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Green is the New Black: Plant Monsters as ecoGothic tropes - vampires and *femme fatales*

Teresa Fitzpatrick

Recent ecoGothic critics have drawn on ecofeminism ‘to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear [...] by exposing interlocking androcentric and anthropocentric hierarchies, misogyny and speciesism, [that] seeks to question the mutual oppression of women, animals, and nature’ (Del Principe 2014: 1). While late-Victorian and Edwardian writers may have questioned ‘assumptions about human supremacy’ through the female Other as a spiritual conduit of non-human nature (Punter 2013: 55), ‘[g]othic fiction at its core is about transgression of all sorts’ of boundaries, including national, social, sexual, and ‘the boundaries of one’s own identity’, challenging established constructs and foreshadowing societal anxieties of impending change (Heiland 2004: 3). An ecoGothic approach pertains to examine these deep-seated fears through ‘the interconnectedness of gothic and nature (ecology)’ (Keetley & Wynn Sivils 2018: 3). Moreover, although ‘femininity itself has been demonised in Gothic literature by way of the *femme fatale*, man-made monster, vampire and Medusa’ (Mulvey-Roberts 2016: 108), these established Gothic tropes, particularly vampire and *femme fatale* figures, have not been extensively reconsidered as gendered Other in plant monsters, nor considered through an ecofeminist perspective. In fact, plant monster fiction has previously received little attention outside post-colonial gothic criticism. Even more recent explorations, such as *Plant Horror* (Keetley & Tenga 2016), predominantly focus on environmental concerns in twentieth-century eco-horror rather than on plant monsters as Gothic tropes. Drawing on gender associations of nature and femininity within a Victorian framework, Female Gothic and material ecofeminist theories, I offer a reading of two late-Victorian Gothic texts: H.G. Wells’s 1894 tale, ‘The Flowering of the Strange Orchid’ (2013: 63-71) and Howard R. Garis’s 1905 short story, ‘Professor Jonkin’s Cannibal Plant’ (2013: 113-22), that creates a place for plant monsters to bloom as ecoGothic tropes. Wells’s short story depicts the orchid as a vampiric *femme fatale*, gendering nature to blur the lines between human and non-human through bodily transgression, while Garis’s tale features a monster pitcher plant as uncanny *eco-femme fatale*.

French for ‘deadly woman’, the *femme fatale* is a well-established figure in literature: wickedly and sexually irresistible, this enchantress narcissistically manipulates the men around her into compromising and deadly situations. These characteristics are shared with the vampire figure; female vampires are often portrayed as draining male protagonists of their life-force i.e. blood, energy or even money. When these demonised feminine qualities are projected onto flowering plants traditionally associated with the passive, caring female identity, the plant becomes a gendered Gothic monster. The ‘peculiar commingling of the familiar with the unfamiliar’ (Royle 2003: 1) in gendering these plants adds to their rendering as uncanny eco-(logical) *femmes fatales*. Through these gendered plant monsters, both tales engage with the contemporary anxieties and political sensitivities surrounding scientific progress, material change and rising feminism.

Gendering the Plant Monster

Victorians were fascinated with plant-collecting and the desire for greenhouses, gardens and public parks reflected a modern age of imperial and patriarchal desire to demonstrate power over nature. Hardly surprising then, that ‘[t]he monstrous plant [...] has proven an enduring object of fascination in literature and film, appearing everywhere from traditional folklore [...] to hard science fiction’ (Miller 2014: 470), as an embodiment of concerns about rapid social change and major scientific progress. Yet, although plant monsters ‘may point to a deep unease about the boundary between taxonomic kingdoms’ within animal studies, they are often overlooked in literary criticism (Miller 2012: 461). This seems strange since ecofeminism has increasingly focused on the intersectionality of cultural identities, with plant monster fiction offering a vehicle for considering national, racial and gendered ‘Other’ through the gothic tropes of monstrous, grotesque and *femme fatale* figures. The long nineteenth century was one of ‘explosive changes’, which ‘transformed the texture of everyday life’ meaning ‘social identities were dissolved and remade’, with evolutionary theory providing ‘a particularly rich source for Gothic plotting’ and strange identities (Hurley 2001: 131-133). The struggle to cope with these social changes in relation ‘to nation, to race, to gender, to sexuality’ accompanied fears of degeneracy that were frequently projected onto the vampire (A. Smith 2001: 64). The female vampire, however, challenges the ‘power of the Victorian patriarch’ with the ‘voluptuous, voracious, immoral seductress’ undermining the notion that ‘women must appear pure and virtuous angels in the home’ (Wisker 2012: 225). Amid such discourse on degeneration, invasion anxieties and the

