

Vegetal Agency and Ecofeminist Resistance

Daphne du Maurier's "The Apple Tree"

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Abstract *The chapter "Vegetal Agency and Ecofeminist Resistance" looks at Daphne du Maurier's little-known short story "The Apple Tree" from an ecofeminist perspective. It highlights the feminized tree's agency as a force that not only drives the protagonist but also counteracts him and offers resistance to the man's schemes. The close reading of the story's ending emphasizes that the agential tree ultimately brings the misogynist down while indicating hope for vegetal renewal and the plant's survival.*

Daphne du Maurier is probably best known for her 1938 Gothic novel *Rebecca*, which has been widely researched and continues to inspire remediation. Two central aspects of the novel have influenced the short story "The Apple Tree" ([1952] 2004), making them highly relevant for this essay. First, the novel oscillates between the ghostly haunting and the psychological torment of the narrating heroine. Thus, the book leaves the reader wondering if the ghost is, in fact, there or if it is a trick of the narrator's mind. Second, *Rebecca* exemplifies a notion of nature that is more than a mere setting for the plot¹. Already in the

1 The importance or even agency of the setting in Gothic fiction predates du Maurier. The first-ever British Gothic text, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, allows the castle to determine the atmosphere, the orbit of the story, and the pace of the plot as it slows down the characters by blocking their way around the building or holding them captive. Thus, the castle exerts nonhuman agency and rightfully assumes its place in the title (Clery 1996, xv). Other examples also show that, in Gothic narratives, the setting is more than just a background against which the action is played. Yet, these settings are mostly buildings or the urban sphere (as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). In *Rebecca*, however, not only the house but also the natural surroundings are foregrounded since they play a central role in the story (e. g., the garden and especially the sea).

opening paragraph, a dream section in which the heroine returns to Manderley, i. e., the estate haunted by the ghostly presence, nature is far from passive or inert:

Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long tenacious fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. They crowded, dark and uncontrolled, to the borders of the drive. [...] The drive was a ribbon now, a thread of its former self, with gravel surface gone, and choked with grass and moss. The trees had thrown out low branches, making an impediment to progress; the gnarled roots looked like skeleton claws. (du Maurier 1971, 1–2)

While on the one hand, the eerie descriptions help set the scene, on the other hand, du Maurier imagines the natural surroundings as active and animate. She marks the environment as malevolent (“insidious”), threatening (“always a menace”), and overpowering (“had triumphed,” “uncontrolled”). What was once the estate’s garden, i. e., cultivated landscape, has now defied human control and is growing rampant. In forceful and violently connoted actions, nature “encroache[s]” (1), grasses “choke” (2) the drive, and trees “crowd” (1) the scene and energetically “throw [...] out low branches” (2) to impede trespassers.

Rebecca puts forward an understanding of the more-than-human that is developed further in later narratives, for instance in the short stories published in the 1952 collection *The Apple Tree: A Short Novel and Several Long Stories* (reissued later on under the title *The Birds and Other Stories*). Some of these narratives portray nonhuman species not only as eerily active but as fully agential. “The Birds” ([1952] 2004), which was famously adapted by Alfred Hitchcock (although his version deviates widely from the original), illustrates a turning of the more-than-human against humanity when, suddenly, birds start attacking humans in war-like air raids – making them flee their attackers, barricade their houses, and adjust their routines to a state of emergency, given they manage to survive at all. Similarly, “The Apple Tree” depicts another menacing, and ultimately fatal, interspecies encounter. As the title suggests, this story features vegetal agents rather than animals. The biological factors determining the existence of the plant, such as its sessility, distinguish the tree from the projectile-like mobility of the birds. Nevertheless, the eponymous tree is depicted as a force to be reckoned with. To begin with, the tree is anthropomorphized and feminized in a way that allows one to consider intersecting patriarchal mistreatments of

women and the more-than-human. Hence, “The Apple Tree” makes use of the longstanding tradition to associate femininity with plants. Yet, the story subverts the discourse’s classic dynamic, turning it into an ecofeminist take with an agential vegetal being. Furthermore, the agential tree both interacts with and counteracts the central character, offering ecofeminist resistance against the man’s schemes to get rid of the plant. In the process, the tree not only triggers the man emotionally, but it actively opposes him in various ways that indicate biosemiotics and counter anthropocentrism. Despite the multitude of intriguing aspects, the short story has hardly been researched at all. The only article that concerns itself with the story is Setara Pracha’s (2016) comparative reading, which unveils parallels and correlations between du Maurier’s story and Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss”. Yet, Pracha does not consider questions of vegetal agency or ecofeminism. Thus, to shed light on overlooked aspects of “The Apple Tree”, this essay will uncover the story’s manifestations of vegetal agency, which can be understood as acts of ecofeminist resistance against the patriarchal protagonist. Moreover, it will revisit the story’s ending informed by critical plant theory, which allows for an interpretation in which the tree outlasts the protagonist rather than going down alongside him. The following analysis will be structured into three parts. The first part will shed light on various aspects of the story’s beginning. Before turning to the development of the tree’s agential capabilities, it is necessary to understand how the female and the natural are intertwined in the figure of the apple tree and how the narrative situation already instigates agency. Having untangled the preconditions, the following parts will address agency and resistance. They will illustrate how the agency that was initially installed in the tree by the human protagonist grows ever more powerful – until the plant eventually causes the patriarch’s downfall.

