on my wife's body" (1). Youth, beauty, growth and fertility—in nature as well as the woman—are closely related, they are exposed to violence and destruction. Seen through the eyes of a first-person male narrator they are separate from the realm of the patriarchal society he is a member of.

Part of the violence consciously or subconsciously experienced by the young couple are the housing conditions in the city. They live in an apartment in a block of high-rises with "seven hundred thousand people all crammed together", in hundreds and thousands of identical buildings. The view from their balcony is the main road and a river, trees or grass are never mentioned again (4, 5). Having grown up in the hillier districts of Seoul, she hates it there and cannot get used to "a central-heated, tightly-sealed flat" (5). A defining feature of the flat itself is its chilliness and its "contained emptiness" (8). In short, it is a sterile, deadening environment in which even the plants on the balcony, described as "hardy greenstuffs" and functioning as mere backdrop to the couple's life, cannot thrive (6).

This chilly environment must be seen as symptomatic of the couple's relationship in which both act out socially expected gender roles: he is the breadwinner who goes out every day, often till late at night to earn money, while she stays at home to cook for him and keep house. Theirs was an arranged marriage. He was attracted to her voice which he valued like a precious object, comparing it to "an elaborately glazed and lacquered

table" (6), but he cannot understand her as a human being. He finds her secretive, and her eyes seeming to wander far away. What on earth could she be yearning for? When he detects a loneliness in her, something that sets her apart, it reminds him of his own loneliness as he repeatedly and insistently emphasizes in the course of the story. As a totally self-centered man, he even questions "whether this woman really had any right to cause me such loneliness" (7). Confronted with the growing bruises on her body, he treats her like a child, commanding her to go to the hospital. There is no physical or emotional connection between the two, their sexual life having withered like the plants on the balcony.

Nonetheless, despite the chilling sterility of the apartment and the marriage, nature or natural impulses will have their way. Lilacs bloom, although their petals are trampled upon, and the woman's body also seeks new ways to blossom and thrive. Ultimately (and improbably), she metamorphoses into a plant. Metamorphoses are a familiar concept in Western culture, in myths and fairy tales, as well as in fiction and drama. However, as Han Kang's translator Deborah Smith notes, Korea has no comparable tradition of transformation. Her telling of myths seems more like retellings for which no original exists (13). Although the story reminds us of Daphne turning into a tree, the author does not pursue parallels to the antique myth. She rather focuses on the gradual transformation of a human being into a completely different form of existence, the details of which are reminiscent of the ideas of plant studies.

Why does the woman leave her human body behind and become a plant? One reason is that she needs to escape from her stifling social circumstances, her apartment and her unloving husband. Escape is an old dream of hers. As a teenager she ran away to the city, never wanting to be like her mother who is rooted in her village. "Living and dying freely had been her dream ever since she was a child", the husband tells us (5). However, instead of going away as far as possible, she does something that contradicts her plans: she quits her job and puts all her savings into the deposit for their apartment, finally becoming stuck there. Instead of pursuing her dream of freedom, she gives in to her deadening environment and slowly begins to wither. Paradoxically and at this point unbeknownst to her husband, her withering is part of her process of rebirth, an escape from patriarchal violence into a more satisfying vegetal existence. It is a radical resistance against the demands of patriarchy. During this process her husband's anthropocentric convictions become shaken. We can observe how he slowly begins to see plants no longer as mere objects but as alive and responsive.

But first he notices, from his position of separateness, how his wife's body changes in unexpected ways. Small pale bruises the size of a newborn's fist appear on her skin.

The husband is disgusted with these marks on her body over which he has no control. He reminds the reader of a 19th century story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark," in which a young scientist, recently married, is abhorred by a birthmark on his wife's cheek which is connected to her fertility and out of his male control. Whereas Hawthorne's scientist experiments on the birthmark and thereby causes his wife's death, Han Kang's female protagonist is not a passive victim of male dominance. She does not give up life, but finds a totally new, non-human way of being in the world.

The transformation is a slow process, also for the husband. What he first observes as a seemingly cold, detached person —although he is obviously frightened— is utterly mysterious. He finds the growing, spreading bruises, her weight loss, and her weakening signs of life to be very unattractive. He describes her body, "the withered, naked frame", with negative food and plant metaphors: her hair looks like "radish leaves" (4), her narrow shoulders "are drooping like wilted cabbage" (5), the small fist-like bruises are now like taro leaves, "the dull colour of a weeping willow's branches" (4), her face is wet and blotchy and quite unsightly. Instead of helping her, he scolds her for not taking better care of her body. His disregard of her feelings, his selfishness and revulsion certainly drive her further and further away from him. We observe, through his judging eyes, how she loses her human features and acquires a vegetal corporality: she loses her appetite and craves only water, she slowly loses her speech, she can hardly move anymore, her breathing becomes incredibly faint, her entire body turns dark green. In short, she becomes a plant. So far, we see her changes through her husband's eyes, changes that concern the exterior of her new body and its needs. We do not even get a glimpse of her own inner experience.