classification of national, racial and gendered Other, the *femme fatale* trope emerges ‘from a phallogocentric point of view’ as the dark, chaotic, irrational, wild side of femininity (Stott 1992: 38). In Wells’s tale, this dichotomous view of women is highlighted through the gendering of both human and non-human characters when novice plant collector, Winter-Wedderburn, purchases an unusual orchid rhizome at auction. After careful nurturing, it flowers beautifully, enticing the hapless gardener closer with its perfume, only to attack Winter-Wedderburn with its tentacle-like roots, revealing itself as a vampiric *femme fatale* in contrast to the conservative human housekeeper.

Orchid as *femme fatale*

In the years following the Great Exhibition (1853) which was seen as the pinnacle of British imperialism, Victorians became fascinated by orchids. An unusual, care-intensive, expensive and varied species: orchids were highly sought after at the time and required heated environments (hothouses) to replicate original habitats, meaning the ownership of both hothouse and orchids indicated wealth and social status. Victorian sensibilities encouraged the use of flowers to convey messages and orchids were popular symbols of love, admiration and fertility. Hence, projecting socio-political concerns onto the ‘flowering’ of the ‘strange orchid’ within a Victorian Gothic context may well have resonated clearly with a contemporary reader. Having aerial roots, epiphytic growth, fused sexual structures, and a symbiotic fungal relationship for germination (Arditti & Wing 2004: 69-70), orchids already offer Gothic potential with such unusual growing and reproductive methods. Darwin’s investigations into orchids also helped blur the boundaries between plants and animals, providing inspiration for writers to reflect the shifting relationship between the sexes (Endersby 2016). Aligning the long-lasting orchid blossoms with female sexuality, this supposedly delicate plant has survived and adapted thousands of species and varieties over millennia, making it an ideal trope for evolving gender identities.

Using this heightened sexualised femininity, Wells creates an *eco-femme fatale* figure through the orchid’s transgressive nature and attack on the male gardener, reflecting contemporary concerns about socio-political change. Extolling his orchid growing, Winter-Wedderburn declares that in practising the ‘mysteries of the orchid cultivator’, his expensive rhizome could ‘turn out to be a very beautiful orchid indeed’ (Wells: 66-7). In a gendered reading, the protagonist suggests the male ‘orchid cultivator’ must appropriately guide the orchid as ‘woman’ into their patriarchally-constructed role. However, his ‘rhizome’ produces

a monstrous orchid that blurs the boundaries between beautifully benign and monstrously lethal, embodying the uncanny (Royle 2003: 2) and the dangerous nature of ecoGothic. Deleuze and Guattari argue that '[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles' (1987: 6-7), allowing the orchid to be considered as a gendered ecoGothic trope that reflects Victorian anxieties. They suggest modernity seen through a 'radicle-system' reflects a fragmented, chaotic world-view; '[t]he world has become chaos' while a 'rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 5-6), providing a way of understanding the interconnectedness and increasing flux of cultural concepts. The aggressive nature of a generally benign flower underlines the multiplicity of anxieties stemming from the swift changes of modernity, such as evolving gender roles. On the one hand, the orchid reflects societies such as the Girls' Friendly Society and the Mothers' Union which promoted an ideal of motherhood and femininity. Yet, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the Women's Movement were conversely influential in supporting social and political equalities, with members often lampooned publicly as monstrous despite many, in fact, being famously beautiful, such as British actress and suffragette, Cicely Hamilton. Hence, concerns about the increasing influence of these feminist and social movements on established gender roles are explored through Wells's orchid as a *femme fatale* figure.