Ecofeminist Entanglements

The story starts to unfold on a fine-weathered spring morning three months after the death of the protagonist’s wife, Midge. The widower remains anonymous over the course of the plot except for his nickname, Buzz, which is onomatopoeically linked to his wife’s name that refers to a fly (Pracha 2016, 175). At the outset of the plot, he is standing by a window when his eye catches the eponymous tree. Until then, the tree was just one of many – a part of the indistinguishable mass of the orchard. Yet, on this day, it clearly stands out from

the other plants due to its unmistakable, uncanny resemblance to Midge. As the narrator notes:

The tree was scraggy and of a depressing thinness, possessing none of the gnarled solidity of its companions. Its few branches, growing high up on the trunk like narrow shoulders on a tall body, spread themselves in martyred resignation, as though chilled by the fresh morning air. The roll of wire circling the tree, and reaching to about halfway up the trunk from the base, looked like a grey tweed skirt covering lean limbs; while the topmost branch, sticking up into the air above the ones below, yet sagging slightly, could have been a drooping head poked forward in an attitude of weariness. (du Maurier 2004, 114)

The negatively connoted adjectives (“scraggy,” “depressing,” “martyred,” “drooping”) characterize both the apple tree and the protagonist’s former wife. To emphasize the connection, the narrator goes on to state: “How often had he seen Midge stand like this, dejected. No matter where it was, [...] she would take upon herself this same stooping posture, suggesting that life treated her hardly, that she had been singled out from her fellows to carry some impossible burden” (du Maurier 2004, 114–115). These passages establish the entanglement between Midge and the apple tree, which paves the way for ecofeminist² considerations of the interconnections between sexism (along with other isms such as ageism) and “naturism (i. e., the [...] domination of nature)” (Warren 1997, 4). This is supported by further contemplations of the anthropomorphized tree in the orchard: “That martyred bent position, the stooping top, the weary branches, the few withered leaves that [...] shivered in the spring breeze like wispy hair; all of it protested soundlessly to the owner of the garden looking upon it, ‘I am like this because of [...] your neglect’” (du Maurier 2004, 115). The last statement applies to both the tree and Midge. Thus, it reflects the intersecting abuse of women and nature at the hands of the story’s patriarch, which will become clearer in the following.

2 Warren explains that just as there is no one feminism, there is no monolithic concept of ecofeminism either. Yet, “[w]hat makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that non-human nature and naturism [...] are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination (e. g., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, anti-Semitism) to nature” (1997, 4). Thus, it highlights the interconnections between these isms and their shared origin.

After recognizing the resemblance between the tree and Midge, the narrator recounts details of the couple's unhappy life. These include accounts of how the protagonist resented habits of his wife such as borrowing half of his morning paper, commenting on the news, and returning the papers crooked, "so that part of the pleasure of reading it was spoilt" (du Maurier 2004, 115). Further complaints revolve around "her long-term reproach, directed at [her husband], that has marred their existence over a span of years" (116), or the "suffering nobly borne, [which] spoils the atmosphere of his home and drove him to a sense of furtiveness and guilt" (116). Various scenarios describe the man leisurely strolling through the garden or sitting in his armchair while his wife goes about household and care tasks. Ultimately, he is upset by "that wan face of hers looking out upon the sunlit terrace, the hand that went up wearily to push back a strand of falling hair, and the inevitable sigh before she turned from the window, the unspoken, 'I wish I had the time to stand and do nothing in the sun'" (118). Hence, in the husband's view, the wife is to blame for his being unable to enjoy himself and for the irritations he experiences. What goes unnoticed is that Midge bears the burdens of unpaid care work while her husband tries to avoid her: "Finally, [...] he was led into every sort of petty deception to get away from her, making a pretence of going up to London to have his hair cut, to see the dentist, to lunch with an old business friend; and in reality he would be sitting by his club window, anonymous, at peace" (119).

In this context, the narrative situation is very significant. Although the narrative voice is heterodiegetic, the events are focalized through the protagonist. Thus, the point of view that is represented is rather subjective and reproduces the patriarchal power imbalance also manifesting in the relationship of the central couple. Midge does not get to speak for herself; neither does the reader get insight into her perspective. Anything that is told is tainted by the protagonist's point of view, and any thought Midge might articulate remains "unspoken" (du Maurier 2004, 118) or "soundless" (115). After all, Midge is already dead when the narration starts. Consequently, the story is his to tell, the female voice is silenced, and the record is governed by a patriarchal perspective that promotes misogyny.

Yet, the fact that the story is focalized through the patriarch is essential to questions of vegetal agency. Like in *Rebecca*, which plays with the uncertainty that the ghost might just be a product of the narrator's delusions, here too, readers will find no other character who confirms any of the protagonist's irritations. From the initial impression of resemblance between the tree and Midge to later examples in which the protagonist finds fault with the tree or

