

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

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Daisy Butcher (ed.), *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*

(London: The British Library, 2019)

Teresa Fitzpatrick

Haunted forests, bleak moors, and dark dangers of the wilderness have long been familiar settings for Gothic tales, but with the recent ecocritical turn in Gothic studies, Nature has become a focus for closer scrutiny (Del Principe, 2014). As this new mode of ecoGothic emerges (Smith and Hughes, 2013), so too, the grossly overlooked monstrous plant steps out of the shadows. A popular trope of the late nineteenth century, tales of dangerous exotics, devil flowers, and man-eating plants are being re-visited, as Daisy Butcher's edited collection, *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic* (2019) clearly demonstrates.

Published as a part of the British Library's *Tales of the Weird* series, *Evil Roots* compiles fourteen short stories from 1844 to 1935, including better-known as well as less familiar tales/writers. Beginning with the poison plants of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter' (1844), Butcher has selected those she feels best represent a sub-genre of 'predatory plant' which she dubs 'Botanical Gothic'. Botanical Gothic includes a carefully thought-out range of plant beasts thriving in jungles, gardens, forests, and a hothouse, depicted as (super)natural phenomena rather than those of alien origin (Butcher, p. 10). Readers will find animalistic killer plants in Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The American's Tale' (1880), Lucy H. Hooper's 'Carnivorine' (1889), and H.C. McNeile's 'The Green Death' (1920), while H. G. Wells' 'Flowering of the Strange Orchid' (1894), Howard R. Garis' 'Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant' (1905), and Emma Vane's 'The Moaning Lily' (1935) illustrate the association of nature with femininity through *femme fatale* plant monsters (p. 8). The chronological ordering demonstrates the persistence of the plant monster trope, supporting Butcher's category of sub-genre. Although Butcher emphasises that her selection of tales focus on Gothic notions of hybridity and the liminal (p. 9), she makes only passing reference to ecoGothic concepts such as, for instance, 'an interconnectedness between femininity, flowers and death' (p. 11). Nevertheless, the above and other tales may interest those studying new materialism and, in particular, a Gothic trans-corporeality can be read in eco-horror tales like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Giant Wistaria' (1891), M. R. James' 'The Ash Tree' and

Ambrose Pierce's 'A Vine on a House' (1905). Whether murdering, consuming, or merging, this plant monster collection offers a variety of Gothic tales worthy of an ecoGothic lens and certainly provides some key texts for exploring Simon Estok's concept of ecophobia (2009)—based on Victorian 'distrust of the natural world' (p. 8).

There are no newly discovered tales here. All of the tales have individually appeared in other Gothic anthologies and there are also other more complete collections available, such as Chad Arment's three volumes from Coachwhip Publishing, dedicated to cryptobotany.¹ However, Butcher's compilation offers a more focused rationale for claiming the plant monster fiction as 'its own genre of eco-horror' (Butcher, p. 10). What separates Butcher's from these other edited collections is her contextualisation in her introduction of each tale. Alongside relevant authorial information, Butcher synthesises the key feature of the narrative that deems it worthy of inclusion in her collection, evoking references to research ideas, such as interconnectedness, hybridity, sentience, femininity, cannibalism, and body horror. Her decision to organise these tales chronologically rather than attempting to categorise them by their liminal monsters allows Butcher to demonstrate this fiction is worthy of 'recognition of its own subgenre of gothic/horror' (p. 1) that she suggests inspires the modern day 'predatory plants' of videogames, film, and TV (pp. 9-10).

The surprise inclusion within this plant horror collection is William Hope Hodgson's 'The Voice in the Night' (1906) as the story centres around a fungal monster rather than a plant or flower. This seems anomalous but Butcher argues, and I would agree, that while 'fungi are classified in their own kingdom [...] they are part of the same conversation' (p. 9). This singular tale still seems out of place though. She includes 'The Voice in the Night' as it illustrates 'the hybridity and the blurring of the lines between animal and plant' (p. 9) that feature significantly within *Botanical Gothic*. Butcher's inclusion of this 'all-consuming fungus' (p. 161) narrative invokes ecoGothic themes inverting the human/nonhuman predator/prey dynamic 'as the food sources become the hunters', reflecting modern 'fear[s] of contagion and infection' with its 'cannibalistic elements' (p. 161). However, this lone story of teratological fungus does little by

¹ Arment, C. *Botanica Delira* (2010), *Flora Curiosa* (2013) and *Arboris Mysterius* (2014). Pennsylvania, Coachwhip Publishing

itself to confirm Butcher's assertion and there seems to be a missed opportunity in not including at least a second fungal eco-horror tale—and there are quite a few.

In her introduction, Butcher focuses on Charles Darwin's botanical research and Victorian imperialist interest in exotic plants as the cultural and historical influences for nineteenth-century plant horror. She argues 'this specific strain of gothic short story creates fear through the concept of devolution or degeneration' (p. 8), presented through these plant monsters in their reflection of Victorian 'deep-rooted fear of foreign environments' (p. 9)—a colonial 'ecophobia' (p. 8). Butcher further suggests the 'interconnectedness of femininity, flowers and death' (p. 11) are key elements for consideration throughout this collection, alongside the depiction of nature as the monstrous female. Indeed, many of the tales underline the transgression of gender boundaries and human/nonhuman dichotomies during a time of significant social change and scientific advancement. A particularly clear thread through all the stories, sentient nature is depicted as a monstrous feminine that victimises the often unwitting male.

Overall, her choice of 'botanical-themed gothic fiction highlights fears of hybridity and liminal figures' that have 'developed into the monster we know it as today' (p. 9). As Butcher suggests, it is worth re-visiting these tales with today's awareness of deforestation and environmental devastation, as they clearly 'provide a sense of repercussion when nature fights back' (p. 10). Providing a precursor to more recent eco-disaster movies, this collection potentially offers a chronological development of ecophobia, from fear of nature towards fear of the consequences of natural devastation, and how this fear is entangled with forms of social oppression and otherness.

The Victorian age of imperialism and exploration, their fascination with the bizarre, and the hothouse as status symbol—together with fears of modernity and degeneration—paved the way for terrifying tales of man-eating plants and vengeful feminised nature (Jane Desmarais, 2018). The tales in Butcher's *Botanical Gothic* selection reflect these nineteenth-century obsessions and anxieties, situating *Evil Roots* as a compact compilation of tales for Victorian ecoGothic scholars keen to revitalise debates on gender, colonialism, and identity, amongst others, as well as a compact selection of weird uncanny plant narratives.

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