While Stott (1992), drawing on feminist theories of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Toril Moi, and Julia Kristeva, positions the *femme fatale* as Other within the dichotomous perspective of idealised/vilified woman in the male imagination, Mario Praz 'identifies the *femme fatale* as praying mantis, a vampire, a siren or a wanton courtesan', and sees 'sexual cannibalism and predatory instincts as a predominant characteristic of the fatal woman' (Praz in Luczynska-Holdys 2013: 4-5). In Wells's tale, Winter-Wedderburn is besotted with the exotic beauty of his orchid, described in suggestive overtones generally reserved for the sexual attractiveness of a human *femme fatale*. Andrew Smith has argued that Victorian obsession with 'normality' and the ostracisation of social deviants witnessed fears of degeneracy projected onto monstrous Others (2001: 164). Established gendered readings of nature alongside the characteristics of a vampire interpret the strange orchid as an alternative fatal woman. Winter-Wedderburn is always 'singularly busy in his steamy little hothouse [...] having a wonderfully eventful time', admiring 'his new darling', and when the orchid blooms, '[h]e stopped before them in an ecstasy of admiration' (Wells 2013: 66-68).

The overt eroticism in his ‘worshipping’ the flowers, described as having a ‘heavy labellum [...] coiled into an intricate projection’ (Wells 2013: 69), portrays the orchid as a sexualised female protagonist in contrast to the conservative human (female) housekeeper, providing an uncanny rendering of females as symbols of either ‘domestic happiness or unnatural monsters’ (Hurley 1996: 121). Wells engages with contemporary anxieties about changing gender roles and early feminism, played out through the plotline of the power struggle between modern ideology (represented by the orchid) and conservative traditionalism (embodied in the housekeeper). After all, the *femme fatale* is a subversive figure that at any one time can be ‘prostitute, suffragette, New Woman, virago, degenerate, Wild Woman, Free Woman’ or witch, who threatens cultural, social, sexual, political and gender norms, representing unpalatable progressive changes of modernity (Stott 1992: 49).

When violence is exhibited by the fatal woman it is often ‘displaced onto an inhuman and unfemale source’ (Craciun 2009: 24-26), seen here as the plant monster. Also, in the late Victorian era, ‘an independent woman was castigated as unfeminine or even openly presented as masculinised’ (Luczynska-Holdys 2013: 11), and it is this change from feminine beauty to predatory violence nascent in the *femme fatale* that is portrayed through the plant monster discussed here. Investigating the ‘predatory female as invading Other’, Stott positions the *femme fatale* at the intersection of sociocultural anxieties about invasion and the ‘preoccupations with the all-powerful New Woman’ (1992: 124-5). Using Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Stott aligns native females in colonial encounters with ‘carnivorous jungle plants – *fleurs du mal* – alluring and deadly’ (1992: 128). Drawing a direct and clear association between foliage, flower and female as a ‘devouring femininity’, Stott develops a compelling link between the *femme fatale* and exotic (carnivorous) plants as a means of addressing socio-political concerns through gender (1992: 137, 126-62). Craciun, like Stott, argues that while women writers employed the *femme fatale* as a revolutionary figure in the ‘liberation from the constraints of domesticity’, the image of woman as bacchante was used by men during this period ‘to justify restricting women’s rights even further’ (2009: 41). While Winter-Wedderburn is besotted with the orchid’s unusual beauty, his housekeeper is not swayed. She describes the aerial rootlets as ‘little white fingers poking out [...] trying to get at you’, reminding her of ‘tentacles reaching out after something’ (Wells 2013: 67-8). Kelly Hurley (1996: 62) identifies tentacled beings or insects as the main non-human monsters in *fin-de-siècle* tales, building on late Victorian obsession with the bizarre and fears of degeneration. Although Winter-Wedderburn’s attitude towards the orchid reaffirms

traditional associations of nature and femininity, the female housekeeper's reference to it as 'that horrid orchid' with 'tentacles' (Wells 2013: 67-9) highlights the transgressive nature of the plant. Through her attitude Wells characterises conservative fears of progress alongside anxieties of evolutionary regression.