is actively targeted by it, no other character seems to agree with him or notice anything out of the ordinary. However, there is a crucial difference to the Gothic novel. In the case of *Rebecca*, the narration is autodiegetic rather than heterodiegetic. Thus, voice and focalizer manifest in the same character. Consequently, the credibility of both narration and focalization is called into question through the heroine's psychological instability. When it comes to "The Apple Tree", however, the narrative voice is external and, thus, uncoupled from the focalizer. Therefore, not the narrative voice but the focalizer is questionable. Nevertheless, it is important not to jump to conclusions and undermine the focalized perspective as unreliable, which Pracha falsely does when they characterize the protagonist as delusional (2016, 178) and self-deceptive (180). Rather than challenging the credibility of the protagonist, the given circumstances relate to the fabrication of agency by the human. By attributing human resemblance to the tree, the protagonist on the one hand recreates his relation to Midge posthumously. On the other hand, the widower also ascribes agency to the vegetal being, i. e., he fabricates the parallel between the tree and his former wife and, thus, makes the tree act according to this parallelism. This is in line with Bruno Latour's (2005, 46) idea that "[a]n actor is what is *made* to act by many others" (emphasis in original), as action is always "dislocated [...], borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced," etc. (46). In this context, the protagonist acts as a mediator³, "whose input is never a good predictor of their output" according to Latour (2005, 39). In the case of mediators, there is no way to directly translate cause into effect, as "they are simply offering occasions, circumstances, and precedents" and, thus, "make things do *other* things than what was expected" (59, emphasis in original). As will be shown later, the tree gradually starts to defy the protagonist's control and becomes more powerful the more the human tries to withdraw agency from or escape the plant. Therefore, the tree is capable "of reversing the origin of power," turning into more than it was initially constructed to be, and "dissimulating its own manufacture," so that the creator "turn[s] himself from a cynical manipulator into an ingenuous dupe" (Latour 2010, 9).

Turning back to the issue of credibility, it remains to be shown that the tree's fabricated agency and its ultimate reversing of the power dynamic are

3 Latour (2005, 217) explains that "an actor-network is what is made to act by a large star-shaped web of mediators flowing in and out of it. It is made to exist by its many ties: attachments are first, actors are second."

not imagined but *real*. Pracha gets into a double bind when it comes to the issue of reality in “The Apple Tree”. First, they argue that the protagonist is delusional and cannot “deliver authentic clues to the realit[y] of [his life]” (Pracha 2016, 180). Yet, in the following, Pracha suggests that “Midge’s silence does not preclude power, or indeed violent revenge if she is read as an *actual* revenant haunting Buzz instead of an aspect of his psyche” (181, emphasis added). While the idea of the return of the repressed is fitting, the rest of the argument contradicts the former characterization. Clearly, the two statements are mutually exclusive. Insisting on the character’s unsoundness of mind undermines the actuality of the feminized tree’s agency. In contrast to this, reading “The Apple Tree” in light of Bruno Latour’s “factish” (2010, 22) allows readers to understand that the widower’s point of view is not unreliable at all – and that the tree’s agency is both constructed and real. “Factish” refers to the “robust certainty that allows practice to pass into action without the practitioner ever believing in the difference between construction and reality” (22). Put differently, “[t]hanks to factishes, construction and truth remain synonymous” (28) rather than being opposed to each other. Therefore, the agency fabricated by the protagonist is not reduced to a delusional thought in the man’s head. It becomes reality. Consequently, there is no “discrepancy between the real and the perceived,” as Pracha (178) falsely argues. In fact, the perceived is entirely real. “The factish can therefore be defined as *the wisdom of the passage*; as that which allows one to pass from fabrication to reality [...]. The factish is a fact-maker” (emphasis in original), which enables humans to “produce [...] autonomous beings that somewhat surpass us” (Latour 2010, 35). This is precisely what happens in “The Apple Tree”. The protagonist ascribes agency to the tree and, therefore, fabricates the plant’s agency, which then becomes real.

In the following, a second apple tree in the orchard attracts the widower’s attention and gives rise to a memory that connects this tree to another woman of the protagonist’s past.

There was one young tree – only planted a few years back, he recalled quite well – growing to the right of the old one and standing straight and firm, the lithe young branches lifted to the sky, positively looking as if it enjoyed the rain. He peered through the window at it, and smiled. Now why the devil should he suddenly remember that incident, years back, during the war, with the girl who came to work on the land for a few months at the neighboring farm? (du Maurier 2004, 122)

The man recalls meeting the young woman on the farm where he also helped at the weekends. In sharp contrast to Midge, the girl is introduced as “cheerful and pretty and smiling; she had dark curling hair, crisp and boyish, and a skin like a very young apple” (122). The protagonist “liked looking at the child – she was scarcely more than that, nineteen or so – in her slim breeches and gay shirts; and when she smiled it was as though she embraced the world” (122). Subsequently, the narrator goes on to recount a particular instance that led to the protagonist kissing the young girl while working with her in the farm’s shed: “It was a happy thing, spontaneous and free, and the girl so warm and jolly, with her fresh young mouth” (122). The euphoria subsides quickly when the two meet Midge on their way out of the shed, basically being caught red-handed. The protagonist is burdened with guilt and stops working on the farm. “This, then, was adultery. This was sin” (123). The reference to sin is not coincidental. It is inscribed in the religious symbolism inherent in the apple reference and the figure of the apple tree at large. The imagery evokes the fall of man in Genesis, in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden due to their disobedience. Against God’s instruction, the couple eats fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is commonly represented as an apple tree. In an act of more-than-human agency, a serpent makes Eve eat one of the tree’s apples, which the woman then shares with Adam (*Christian Standard Bible*, Genesis 3:1-7). Consequently, the humans lose their innocence, are banished from the garden, and bring sin to the entirety of their species (Genesis 3:8-24). The description of May’s “skin like a very young apple” (du Maurier 2004, 122) makes her the forbidden fruit in du Maurier’s story (Pracha 2016, 175). Giving in to temptation and trying the fruit equals sin – and like Adam and Eve who were banished, the protagonist punishes himself by never going back to the farm again.

