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Randy Laist (ed.), *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2013), 270pp.



What are critical plant studies? *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* is an anthology that grapples with this question, showcasing a diverse, engaging and rich range of individual papers exploring different aspects of the human-plant interface. There is an urgent need for such a book as the emerging field of critical plant studies takes shape, but the reader approaching it with the expectation of clear definitions and delimitations may well come away with more questions than answers. The main area of potential confusion stems from the uncertain relationship between literature and critical plant studies, which is the focus of this review.

*Plants and Literature* is the first volume of a series on “Critical Plant Studies: Philosophy, Literature, Culture” (ed. Michael Marder), resulting from a panel at the 2013 Modern Language Association conference. Presumably, future volumes will focus on the relationship between critical plant studies and other areas of research. A brief discussion of the series as a whole might have helped explain the focus on literature in this volume. The introduction by Randy Laist addresses the alienation of the postmodern urbanite from the world of plants, which are nonetheless essential to continued human existence. It reads almost as a whirlwind manifesto juxtaposing the many ways—evolutionary, symbolic, semantic, dietary, cultural, etc.—in which plants are a central defining feature of human life. Critical plant studies is introduced as an interdisciplinary endeavour which goes one step further than the more established animal studies, suggesting, provocatively perhaps, that the interesting and challenging frontier lies not between humans and animals but between humans and plants. Laist describes plants as a fundamentally different life form, a “significant barrier to our imagination,” (12) which poses deeply interesting ontological, not just semantic, questions about what it is possible to know about the world of plants. At the same time, the human-(animal)-plant relationship raises questions about what it means to be human in the first place. Are we “carnal” or “vegetal” beings?

While the introduction raises key themes or issues in critical plant studies which are then explored in the different contributions, it does not discuss the relationship between literary criticism (or ecocriticism) and critical plant studies. This would have been a useful addition, particularly as critical plant studies is described in such interdisciplinary terms. It is unclear to what extent the contributors see themselves as actively participating in critical plant studies. This becomes a possible problem of orientation for the reader, as most of the introduction functions independently of the essays, as an overview of critical plant studies rather than a guide in how to read the literary contributions within the new field. What is new here? Does the critical element

stem from the source material or the analysis? If it is a case of identifying texts/media which foreground plants, particularly the role of plants as sites or vectors of resistance, then literature has been conducting critical plant studies for centuries. If the field is distinguished by its analysis, how is its methodological framework different from that of literary criticism?

The scope and organisation of the anthology affects the interpretation of how literature informs critical plant studies. As Laist observes, an exhaustive account of critical plant studies would be impossible, implicating the whole of human history. The selection includes papers on English literature (European and American) since the Romantic period, reflecting the history of Western modernity. It is divided into analyses of Romantic, Modernist and Postmodernist literature, in a loosely chronological structure which Laist describes as “arborescent” and “more fundamentally, rhizomatic, providing a kaleidoscopic array of perspectives and case studies” (14). In terms of genre, a wide range is represented including not only conventional literary fare such as poetry, prose and drama, but also comics, graphic novel, film and, in the final paper, the commercial. The trajectory from more to less conventional maps onto the chronological structure. In the introduction, this structure is explained as following a development in literary accounts of human-plant relations to a greater degree of interconnectedness. At the same time, given that this relationship is environmentally and culturally specific, anxiety about alienation must be understood in a Western and increasingly urban context linked to environmental concerns. In Ubaraj Katawal’s paper on “The Smell of Cottonwood Leaves: Plants and Tayo’s Healing in Silko’s *Ceremony*,” alienation from the natural world is connected to alienation from native, pre-European culture and community. A recurring theme in the anthology is the association of the plant kingdom with something or someone to be mastered, dominated or consumed, as a site of subversion and resistance. This is developed from the beginning of the book with a gender analysis of *Mansfield Park* and “The Goblin Market” as well as in the association of the mastery of plants and slaves in the minds of Antebellum planters. Repeatedly, the simple nature-culture or subject-object dichotomy which assigns all agency to the human is resisted or overturned. The subversive role of plants as a site of resistance could have been more fully explored if, for instance, post-colonial literature had been included.

A final word on temporal delimitation. *Plants and Literature* follows the conventional limits of ecocriticism and environmental history by beginning with the Romantics, yet this excludes the hugely productive and influential early modern period, in which the study of plants was inseparable from the world of text. Travel writing, herbals, lexicography and translation were an integral part of the discovery, exchange and classification of plants, while poetry and drama engaged with these developments and herbaria collected dried plants and their labels in books. This anthology implicitly suggests that there is something special about the relationship between plants and literature, and an engagement with earlier texts would have served to make this relationship more explicit.

To sum up, *Plants and Literature* is a timely and rich publication in an urgently needed emerging field, which raises a number of important questions about how critical plant studies should relate to existing disciplines and scholarly traditions, and how it should delimit its canon. That it ultimately fails to explore these questions as fully as one might have wished is reflected in the unclear relationship between the volume's introduction and the individual contributions which it comprises, however compelling these are in and of themselves.