The blurred boundaries of eco-*femme fatale*

Recent eco-feminist criticism calls for a reconsideration of anthropocentric views towards 'the movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature' (Alaimo 2008: 238). The orchid as an uncanny ecoGothic trope explores these blurred boundaries in the relationship between the plant (as female) and the (male) gardener. The female body has been 'so strongly associated with nature in Western thought that it is not surprising that feminism has been haunted' by, and largely responsible for re-affirming, gendered dualisms (Alaimo 2008: 240). Viewing Wells's blood-thirsty orchid as a *femme fatale* through an eco-feminist prism, however, materialises this gendered female body within nature, which 'fundamentally unsettles [...] the liberal humanist conception of the human subject as the only intelligent agent with the ability to control nonhuman others' (Oppermann 2015: 4).

Through the intersection of feminine nature, animalistic monstrosity and the grotesque, the orchid clearly claims its status as *femme fatale*. Winter-Wedderburn's obsession and the orchid's captivating perfume as his 'new darling' matures is the seduction tool of the fatal woman: '[T]here was a new odour in the air, a rich, intensely sweet scent, that overpowered every other' which at first beguiles him before the 'insufferable scent' causes him to swoon (Wells 2013: 68-9). The deliberate targeting of the plant monster's victim demonstrates the orchid's agency as *femme fatale*, reflecting socio-political fears of the emancipated woman. Shortly after succumbing to the orchid's scent, Winter-Wedderburn is duly rescued from the clutches of the seductive and beautiful vampiric orchid by his devoted housekeeper who restores the natural order of things, ergo, be wary of the consequences of modernity and the New Woman, referenced here as a sexually deviant, female vampiric orchid.

Cheryl Blake-Price (2013) has argued that the interactions of monstrous plants with their victims often depict a male domination over female victims. Gendering the plant as an aggressive female and the male gardener as the victim clearly disrupts phallogentric gender roles. The exotic orchid's femininity is undermined by its vampiric attack. Coupled with the atypical gender attributes of the human protagonists, established gender constructs are

completely destabilised. This is a ‘strange’ orchid, and Winter-Wedderburn is keen to point out that fertilisation is not typically through the orchid-flower, hence ‘such queer things about orchids’ are that ‘some of them have never been found with seed’ (Wells 2013: 67-8). The orchid-flower’s asexual identity and the grotesque descriptions of tentacled roots blurs the boundaries of plant, animal, human, non-human and gender associations.

Gendering the orchid within its Victorian context, Wells depicts its florid beauty and exoticism as a *femme fatale* of nature. In doing so, the ‘strange’ orchid’s monstrous attack on Winter-Wedderburn reflects contemporary anxieties about rising feminism and expanding female roles through the key qualities of the fatal woman. Upon finding the prostrate Wedderburn ‘lying, face upward, at the foot of the strange orchid’ and within the clutches of its ‘exultant tentacles’ that were ‘crowded together, [...] grey ropes, [...] stretched tight with their ends closely applied to his chin and neck and hands’, the housekeeper struggles to ‘pull him away from the leech-like suckers’ (Wells 2013: 69). When snapped, ‘their sap dripped red’ and the orchid is completely revealed as a vampire plant (Wells 2013: 69). For Andrew Smith, ‘images of vampirism’ represent concerns about masculinity posed by modernist aesthetics as the ‘power struggle between the sexes’ in a way that ‘suggests that masculinity loses control both over itself and over a feminine Other’ (2001: 150-1). Using Victorian associations of flowers and femininity, Wells displaces concerns about embracing modern ideas of social equality onto the expensive orchid bulb suggesting that supporting, nurturing and encouraging modern ideology could lead to gender anarchy. The struggle between conservative and progressive views are portrayed through gender and body at the end of the tale where the conservative housekeeper battles to free the gardener from the clutches of the modernist orchid: ‘[s]he tugged now with renewed strength at Wedderburn’s motionless body’ yet ‘[the orchid] still clung with the grimmest tenacity to its victim’ (Wells 2013: 70). The gender role reversal of hero-villain-victim (usually male-male-female) within the Gothic context and reconfiguring the flower as a sexualised body renders the situation and the orchid truly uncanny in that the familiar positions of both flowers and women are rendered alarming and strange.