The introductions of the two women evoke problematic gender dynamics as their juxtaposition is a sexist pitting of one female against the other. Midge is presented as old, fragile, burdened, and weary, which is both sexist and ageist. Contrastingly, May, whose name is only revealed later when an acquaintance reminds the protagonist of what she was called (and reveals that she was ultimately killed in an accident), is young, plump, and full of zest for life. Hence, the latter is highly objectified and sexualized. Her telling name, May, is connected to the spring season, in which the natural world comes back to life after the winter, and the rhythm of the seasonal cycle is off to a fresh start. The name carries implications of revitalization and fertility (Pracha 2016, 176), which again sets up a contrast to Midge who has no kids. The opposition of

age and characteristics suggests that a middle-aged woman is past her prime, while a young, adolescent woman is a desirable paragon of beauty – an idea translating into the depiction of the trees that are analogies to the women. Midge’s tree is old, barren, and bent, whereas May’s tree (planted just a few years ago) stands “straight and firm” (du Maurier 2004, 122) and articulates youthfulness. The emphasis on appearances – both the women’s and the trees’ – further points to the male gaze, which filters and determines the representation of both the female characters and the plants.

The trope to cast women as plants or vice versa has a long tradition in literature. Ovid’s *Daphne*, whom Pracha already connected to du Maurier’s Midge (2016, 180), ends up being turned into a laurel tree. Her father transforms her into a plant when she asks him for help in escaping Apollo, who is driven by Cupid’s arrow and, therefore, relentlessly pursues her (Ovidius Naso 1954, 13–16). Love poetry, for instance Wordsworth’s *Lucy* poems, often resorts to comparing women to flowers: “When she I lov’d, was strong and gay / And like a rose in June” (2005, 198). What unifies these examples are the sexist dynamics that come with the equation of women and plants. The woman cast as a plant loses agency and is both dehumanized and silenced. Comparative instances that are supposed to highlight beauty result in objectification, idealization, and sexualization, as they reduce the woman to her appearance, cater to the male gaze, and carry connotations of (sexual) innocence. Further, insisting on the closeness of women to nature, contrasted with men’s detachedness from it, indicates patriarchal power dynamics. Following this logic, women’s state as second-class citizens is cemented through their more natural and, therefore, less rational, i. e., deficient, status measured against the post-Renaissance paragon of the human as the white, male, bourgeois, “rational political subject of the state” (Wynter 2003, 277). Du Maurier plays with and subverts the tradition to associate women with the vegetal. She uses the classic formula of comparing a beautiful maiden to a youthfully and sexually connoted plant but, at the same time, contrasts it with an inverted, negative image (Midge’s tree) that would not be found in traditional examples of the trope. Furthermore, the author shifts the dynamic as her female characters do not transform into trees, but the trees turn into women. Ultimately, du Maurier upgrades the trope by challenging the inferior status of the woman as plant and rendering the tree highly active and agential, which will be the focus of the following subchapter.

Vegetal Agency and Resistance

From the moment of recognition, the protagonist is unable to rid himself of the irritation caused by the old apple tree. The emotional hold the tree exerts over the protagonist suggests a considerable level of agency as the plant engages in an affective connection with the human and triggers emotional reactions: “It began to irritate him, humped there, straggling and thin” (du Maurier 2004, 122). Like Midge before her death, the tree’s mere presence unnerves the widower and taints his everyday experiences: “What in heaven’s name was the matter with the thing that it had to stand there, humped and stooping, instead of looking upwards to the light? It marred the still quiet night, it spoiled the setting” (125). The tree causing the protagonist’s irritation and anger challenges the long-held Western presupposition that plants are uncommunicative and do not interact with other species – or else that they are insensitive and non-affective organisms. Du Maurier, therefore, sketches what John Charles Ryan terms a “bioempathy of plants,” which “encompasses the persistent exchanges (somatic, sensory, energetic, emotional, conscious, unconscious, etc.) that confer benefits and losses [or signals in general] to the plant and non-plant agents involved” (2018, 93). Thus, the tree affects the human-being and is potentially affected vice versa, i. e., it becomes an empathic and affective subject in its own right.

Beyond the affective dimension, the agency of the tree manifests in the many ways in which the plant defies the protagonist’s schemes to destroy it. Eventually, the man decides that it would be best to just chop the tree down, “if only for the sake of bringing more sunshine to the little sturdy one; it hadn’t a fair chance, growing there so close to the other” (du Maurier 2004, 123). Yet, after making the decision, a week of heavy rain prevents the widower from realizing his plan. Thus, du Maurier’s story presents a complex actor-network, whose multifarious agency protects the environment. Once the rain subsides, the tree is suddenly in bud. The gardener, Willis, delighted by this unexpected outburst of vegetal activity, proudly demonstrates the budding branches to the owner who welcomes neither the change nor Willis’s insisting that the tree might blossom and bear fruit after all: “For some reason he felt irritated with Willis. Anyone would think the damned tree lived. And now his plan to axe the tree, over the weekend, would come to nothing” (du Maurier 2004, 124–125). Again, the widower compares the older tree to the younger one, which is also budding, and tries to convince Willis to cut the old tree down to make room for the smaller one. Yet, Willis refuses: “Do away with her, sir, [...] while there’s

still life in her? Oh no, sir, I wouldn't do that. She's doing no harm to the young tree. I'd give the old tree one more chance. If she doesn't bear fruit, we'll have her down next winter” (125). Once more, the motif of fertility surfaces, and the tree is feminized as it is referred to by the pronoun she. In contrast to the protagonist, Willis demonstrates a more amicable and respectful approach⁴ to the tree. As long as the plant is evidently alive, he sees no reason to cut it down. Even if it seems that the decision to log the tree or not ultimately lies with the humans, the tree demonstrates its agency in this scene. If one reads the sudden and spontaneous budding as an intentional action on the part of the tree, i. e., an instance of bio-semiotic communication, it can be understood as an act of resistance against the protagonist's schemes. Just as the latter decides to chop the tree down, the plant puts forth buds as a sign of its liveliness and opposition. Hence, it upsets his plans and hinders him from putting them into action. Du Maurier's approach goes beyond merely anthropomorphizing the tree and translating its faculties into human terms, which is often the case when vegetal agency is suggested. For instance, this applies to the figure of the talking tree in the well-known children's story *The Giving Tree* or to the talking flowers in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. In contrast to these examples, du Maurier's take allows the tree to come to the fore as an agential subject in its own right – complete with its own, plant-specific modes of communication and resistance.

