
Editor's Introduction

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In the Afterword to this special issue, Michael Marder employs the figure of the ‘centerpiece’ to describe the essays on premodern plants that we have ‘gathered here.’ In this conceit, the essays come into focus as ‘Beautifully lush and precisely arranged’ flowers, as if we had set them for display in a vase on *postmedieval*’s dining room table. The floral centerpiece, for Marder, is a ‘productive self-contradiction’: it is an ‘artefact’ that is ‘aesthetic, redundant, dispensable’ and – because it is typically located in the middle of a table – it is a ‘pivotal point around which everything else turns.’ It thus proves an apt emblem for our issue’s double focus: ‘Plants and mediocrity.’ In Marder’s formulation, these are ‘the centerpieces of the human relation to the world and to our own history, at once gratuitous embellishments and unsurpassable elements, the “fundamentals” of life, thought, and time.’ Marder’s philosophical writings on plants – and especially his attention to the vegetative soul in Aristotelian taxonomy and its legacies – inspired our decision to edit this special issue (Marder, 2013). And now his comments about its contents inspire how we introduce it.

But whereas Marder sees these seven wonderful essays as a centerpiece of cut flowers, we glimpse instead a representation of such a centerpiece. We view



them, in other words, as if they were a still life painting, perhaps akin to this early example of the genre, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder's *Still Life of Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase* (Figure 1).

According to Svetlana Alpers, an eminent art historian of the Dutch Golden Age, 'still lifes isolate and attend to objects. Each object is displayed not for use, or as a result of it, but for the attentive eye' (Alpers, 1983, 95). In the essays gathered here, our contributors attend to premodern plants in ways that, by contrast, encompass both aesthetics (poetry, fiction, gardening, contemplation, and decoration) and utility (herbals, practical manuals and scientific texts, and gathering prayers). We hope that such attention will prompt readers to further explore the discourses and the material practices associated with premodern plants.

In their own ways, our contributors attend to what we regard as the subject of floral still life painting: life itself, which is to say vegetal life (Marder, 2013, 22; Nealon, 2016, x). This is perhaps a counterintuitive statement to make about this genre of painting, since the aim of the floral still life is deception, not reality. As the art historian Anne Goldgar explains, 'A floral still life gives the opportunity for the impossible: the preservation of what will certainly fade. Indeed, such a picture allows a fantasy of a desirable but never attainable reality in its presentation of flowers that bloom at different times of year – again, a gathering together of riches against the commands of time' (Goldgar, 2007, 98). And yet, in so flagrantly and gorgeously refusing the passage of time, the floral still life also attempts to capture – to still – the elusive movements (to the naked human eye) of vegetal life. Tellingly, in other pictorial traditions, such representations are called *nature morte*: to behold vegetal life, one must also see nature dead (Petry, 2016). Certainly more morbid a designation than is still life, the French phrase *nature morte* nonetheless reminds us, as Marder does, that the 'life of plants is situated on the brink of death, in the zone of indeterminacy between the living and the dead' (Marder, 2013, 53). Here, our contributors shine a scholarly light on that zone for *postmedieval's* readers.

Dear readers, we ask that you imagine a still life. On a flat surface, there is placed a delicate, ornate vase overstuffed with roses (for Lara Farina), tulips, fritillaries, irises, carnations, narcissi, and daisies (for Gillian Rudd). Hovering around the vase and its blooming flowers are some butterflies and other insects (for Brooke Heidenreich Findley and Jessica Rosenberg), all of which index the effects of rot and decay. Under what conditions, you might wonder, did we *gather* these precise flowers? (Sara Ritchey might.) And did we consult seventeenth-century florists' manuals for a better sense of how to arrange or *compose*, in that word's multiple senses, nature so artfully? (This is a question for Tom White.) Finally, is there a science to such art that can be articulated in the absence of human categories for desire and embodiment? (This one is for



Figure 1: Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *A Still Life of Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase on a Ledge with Further Flowers, Shells and a Butterfly*. 1609–10, Netherlands. © The National Gallery, London.



Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari.) Even though none of our contributors focuses on such paintings, the conceit of the still life nonetheless generatively opens onto the botanical matters to which they do attend in these pages. Below is a series of descriptions for these flowers and other vegetal items as they appear in the table of contents; readers should consult it first so that they can better nose around this special issue, as if they were bees – like the one in Bosschaert the Elder’s *Still Life of Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase* – gathering up all the intellectual pollen.

The daisy: In the first chapter, Gillian Rudd scrupulously compares attention to this flower in the two Prologues to Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*. What, she wonders, do we see (and perhaps also miss) when we contemplate the (literary) flower?

The rose: In the second chapter, Lara Farina re-opens the case concerning the *name of the rose*. By what kind of logic, she asks, does naming operate in premodern herbals, and why does plant life seem to prompt human beings to generate so much of it, so many words for and about plants?

Gathering prayer: In the third chapter, Sara Ritchey investigates the ‘gathering prayer,’ a premodern genre of spiritual saying that pickers articulated as they collected herbs. What can these prayers tell us about the ontology of plants in the premodern imagination, and how might this understanding reconfigure a Foucauldian account of the signature?

Plant manual: In the fourth chapter, Tom White examines relations between medieval grafting treatises and other texts (literary and philosophical) that accompany them in manuscript. How might grafting – a practice that organizes time, plant matter, and human labor – also serve as a conceit that illuminates ideas about matter itself in these manuscripts?

Rot: In the fifth chapter, Brooke Heidenreich Findley tracks figurations of vegetal decay in the prose romance *Perceforest*. Essential to further growth and regeneration, decay is coded as spiritually valuable. How, she explores, does *Perceforest* establish a politics on the basis of rot?

Lifespan: In the sixth chapter, Jessica Rosenberg focuses on the futurity of plants – their ripening and rotting – in manuals for grafting orchard fruit. Since grafting attaches one plant to another, Rosenberg elaborates what it means to think about such futurity as the recursive memory of touch between plants.

Libertinage: In the seventh chapter, Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari examine vegetal life in libertine science and literature from the seventeenth century. Such writings imagine vegetality as queer, so what, they wonder, might this tradition afford contemporary theorizations of sexuality and environmentality?

After Michael Marder’s Afterword, we are delighted to include the superb review essay that Danielle Allor and Haylie Swenson composed. It provides a



current state of the field for critical plant studies; it also contextualizes and perhaps challenges how our contributors think and write about premodern plants. In it, Allor and Swensen critically engage a suite of must-read books published in a range of disciplines: Prudence Gibson's *The Plant Contract* (2018), Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder's *Through Vegetal Being* (2016), Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Plant Theory* (2015), Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), and Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2016). If this special issue's chapters comprise a floral still life, then this review essay proves a veritable scholarly bouquet.

About the Author and Issue Editors

Vin Nardizzi is Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* (2013) and is working on a new project called "Marvellous Vegetables: Plants and the Poetry of Description in the English Renaissance." He is grateful to Karol Pasciano for her keen editorial eye and helping him arrange these flowers (E-mail: nardizzi@mail.ubc.edu).

Robert W. Barrett, Jr. is Associate Professor of English, Medieval Studies, and Theatre at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is the author of *Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656* (2009) and of articles on the Chester Whitsun plays' engagement with (among other topics) Welsh difference and Pentecostal translation. He is working on a book about the enmeshment of human and plant bodies in the drama of medieval Cornwall and England (E-mail: rwb@illinois.edu).

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