

Melissa Purdue, 'Embowered in a mass of vegetation': Confinement and Predatory Plants in Fin-de-Siècle Fiction, *Victoriographies*, 13:1 (2023): 42-59.

Melissa Purdue embarks on her thought-provoking study of fin-de-siècle imperial ecogothic with the express aim of tackling an issue raised by Simon C. Estok in 2009: ecocriticism's lack of a robust account of the "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism," which Estok terms "ecophobia" ("Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." *ISLE* 16.2 (2009): 203-225, 209). Probing the ecophobic tropes of the past, Purdue argues, may help us come to terms with our own anxieties about our species' fragile habitat. Specifically, Purdue puts her finger on killer-plant literature's taste for recycling and repurposing a rather familiar Gothic move, once termed the "feminine carceral" by D. A. Miller. The killer plants of Algernon Blackwood's "Ancient Lights" and "The Man Whom the Trees Loved," Ulrich Daubeny's "The Sumach," Arthur Conan Doyle's "The American's Tale," Lucy H. Hooper's "Carnivorine," Edmund Nolcini's "The Guardian of Mystery Island," and H. G. Wells's "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid," Purdue points out, tend to entrap or imprison their victims. Intriguingly, a growing sense of human vulnerability manifests itself in these stories as claustrophobia, betraying a close association of power with freedom of movement.

As others have done before her, Purdue traces the ecophobic elements of fin-de-siècle ecogothic to recent developments in botany and evolutionary science. Shoring up evidence for evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants* (1875) and *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880) foregrounded vegetable characteristics that jarred with the human exceptionalism of the time, though Darwin himself was unambivalent that plant movements and especially plant sensitivity are in no way comparable to human consciousness. Following T. S. Miller, Purdue argues that "[t]hese stories, in which plants have veins and need blood (or a bloodlike sap) to function, work to collapse that distance between plant and animal . . . Plants become dangerous and monstrous kin" (49). That sap played some critical role in the lives of plants had in fact been accepted for centuries. A more pertinent question Purdue's readings raise is why plant metabolism and its reliance on sap comes to be considered monstrous at this particular moment in time.

Most of this article's shortcomings appear to be due to the fact that it is indeed too short. Purdue looks at a large number of texts, spotlighting a wealth of complexities, but most of these are only touched upon briefly. An in-depth exploration of the scientific context outlined here would also be a welcome addition. Darwin's texts are not discussed in detail, neither are the more spectacular (and less familiar) writings on the topic of carnivorous vegetables of Grant Allen and James W. Buel. The scientific concept of degeneration, which appears to be central to Purdue's argument, is not explored at all. The absence of Ray Lankester's writings is particularly striking in this respect. The radical re-gendering of the implicitly white, feminine carceral—which becomes the explicitly white, masculine carceral here—also gets short shrift; Purdue's argument goes hardly beyond Elly McCausland's recent observations on the topic. Some of these loose ends are surely the result of Purdue's decision to sideline empire.

How fin-de-siècle ecogothic (or, for that matter, fin-de-siècle literature in English as a whole) should be earnestly examined apart from empire is a mystery to me. The stories Purdue showcases are profoundly imperialist—from their rhetoric to their scientific influences and popular contexts, from their settings to their plant matter.

Perhaps the most exciting way in which Purdue's captivating vegetables twist and turn the feminine carceral is their literalisation of the motif. The confined space of the Gothic prison has served one influential reading tradition, going back at least as far as Mary Wollstonecraft's 1798 *Maria*, as metaphor for the constraints of patriarchal society. But Purdue's readings suggest that the ecogothic relates differently to its own inescapable truth. Synecdochally rather than metaphorically, the vegetable world stands for the vegetable world in these stories. Or does it? Purdue's important interrogation of ecogothic plant prisons often feels cut short by her constant returns to Estok's wider hypothesis that ecophobia is driven by "fears about loss of control" (51) — control over the human species' environment that was imaginary to begin with. But what exactly is it to be "embowered" in these stories? What does it mean that open nature turns out a prison, especially in texts "designed to inspire travel and exploration" (50)? And what can the ecogothic's appetite for the feminine carceral tell us about ecophobia? What precisely might the relationship be between fears about control and a sense of limitation, of freedom "wrongfully" restricted, of access to land and resources curtailed?

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