As the story goes on, other instances of vegetal agency, which both counteract and actively target the protagonist, occur. During the night that follows the discovery of the budding branches, the widower stands in his bedroom. He contemplates the apple trees and reminisces about May when his attention is suddenly caught by the old tree.

The apple tree [...] was no longer in shadow. The moon shone upon the withered branches, and they looked like skeleton's arms raised in supplication. [...] There was no wind, and the other trees were motionless; but there, in those topmost branches, something shivered and stirred, a breeze that came from nowhere and died away again. Suddenly a branch fell from the apple tree to the ground below. It was the near branch, with the small dark buds

4 When the widower insinuates that Willis's motivation stems less from a fundamental respect for vegetal life than from the possibility to profit from potential fruits or wood the tree might produce, the gardener corrects him: “It's not the value', he said. 'I don't reckon for a moment that this tree is worth any money at all. It's just that after all this time, when we thought her dead, she's alive and kicking” (du Maurier 2004, 127).

upon it, which he would not touch. He went on staring at the branch as it lay there on the grass, under the moon. It stretched across the shadow of the young tree close to it, pointing as though in accusation. (du Maurier 2004, 126)

Thus, rather than being operated by external forces like the wind, the tree moves of its own accord and sheds a budded branch in a suggestive gesture, thereby communicating with the man who understands the reference as an accusation. Again, the emotional complexity of the situation and the older tree's awareness of the triangular relationship indicate a complex network of actors that affect each other and are extremely capable and alert. A few afternoons later, the widower enters the living room to find it filled with smoke and a "sickly, rancid smell" (du Maurier 2004, 128). It turns out that Willis chopped down the fallen branch of the old apple tree and gave it to the housekeeper to use as firewood. Yet, the logs only smolder and produce "no heat at all" (129), so that they leave the room cold but smelling unpleasantly. Like in the olden days when he was bothered by Midge knitting and yawning in the living room, the widower finds himself taking refuge in the study. Hence, the wood, which the tree actively dropped to the ground, has infiltrated the space of the house and forces the man to retreat. Finally, the affective interaction causes the protagonist to panic: "What if the smell filled the whole house through the night, came up from the kitchen quarters to the floor above, and while he slept found its way into his bedroom, choking him, stifling him, so that he could not breathe? The thought was ridiculous, insane – and yet ..." (131). In the following, the protagonist gathers the logs in a scuttle and goes outside to throw them into the fields beyond his premises to hide them from the housekeeper and the gardener. Significantly, he rids himself of the wood by bringing it outside, thereby purging the house (and by extension his entire property) of the wood and reestablishing the boundary between inside and outside: "[The logs] were out of his house, and it did not matter what became of them" (132).

Another agential outburst of the apple tree's resistance materializes when it finally blossoms. The tree actively blooms to reinforce both its liveliness and the triumph over the widower. Instead of modestly blossoming into an aesthetically pleasing bloom, the tree turns itself into a travesty that provokes the man once more: "Well, there it was. Willis had been proved right. The tree had blossomed. But instead of blossoming to life, to beauty, it had somehow, deep in nature, gone awry and turned a freak" (du Maurier 2004, 139). The protagonist tries to convince Willis, who is thrilled by the outburst of vitality, to chop down

some branches and take them home. Yet, again his pleading comes to nothing: “No, thank you, sir, I wouldn’t dream of it. It would spoil the tree. I want to wait for the fruit” (139). The enormous silhouette of the blossoming tree goes on to impede the widower’s endeavors to enjoy the far more subtly blooming young tree: “He went back to the terrace. But when he sat down there in the sun, looking up the sloping lawn, he could not see the little tree at all [...]. She was dwarfed and hidden by the freak, with its great cloud of sagging petals” (139). Even when he tries to rearrange his chair, “it seemed to him that he could not escape the tree, that it stood there above him, reproachful, anxious, desirous of the admiration that he could not give” (139–140). Again, the forceful blossoming equals the sending of a communicative signal that the widower interprets as “desirous of [...] admiration” (140). However, he is unable to return any sign of affection, let alone communicate his approval. This scene also indicates the shifting power dynamic of the factish according to Latour (2010, 22). Having fabricated the special relation to and agency of the tree, the widower now encounters the first instance of the tree gaining more and more power the more the human tries to evade it. He cannot “escape the tree” (du Maurier 2004, 140) or elude its control. After all, he is in the sphere of the outdoors. Inside, i. e., in the house, he can ward off the trespasses of the tree. Yet, in the space of the more-than-human, he is clearly inferior.