Material eco-feminism: human as food

Stacy Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality explores the ‘movement [of material substance] across human and more-than-human flesh’ through ‘food, since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh’ (Alaimo 2010: 12). Using this theory to examine the vampiric

tendencies of the orchid as *eco-femme fatale* helps dispel any clear-cut boundaries between nature and culture through consideration of the material flesh of the gendered body. Within the Gothic context of 'other', the predatory orchid becomes a gendered eco-monster that engages with contemporary ideologies of femininity and resulting socio-political anxieties. As the gardener becomes plant 'food', the 'intra-action of matter, discourses, and cognitions' (Barad 2007) reflect contemporary concerns about the disintegration of edified gender roles through a coemerging body. Plant, human, and gender boundaries become temporarily blurred during the vampiric (sexual?) act in a momentary reflection of modern anxieties. The vivid imagery of a rotting corpse as the *femme fatale* orchid 'lay there, black now and putrescent', provides stark contrast to the rescued gardener as 'Wedderburn himself was bright and garrulous' (Wells 2013: 71); dichotomous gender ideology is restored through the separation of man and nature.

Although the creepy personification of nature as *femme fatale* vampire in a quasi-domestic setting 'would separate human from nature' and may seem anthropocentric, 'trans-corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position' (Alaimo 2010: 14-16). The orchid feeding on the human gardener exemplifies, albeit in reverse, trans-corporeality as 'the material interchanges between bodies (both human and non-human)' helping to 'cultivate a tangible sense of [human] connection to the material world' (Alaimo 2010: 16), highlighting (hu)man's relationship with nature and his desire for control over it in the form of gardening. The orchid as vampire and physical consumption of the (human) gardener reflect Nancy Tuana's notions of porosity, which 'discloses [...] the flow of information and discursive practices through bodies. Phenomena such as gender, sexuality, class, social practices, and their narratives are filtered through [...] coemerging bodies' (Iovino 2014: 103, original italics). The gender complexity and rhizomorphic quality of the orchid as an ecological *femme fatale* along with its vampirism provide an uncanny body that encapsulates these intersecting cultural concerns. Similarly, the anthropomorphic gendering of this predatory orchid seeks not only to question modernity's socio-political and cultural progressiveness but also to puncture the pervasive assumptions that (hu)man is superior and separate from nature and the environment.

A gendered space: the hothouse

The blurred boundaries of gender are typified by the description of the gardener, who, from the outset is 'a shy, lonely, rather ineffectual man' whose only preoccupation is his

‘ambitious little hothouse’ (Wells 2013: 63). According to Marianna Torgovnick (quoted in Hurley 2001: 140), ‘degeneration was associated with femininity (effeteness)’, and ideas of masculinity are ambiguous in both gardener and hothouse.

The greenhouse follows social progress so closely that its development can be plotted from the Orangerie of the Restoration nobles, to the ‘highly decorative, social status’ conservatory of the Victorians (Lemmon 1962: 121). Predominantly domains of scientific enquiry and the conserve of plant explorers, Victorian glasshouses have an ambiguous identification with the garden. Associated in Victorian Literature with the construction of female identity as a nurturing gender role, the garden is considered a domestic space (Grasser 2005). Within Gothic texts, the garden is considered an extension of the house/home, a safe domestic space, with transgressive acts occurring in the garden rendered uncanny. Although greenhouse work was considered recreationally ‘suitable for the women of the household’, this took place in conservatories attached to the main house for the cultivation of out-of-season fruit and flowers as indicators of one’s financial means and social standing (Lemmon 1962: 133). Botany, too, had previously been considered a feminine science (Endersby 2016), but during the late-nineteenth century botany became a manly pursuit of scientific enquiry and the detached glasshouse construction (hothouses) became more botanical laboratory than garden that ‘called for a monklike [sic] devotion’ and included only ‘one or two curious or ugly objects [...] to show that there are such things’ (Lemmon 1962: 157&177). In Wells’s tale, while Winter-Wedderburn invites his housekeeper to admire his orchid in the hothouse, this is not a space that she enters frequently nor feels comfortable in; this is a steamy, exotic, male space that implies sexual indiscretion. Situating feminised exotic plants grown by the male protagonist in a scientific (male) space underlines phallogentric dichotomies. The gendering becomes uncanny when it is disrupted through the *femme fatale* orchid’s vampiric attack; when the domestic benign becomes aggressive.