Interestingly, however, the husband begins to find her more fascinating the more plantlike she becomes. When he returns home after a one-week business trip, her transformation is almost complete. Whereas before it bothered him that he could not find any clues in her eyes or explanations in her words, he now notices a peculiar beauty: her face is like a glossy evergreen leaf, her hair like stems of wild herbs, her eyes are glittering (9). Not only does he appreciate her plantlike appearance, he also begins to understand her desires and needs uttered by her in a weak voice, and expressed in the signs of her body. When she murmurs, barely audible, that she needs water, he responds to her and splashes it onto her chest, whereupon her entire body "underwent a quivering revival, like the leaf of a huge plant. I went back and refilled the washbowl, returning to pour it over my wife's head. Her hair sprang up, as though some invisible weight had been compressing it. I watched her glittering green body bloom afresh with my baptism. [...] My wife had never been so beautiful" (9), he exclaims. He then puts her in a big flowerpot on their balcony and in a reversal of previous gender roles takes care of her.

Before we come to the ending of the story, we get to hear, finally, the wife's version of her almost completed transformation. Her first word is "Mother" (9) whose warmth and love, represented by the orange woolen sweater she had left behind, is missing in the daughter's married life, giving us another clue as to the motivation for her transformation. She tries to explain to her mother what is happening to her and how she feels about it. Important here is a heightened sensibility, one typical of plants:

Even without seeing, listening, smelling and tasting, everything feels fresher, more alive. I sense the rough friction of the car tyres [sic] as they skim over the tarmac [...]. I feel buds sprouting and petals unfurling in places both near and distant, larvae emerging from chrysalises, dogs and cats giving birth to their young, the trembling stop-start of the old man in the next building (10).

She is aware of her husband's loving care, his tears, his desperation by *sensing* "the air molecules being disarranged, his clenched fist flailing without a target" (12). The transition scares the wife, after all her limbs fall out, the flowerpot becomes too cramped, and there are shooting pains at the tips of her roots (12).

The first-person narrator in this section is the wife-becoming-plant who still speaks a human language, but what she speaks about is her experience as a no-longer-human being. At this point she is a hybrid between human and plant who still relies on words, but lets the reader share her new senses and feelings that are not dependent on human senses like seeing, hearing and smelling, but on the touch of leaves and roots, on the movement of air molecules, in short, on a newly developed intricate sensory apparatus. As an almost-plant she is not a dumb object, but a being very much alive to her immediate surroundings. She is not a victim, but an active subject who seems to manipulate her formerly unloving husband into a generous and care-giving man. She finally succeeds not by using human language, but by conveying to him, through signs, the needs of her changed body. In short, she begins to communicate in the intrinsic, nonverbal language (see Gagliano, Ryan, Viera) of the vegetal species, a language which expresses the desires of her new embodiment and which the husband quickly learns to react to.

Her metamorphosis is something she had been wishing for. "I've dreamed of this, of being able to live on nothing but wind, sunlight and water, for a long time now" (10). She keeps dreaming of growing as tall as a poplar: "I pierce through the roof of the balcony and through that of the floor above, the fifteenth floor, the sixteenth floor, shooting up through concrete and reinforcing rods until I break through the roof at the very top. Flowers like white larvae wriggle into blossom at my tallest extremities. My trachea sucks up clear water, so taut it seems it will burst, my chest thrusts up to the sky and I strain to stretch out each branching limb. This is how I escape from this flat. Every night,

mother, every night the same dream" (12). The wife's desire to escape has finally turned from a horizontal to a vertical direction, one inherent in plants. She no longer needs to move across space to maintain a sense of freedom, but finds fulfillment in vegetal growth which allows her to overcome the violent environment of her private and social life. Her metamorphosis can thus be understood as an act of resistance, a reaching up to the sky where she is out of reach of patriarchy. That her success is part of a recurring dream shows her move to be beyond the logic of language, into the realm of the irrational, the inaccessible, the realm of a totally different species like a plant.