When the tree eventually bears fruit in late summer, they produce a similar effect as the logs earlier in the story. The apples also infiltrate the house where they are served as dessert. When the protagonist tastes one, it turns out to be “uneatable” (du Maurier 2004, 142). Meanwhile, the tree is “laden, bowed down, under her burden of fruit” (143) – again, not a sight the widower cares for. He pronounces the tree “monstrous,” “distasteful,” and “pitiful” (144) and complains that it still blocks out the other trees, specifically the young one. Once more, the tree’s forceful outburst triggers the widower emotionally. This time, he even seems empathetic towards the plant, finding its burden “pitiful” (144). Yet, his anger prevails as he already sees the next few months spoilt by the tree’s abundance of fruit: “And he knew how it would be. The fruit would cling there until it was picked, staying upon the branches through October and November, and it never would be picked, because nobody could eat it. He could see himself being bothered with the tree throughout the autumn” (144). In the face of the man’s desperation, the vegetal agent stands “triumphant, gloating” (144). Subsequently, the widower orders Willis to strip the tree of its fruits and take the apples away. The gardener does so, albeit reluctantly. “At last [...] the tree was stripped bare. He looked out at it [...] in satisfaction. [...] Yet, the tree, instead

of seeming lighter from the loss of its burden, looked, if it were possible, more dejected than ever. [...] ‘Is this my reward?’ it seemed to say. ‘After all I’ve done for you?’” (145). Punishment for picking the fruit follows in the form of an apple jam tart provided by the housekeeper. Its effect parallels the earlier scene in which the man tries one of the apples. “One taste was enough. Choking, spluttering, he spat out the contents of his spoon upon the plate” (147). Of course, the jam was made from the apples of the dreaded tree. The man reacts with an outburst of rage directed at the housekeeper. She quits that very afternoon, noting that “when madam was alive, I felt my work was appreciated. Now it’s as though it didn’t matter one way or the other. [...] I think I’d be happier if I went where there was a lady again who took notice of what I did” (148–149).

The housekeeper’s comment resonates with the rhetorical question posed by the tree: “‘Is this my reward?’ [...] ‘After all I’ve done for you?’” (du Maurier 2004, 145). This correlation suggests intersections between sexism and naturalism. The protagonist relies on the women around him, whether it is Midge or the housekeeper, whose namelessness reduces her to her function as caretaker. At an earlier point, the man notes: “It was an infernal nuisance, really, having anyone to do for him at all. It would not take much for him to sack her and fend for himself as best he could. Only the bother, the tie of cooking and washing up, prevented him” (133). The extremely sexist and exploitative nature of the man’s interest in women is epitomized by his idea of the ideal companion: “Silence, good service, perfect waiting, excellent cooking, no need for conversation [...]. No criticism ever, the obedience of an animal to its master, and the light-hearted laughter of a child” (133–134). Analogous to his dependence on female care work, he relies on the orchard to provide nourishment, heat, money, etc. Hence, he maintains an instrumental relationship toward while at the same time neglecting both the women and the trees. After the housekeeper quits, he immediately resorts to a different locale where yet another female caretaker caters to him. He goes to the local pub where “there was jolly, fat, easy-going Mrs. Hill to minister to his needs” (156). Once he gets there, the inciting incident for the ending takes place. Mrs. Hill worries about having neither logs nor coal for the upcoming winter. This gives the widower the perfect excuse to get rid of the old apple tree once and for all.

Rereading the Ending

At the end of the story, the protagonist finally gains the upper hand and succeeds in his endeavor to cut down the tree. Du Maurier builds up the scene of the felling as the grand finale of the plot and elaborates on the action at length. The detailed descriptions of the protagonist chopping down the tree are full of physical brutality and evocative of sexual violence.

For the first dozen strokes all went smoothly. The saw bit into the wood, the teeth took hold. Then after a few moments the saw began to bind. [...] He tried to work it free, but the opening that he had made was not yet large enough, and the tree gripped upon the saw, and held it fast. He drove in the first wedge, with no result. He drove in the second, and the opening gaped a little wider, but still not wide enough to release the saw. He pulled and tugged at the saw to no avail. He began to lose his temper. He took up his axe and started hacking at the tree, pieces of the trunk flying outwards, scattering on the grass. That was more like it. That was the answer. (du Maurier 2004, 152)

In this passage, the changing of the tool is significant. On the one hand, it introduces a climax of violence that continues in the following scene. The forcefulness needed to operate an axe and the heavy blows climactically increase the brutality depicted and the damage done. On the other hand, the change is connected to vegetal agency. At first, the tree still seems to be able to resist the attack. Its active grasping of the blade (“the tree gripped upon the saw and held it fast”) thwarts the man’s initial attempt to cut the tree down. Further, it makes him change his tool. The power dynamic is reflected in the sentence structure in which the tree is the subject that acts upon the object. Yet, afterwards the plant is placed into the position of the object (“He [...] started hacking at the tree”), and it finds itself being overpowered and at the mercy of the protagonist. His perverted satisfaction (“This was more like it. That was the answer”) emphasizes his sadistic intentions. Also, it relates to the dimension of sexual violence evoked through the penetrating wedges, which the protagonist “drove in” (du Maurier 2004, 152). In the following, the references to sexual assault become more obvious and quickly escalate. (The next quote might be disturbing to readers due to its graphic description of sexual violence.)