In the end, the progressive New Woman (the orchid) is defeated in order to restore a traditional gender power balance. Although the tale appears to ‘conclude with the triumphant transcendence of “man”’ (Alaimo 2010: 16), it is the orchid’s exposure to the elements that kills it. The female orchid was reliant on artificial conditions provided by the male gardener in his hothouse laboratory, in a reflection of traditional gender roles. The agency of the natural world intervenes to destroy the ‘strange’ as if issuing a warning against (hu)man’s scientific interference with nature. Wells’s uncanny orchid motif represents fears of how progressive modernity challenges normative constructions encompassed in both the

rhizomorphic and vampiric nature of the flower. Yet despite being a human hors d'oeuvre, Winter-Wedderburn's lack of antagonism towards the man-eating plant monster suggests an acceptance of modernity's materialistic and progressive changes.

Man-eating plant monsters as *eco-femmes fatales*

Vampiric orchids are not the only *eco-femme fatale* figures. Victorians were 'avid botanists' of the unusual and carnivorous, being 'keen to obtain samples of sundews, pitcher plants, and venus flytraps for their collections' (Blake-Price 2013: 312). In 'Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant' (1905) by Howard R. Garis, the eponymous botanist also focuses his attention on his newly-acquired pitcher plant; another rhizomatic growth where plant gendering is used to engage with contemporary concerns. With feminism as a term signifying the 'struggle for women's rights' in both European and American Literature (Donawerth 2009: 213), Garis's *femme fatale* plant monster parodies unease with changing gender roles resulting from the expanding Women's Movement in an American context.

Turn-of-the-century Americans were so concerned about the effects of women's education on the established gendered professions and politics that 'supporters of women's education [...] separated themselves and their cause from woman's rights, insisting that the well-educated woman longed only to enhance her sphere, not abandon it' (Gordon 2002: 227). Despite access to higher education, many colleges continued to limit opportunities for women to nurturing or teaching professions, with others such as clerks and librarians becoming 'feminized' and subsequently low-paid, dead-end careers (Gordon 2002: 236). Since the language of flowers was also popular in Victorian America, with floral symbolism displayed by American writers within their own literature (Ingram 1869: 7), *eco-femme fatale* imagery used by an American author to voice concerns about modernity and expanding female roles through education is equally compelling.

The narrator introduces Professor Jonkin as an experimental botanist having 'had, by skillful [sic] grafting and care, succeeded in raising a single tree that produced, at different seasons, apples, oranges, pineapples, figs, coconuts, and peaches' and as someone who 'was continually striving to grow something new in the plant world' (Garis 2013: 113). Jonkin is the Dr Moreau of the plant world, meddling with nature and scientifically creating vegetable hybrids. The professor's new acquisition is a South American pitcher plant from 'what Darwin calls the carnivorous family of flowers' (Garis 2013: 114). Darwin's theories and botanical writings were well publicised and his personification in *Insectivorous Plants* held

implications for human sexuality and not simply horticultural interest (J. Smith 2003). Indeed, Darwin's evolutionary theory and botanical works inspired prehistoric monsters that became frequently employed by contemporary sensation fiction, linked to real-life events of sexual scandal and criminal behaviour that underlined late 19th Century anxieties (Hurley 1996: 60). Yet such monstrousness is not limited to non-human animal species. Insectivorous plants were likened to *femmes fatales* in both scientific writing and literature, described as 'lur[ing] their victims with enticing looks and tempting fragrances and empty promises of nectar, only to drown, dissolve, and dismember them' (J. Smith 2003: 144). The carnivorous nature of both Wells's orchid and Garis's pitcher plant not only destabilise gender perspectives, but their taste for humans as food upsets the balance of power in a way that reflects concerns about the gender power-shift of nineteenth-century female activism.