When she loses her human appearance, her voice and her eyes, the reader no longer has access to her thoughts and feelings. It is her husband who narrates the ending of the story. As a result of his care, she begins to show signs of fertility: roots sprout out of her inner thighs, red flowers blossom from her chest, twin stamens pierce out through her nipples (12). These erotic images indicate a new, sensual relationship between husband and wife. She even produces tiny fruits from where her lips used to be which he eats. "Fruit of the only woman I'd ever had on this earth" (13). Now he savors the smell of fresh grass that is blooming from her lower parts. Human sexuality has been substituted by a vegetal fertility which gives him hope. He buys more flowerpots and puts the seeds into fertile soil, wishing for new flowers in the spring. "Would my wife sprout again?" he asks himself, "I just didn't know" (13).

The gradual changing of the wife into a plant is accompanied by a change in her husband's attitude and behavior towards her. First reacting with disregard, then anger at the loss of her humanity, he finally accepts and loves her new form of being and her changed desires. He waters her, lets her catch fresh air on the balcony, and enjoys her company. He takes care of their offspring (assuming that the fruit are the product of the final time he had sex with her before her "lowers parts", as he puts it, disappeared), and hopes for more, enjoying the beauty of her vegetal existence. He is also sensitive enough to notice her communicating with him on a plant level, feeling "a hazy sensation that defeats all language, like a minute electric current pulsing out from her body" (13). As philosopher Matthew Hall pointed out, plants do communicate by sending out molecular and electrical signals (141-143). They don't need a brain or words to actively engage with their environment. Functions like touch and receptivity to soil, air, temperature and other phenomena become important as part of a plant's interaction with the world. Cate Sandilands noted in an article on Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian*, the female protagonist's desire to become a plant "exacerbates the elusiveness of our grasp of her desire. Plants don't 'speak' in human words, and their embodied needs and motivations, which are so radically different from mammalian ones, register in human

understanding mostly through their tangible, physical manifestations: leafing, rooting, fruiting, bending, flourishing, withering, dying" (2). The husband learns to read these signs, he is now obviously communicating with his wife as a plant although he will never fully understand her, plants being so utterly different, eluding our grasp.

"The Fruit of My Woman" is a literary text that takes an imaginative leap into the fantastic world of plants. It introduces the reader to a different form of existence which is not passive or without agency, but a sensuous experience of a plant *self* (cf Hall), analogous to the insights garnered from critical plant studies. Especially the newly discovered forms of mobility and of communication support a reading of the wife-becoming-plant as a complex and rich experience. Movement across space as an escape from violence is substituted by the vertical movement of a plant with its possibilities of growth, development and fertility. A different kind of mobility thus becomes a means of evasion for a woman who saw no escape from her role in a suppressive patriarchal society. Furthermore, the wife's dream to turn into a plant is, as it turns out, a fulfillment of her desire to leave the disappointing human world behind. She guides her husband into a satisfying relationship. Therefore, her metamorphosis should not be seen as a defeat. It is a radical rebellion against the deadening social circumstances, especially against gender roles that both were stuck in. Only by leaving the human realm, by growing into another beautiful life form, can the two overcome their estrangement, their sterility and the violence of their environment. She must turn into a *potted* plant because only by caring for her can he leave his toxic masculinity behind and become a loving husband.

The short story shows the reader that human or anthropomorphic language will not help to overcome binary, toxic thinking. By using a first-person male narrator, Han Kang demonstrates how his limited perspective keeps a dominating, exploitative relationship intact. Only when the husband learns other forms of "speaking" —a new register of vocabulary and new metaphors, finally the intrinsic language of plants which goes beyond anthropocentric categories of the superiority or inferiority of gender and species— does he begin a transformation towards caring and love. At the same time, however, the short story shows that the inner experience of a plant remains inaccessible to humans. The story, dependent on words, has no words for a truly alien existence. Human language takes us only so far. By reacting to a plant's signs and signals, the male narrator can change his vocabulary and start to be more considerate. But he cannot enter his wife's mind once she has become a plant. He cannot even say whether she is happy or not, happiness lying outside the register of a plant's existence. He can only follow her development on anthropomorphic terms as long as she has some human traits left. Once her transition is completed, he has no access to



her inner life, her thoughts and feelings. Without a brain, she will have other means of experiencing the world and of interacting with it. He can only react to the visible signs of her changed embodiment.

Literature like Han Kang's story can be read as an indictment of patriarchy, even as a critique of liberal humanism. It can also guide the reader into paying closer attention to our plant environment and our own position within it. It can encourage us to imagine a different species which possesses amazing capabilities, and to interact with it. The attention the husband pays to his wife as plant shows the ethical consequences which a non-binary, non-anthropocentric conception of other species has for us as a human species. Critical plant studies' insights here confirm the benefits of the woman's desire to metamorphose. Scientific studies can point out ways to overcome anthropocentrism and speciesism, but it is fiction which lets us imagine ourselves as partners in a wide web of relations.

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