Up and down went the heavy axe, splitting and tearing at the tree. Off came the peeling bark, the great white strips of underwood, raw and stringy. Hack at it, blast at it, gouge at the tough tissue, throw the axe away, claw at the rubbery flesh with the bare hands. Not far enough yet, go on, go on. There goes the saw, the wedge, released. Now up with the axe again. Down there, heavy, where the stringy threads cling so steadfast. Now she's groaning, now she's splitting, now she's rocking and swaying, hanging there upon one bleeding strip. Boot her, then. That's it, kick her, kick her again, one final blow, she's over, she's falling ... she's down ... damn her, blast her ... she's down, splitting the air with sound, and all her branches spread about her on the ground. He stood back, wiping the sweat from his forehead, from his chin. The wreckage surrounded him on either side, and below him, at his feet, gaped the torn, white, jagged stump of the axed tree. (du Maurier 2004, 152)

Again, the abandoning of the axe in favor of using one's hands renders the violent assault more extreme, more direct, and more personal. The impression of directness is supported by the changing tense. While the former actions are recounted in simple past, here the narration switches to present tense. Moreover, the numerous imperatives ("Hack at it, blast at it, [...] throw the axe away, [...] go on, go on") support the impression of immediacy. They might also be read as the narrator inciting the protagonist. The latter's clawing "at the rubbery flesh," the feminized "she" who is "groaning," "splitting," "swaying," and finally "bleeding" (152), as well as the purposely placed phrase "down there" (152), which is a common English euphemism for genitalia, emphasize the sexual dimension of the assault and combine the patriarchal abuse of women with that of the environment.

While the scene can be understood as a social critique that realistically represents the mistreatment of women in patriarchal societies, the extremely graphic reproduction of violence remains questionable. Feminist critics might find the text flawed not only in this instance but also in the plotline that unfolds after the tree is cut down. In the aftermath of the felling, the protagonist chops up the wood, ropes it into small bundles, and loads it on his trailer in handy portions. He is under pressure due to the looming break of dawn that brings the subsiding of light and the heavy snowfall starting immediately after the tree comes down. In the narrator's descriptions, the snow seems to have an agency of its own. As it falls on the wood, the snow impedes the widower and prevents him from quickly finishing his work. "The snow fell upon the torn boughs and the hacked branches, hampering his work. If he rested but an

instant to draw breath and renew his strength, it seemed to throw a protective cover, soft and white, over the pile of wood” (du Maurier 2004, 153). Like the rain that frustrated the man’s plans to fell the tree earlier, the snow’s act of “protective cover[ing]” (153) again points to the complex network of more-than-human actors that tries to preserve the environment. After the felling, the network turns the tables on the protagonist. Now, it is his turn to suffer:

His fingers were numb with cold, soon they would be too stiff to bend. He had a pain now, under the heart, from the strain of dragging the stuff on the trailer; and the work never seemed to lessen. Whenever he returned to the fallen tree the pile of wood would appear as high as ever, long boughs, short boughs, a heap of kindling there, nearly covered with snow, [...] and all the while the snow fell into his mouth and into his eyes and he could barely see. (du Maurier 2004, 153–154)

Despite the Sisyphus-esque implication, he succeeds in loading the bundles onto his trailer. The transportation of the final piece of trunk parallels the description of a body being disposed of: “Staggering to his feet he bore the weight of the heavy trunk over his shoulder, and began to drag it [...]. It followed him, bump ... bump ... down the steps of the terrace. Heavy and lifeless, the last bare limbs of the apple tree dragged in his wake through the wet snow” (du Maurier 2004, 154). Subsequently, the man drives the trailer to the local pub where Mrs. Hill can use the logs as firewood. When he returns from a jolly evening at the inn, the widower makes a final round through the garden to check on his trees. Lured by the young apple tree, “He wanted to stand beside the little tree and touch the branches, to make certain she was still alive, that the snow had not harmed her, so that in the spring she would blossom once again” (158), he makes his way towards it. However, the stump of the old apple tree catches his foot and makes him fall to the ground: “He tried to move his foot but it was jammed, and he knew suddenly, by the sharpness of the pain biting his ankle, that what had trapped him was the jagged split stump of the old apple tree he had felled that afternoon” (158–159). The tree, or rather the stump, overpowers the widower and holds him captive: “He leant forward on his elbows, in an attempt to drag himself along the ground, but such was his position [...] that his leg was bent backwards, away from his foot, and every effort that he made only succeeded in imprisoning the foot still more firmly in the grip of the trunk” (159). Here, the agency that the protagonist construed in the first place finally outdoes him. Thus, the human cannot defy the stump’s control or escape it. In

line with the factish, the tree's agency is not only both fabricated and real, but it also inverts the initial power dynamic and surpasses the human (Latour 2010, 35). The widower begs, "let me go" (du Maurier 2004, 159), to no avail. "He would have to lie there all night, held fast in the clutch of the old apple tree. There was no hope, no escape, until they came to find him in the morning, and supposing it was then too late, that when they came he was dead, lying stiffly in the frozen snow" (159). The ending suggests that the widower will ultimately die of exposure. Here, space is again very significant. Indoors, i. e., in the human sphere, the man can handle and ward off the trespasses of the tree, for instance the smoking logs and uneatable fruit. Yet, in the outdoors, the natural sphere, he is vulnerable, unprotected, and ultimately at the mercy of the natural surroundings. Aided by the snow and the frost, the tree finally usurps the human body by trapping it in the place formerly occupied by the stem and bringing it down alongside the remains of the plant. More than just an anthropomorphized instance of revenge, this final scene epitomizes the plant-specific usurpation of the human by the vegetal, which holds the man firm until he freezes to death. Thus, this is again an approach that illustrates vegetal agency on its own terms rather than through anthropomorphization.