Jonkin's exotic plant is described in a similarly sensuous way to the orchid: 'a small plant with bright, glossy green leaves', with flowers described as female anatomy, '[h]e saw within a small tube, lined with fine, hairlike filaments'; even when its carnivorous nature is demonstrated, the insects are 'attracted by some subtle perfume, as well as by a sweet syrup that was on the edge of the petals' (Garis 2013: 114). Like Darwin's and Allen's scientific writings, Jonkin's pitcher plant is seen as *femme fatale* through the seduction and entrapment, when

[t]he little hairlike filaments ... suddenly reached out and wound themselves about the insects feeding on the sweet stuff, which seemed to intoxicate them. In an instant the flies were pulled to the top of the flower shaft by a contraction of the hairs, and then they went tumbling down the tube into the miniature pond below, where they were drowned after a brief struggle (Garis 2013: 115).

Jokingly suggesting the professor might 'train it to come to the table and eat like a human being' (Garis 2013: 115), the Professor's friend aligns the plant in patriarchal tradition with children, savages and women as Other. Reading the tale through a post-colonial lens, the pitcher plant could represent a young, female, indigene from South America sent to the professor, possibly as a bride, who needs to be acclimatised for civil society. As Stott (1992) has argued, indigenous women and jungle plants have been closely associated in portrayals of colonial *femmes fatales* within racial discourse and concerns of degeneration.

Notwithstanding such interpretation, the association of plant and female is particularly relevant to a gendered reading of the small pitcher plant as a young female. In the months that

follow, the professor spends ‘much time in that part of the glass house where the pitcher plant was growing’ (Garis 2013: 115). Once more, the gardener appears to be enamoured with his ‘mysterious pitcher plant’ (Garis 2013: 116), portrayed as exotic female within a male scientific space subjected to the attentions of the male gardener. The small plant, ‘about as big as an Easter lily’, increases exponentially to its augmented carnivorous diet ‘until the top was near the roof of the greenhouse, twenty-five feet above’ (Garis 2013: 118). As a grotesque carnivorous monster, the beautiful flower becomes inherently Gothic.

You are what you eat: blurring boundaries through cannibalism

Garis engages with anxieties surrounding gender role reversal at the turn of the century by exaggerating the plant’s carnivorous tendencies in opposition to Jonkin’s ‘healthy’ diet as a vegetarian (Garis 2013: 117). ‘Influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution’ and amid fears of degeneracy, Carole J. Adams argues, ‘[m]en who decide to eschew meat-eating [in the nineteenth century] are deemed effeminate’ (1990: 34), querying the gender assignation of Jonkin as well. Feeding the giant pitcher plant one of its three-a-day porterhouse beef steaks, the professor falls victim to the plant himself. It is in attempting to eat the vegetarian professor that the plant now becomes ‘cannibal’. Humanising the plant and suggesting it be named ‘the cannibal plant instead’ after it tries to eat Jonkin (Garis 2013: 122), implies a sense of equality between plant monster and human gardener. The term ‘cannibal’ refers to humans eating the flesh of other human beings or more broadly, consumption of the same species as food, acknowledging the Professor’s vegetal subjectivity (Marder, 2014).

This blurring of the boundaries is a distinctly Gothic reflection of material feminist theory that focuses on ‘the interchanges between human corporeality and the more-than-human world’ (Alaimo 2008: 244). Jonkin’s surrogate progeny’s meaty diet is increased steadily from ‘chopped beef’, to ‘three big beefsteaks every day’ (Garis 2013: 118). George Beard claims (in Adams 1990: 30) that “‘Brain-workers” required lean meat as their main meal’, suggesting a carnivorous diet was important for male academia. Within the American author’s contemporary context, a gendered reading of the plant’s carnivorous diet symbolises the educational opportunities for women that led to self-sufficiency and small roles within predominantly male professions. The plant is anthropomorphised as female throughout the tale, from training it to ‘eat like a human being’ to deciding ‘not to give it any supper or breakfast’ as punishment ‘for being naughty [...] as if the plant were a child’ (Garis 2013: 115, 122). Nick Fiddes argues that foods ‘are used to symbolise’ cultural

associations within society, although these often signify ‘our relationship with nature’ (1991: 41-45). From an eco-feminist perspective, as a ‘cannibal’ this plant monster not only underlines the interconnectivity of established dualisms, it also exemplifies Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality. For Alaimo, ‘food, whereby plants or animals become the substance of the human’ demonstrates the interconnected entanglements of ‘human corporeality to the flesh of other-than-human’ (2008: 253). In Garis’s tale, the gendered semiotics of cannibal plant monster and vegetarian human as food embeds this concept in reverse, destabilising patriarchal constructs and questioning (hu)man’s hubris in attempting to control the natural world. Furthermore, the horror fiction degenerate is often depicted as eating raw flesh (*The Hills have Eyes* 1977; *Wrong Turn* 1-7 2003-2017) and this ‘transgression of the cannibalism taboo’ is heightened when the consumer is female (Fiddes 1991: 89-90). Garis’s plant monster is clearly portrayed as a female cannibal figure - a transgression that further adds to its status as a *femme fatale*.

When the professor begins feeding the plant larger meaty meals, the plant grows to nearly twenty-five-foot tall and requires a scaffold to support the ‘great flower, about eight feet long and three feet across the bell-shaped mouth’ (Garis 2013: 119). The pitcher’s exponential and rapid growth seems to mirror the socio-political achievements and continued influence of the Women’s Movement on American access to higher education for women and the resulting ‘feminisation’ of certain originally male professions (Gordon 2002). Andrew Tudor argues that ‘abstract threat to stability and order finds immediate and concrete expression in the monster’ (1989: 19), evidenced here in the gigantism of the pitcher plant and its increasingly uncanny taste for more substantial flesh.

However, it is the intermingling of nature (the plant as consumer and human as food) and culture (the gendering of plant, gardener and space) that truly establishes the plant monster as an *ecological femme fatale*. It is the material eco-feminist reading of these plant monster stories that allows gendered nature to be reconsidered, not as a dualistic other, but as a complex interconnection that engages with multiple concerns of modernity. Sensitive gender and social issues were often displaced in gothic texts onto a menacing otherness that allowed such debates to be removed from direct discourse. Like Wells, Garis projects contemporary fears about active feminism and similar socio-political changes onto the pitcher plant as monstrous female Other - as vegetable *femme fatale*. Ambiguous gendering of plant and gardener here engages with contemporary debates about expanding socio-political roles for both men and particularly, women.

Conclusion

A projection of these anxieties onto the plant monster through an ecofeminist perspective provide Stacy Alaimo's (2008) trans-corporeality and Karen Barad's (2007) intra-action with a concrete embodiment of human and non-human interconnection. Human gardener and plant monster become each other in an uncanny reflection of a narrative agency of matter as female nature ultimately gains the upper hand over male scientific endeavour. While the protagonists and the spaces in these stories appear to reflect dichotomous gendering, the uncanny mirroring and bodily transgression of human and plant interaction blurs the boundaries of nature and culture. Feminising exotic flowers and carnivorous plants draws on the *femme fatale* figure to highlight contemporary concerns about progressive modernity. Their interaction and subsequent overpowering of the male gardeners not only reflects anxieties about emerging gender power-shifts but underlines how patriarchally-constructed identities are no longer stable. Portrayed as Female Other through the Gothic tropes of vampire and cannibal *femme fatale*, the authors project contemporary anxieties towards feminist movements onto nature as monstrous, but also open a wider debate about gender identity construction as well as androcentric attitudes towards nature and (hu)man's need to control it. Situating the exotic plant *femmes fatales* within a male assigned space of the scientific hothouse further underlines contemporary concerns surrounding progressive modernity's obsession with controlling the environment and landscape alongside anxieties about expanding female roles within male dominated professions. The transgression of gender-assigned roles onto both human and plant protagonists is distinctly Gothic, creating monstrous others within a gendered yet liminal space of the greenhouse, using established cultural constructs to underline the inextricable entanglement of human and nonhuman actors. Even when considering these transgressive Gothic monsters through a material ecocritical lens, gender remains an important component used to collapse established concepts of Other, particularly when the human 'gardener' loses control and becomes plant food. After all, despite delusions of control, all humans become food for plants in the end.

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