Feminist readers might criticize that while the patriarch is brought down in the end, this is only done after the brutal assault of the feminized tree, its decapitation, and supposed demise. However, an approach via critical plant theory, specifically via the observations of Michael Marder's *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), allows for a reading in which the tree outlasts the protagonist. According to Marder, plants do not have an autonomous self in the sense of being an independent, isolated, and thus mobile entity. Rather, the plant is "inseparable from the place of its germination" (Marder 2013, 169) and cannot exist without the soil that gives rise to, maintains, and provides it with nourishment, while also stabilizing and protecting its roots. Thus, the vegetal self extends to and is one with the surrounding ground and the eco-sphere on which the plant depends. Marder sees a "breakdown of [...] unity and identity" (89) in the figure of the plant. In its constant directedness towards and dependence on both the sun and the soil it is rooted in, the plant cannot be understood as a separate, self-contained individual removable from its immediate surroundings. Instead, the vegetal self transcends the corporeal boundaries of the plant body and its roots. "Given that the plant's self, bound to the universality of the elements and of light, is always external to itself, its unity is at once a dis-unity" (89). In that sense, the plant provokes a reconsideration of the self as we think of it and introduces a new notion of identity. The organism's

inseparability from extra-corporal entities is not the only aspect of vegetal disunity. The plant also proves non-identical to itself in its modular structure. A vegetal being can flourish and decay at the same time, as its modularity allows single parts to wither and die while preserving other parts of the organism that remain unscathed. This modularity is then also combined with modular temporalities⁵.

The plant [...] is not contemporaneous with itself, in that it is a loose alliance of multiple temporalities of growth – some of its parts sprouting faster, others slower, still others decaying and rotting – and in that it does not relate to itself, does not establish a self-identity. Its non-synchronicity with itself is [...] an outcome of the absence of identity that forces it to obey the law and the time of the undifferentiated other, assigning to vegetal being the qualities of heteronomy and hetero-temporality. (Marder 2013, 104–105)

Thus, the hetero-temporal vegetal self expands beyond the boundaries of the vegetal body, encompassing the entire plantscape (Hall 2011, 3), i. e., the plant's entire milieu. "Indifferent to the distinction between the inner and the outer, [...] it merges with the external environment, to which it is completely beholden" (Marder 2013, 32).

Following Marder's argumentation, the felling of the tree in du Maurier's story does not signify the inevitable death of the plant. Rather, there are parts of the apple tree, such as the base of the trunk, the roots, and the surrounding soil, that are not scathed by the axe and, therefore, cannot be annihilated by the protagonist. The tree is practically beheaded through the felling. Yet, in contrast to non-modularly structured organisms with centralized organs and nervous systems, this does not mean that the remaining parts of the tree need to perish due to the loss of the branches and the trunk. As Marder puts it: "Viewed from the vegetal middle" (64) – i. e., the spatio-temporal origin of the rhizomatically growing vegetal being – the plant epitomizes "the maddening place where it is possible to lose one's head" (64). Thus, the tree, which is always external to itself and hetero-temporal in nature, can still prevail – thanks

5 Modular temporalities or hetero-temporality are/ is an important characteristic of the vegetal. However, it is not unique to plants. In fact, members of the animal kingdom, for instance the axolotl or invertebrates like flatworms, can regrow tissue, nerves, organs, or even entire limbs, which means that these organisms can also be inherently asynchronous.

to its “loose alliance of multiple temporalities of growth” (Marder 104). This allows the plant to grow back as a restored version of itself, enabled by the ground that sustains it and is part of its transcorporeal self. In this light, rather than an inferiority, the sessility of plants proves to be the very means by which they preserve themselves despite destructive attacks. This emphasis on sessility also indicates the agency of the ground in embedding, bringing forth, attaching to itself, and maintaining both the tree and the plantscape at large. The earth makes the plant grow, flourish, bloom, bear fruits, etc. As Michael Cuntz notes: “A place, a ground, is considered as an agent in its own right, as a producing, productive place” (2014, 103). Therefore, it manifests as part of the complex actor-network of the ecosphere. The suggestion that the tree will regenerate and live on is also inherent in the narrated timeframe. The plot unfolds in spring and ends in winter with the presumed passing of the protagonist. Thus, it spans an entire seasonal cycle (Pracha 2016, 173), which suggests that the next iteration will bring rejuvenation to the vegetal being that has merely been damaged, but not eliminated, in the attack during the cold season. The plant, whose essential temporal modality is iterability (Marder 2013, 185), is perfectly in sync with this cyclical temporality. Hence, it will renew itself and survive. The patriarchal protagonist, on the other hand, will be gone for good.

Conclusion

Daphne du Maurier’s “The Apple Tree” is a complex short story indicative of ecofeminist intersections regarding the patriarchal mistreatment of women and nature. The protagonist’s relationship to females is neglectful, resentful, and exploitative. Equally, his relationship to the trees in the orchard is instrumental and objectifying as he turns to them for food, wood, and aesthetic pleasure. The anthropomorphization and feminization of the apple trees, highlighting the parallels to Midge and May, allow for these ecofeminist intersections to come to the fore. Du Maurier builds on a long tradition of problematic woman-plant-metamorphoses and comparisons. What distinguishes her approach is that she modernizes the trope and presents the tree as an agential and affective actor resisting the protagonist’s schemes and actively targeting him. Significantly, the author does not translate the tree’s agency into human terms. Rather, the apple tree’s agential capacities manifest in plant-specific, bio-semiotic behavior patterns. In contrast to the traditional dynamic, du Maurier’s female character gains rather than loses agency when returning

as a plant. Unlike Midge during her lifetime, the apple tree is able to counteract the patriarch and even rid itself of him in the end, helped by the Latour-esque (2005) network of more-than-human actors that forms the plant's milieu. This essay considers the complex give-and-take at the heart of these actor-networks and the role of the factish in constituting vegetal agency. Thus, it provides a post-anthropocentric understanding that deconstructs power hierarchies between species and genders and acknowledges the distribution of agency across all parts of the collective.

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