

Reviews

ELIZABETH HOPE CHANG, *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. Pp. x + 228. \$59.50 cloth; \$29.50 paper.

Elizabeth Hope Chang's compelling new book, *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century*, is a welcome offering in the rapidly growing subfield of Victorianist ecocriticism. As latecomers to the environmental critique of literature, Victorianists are quickly making up for lost time with a body of compelling new work. Perhaps most notably, scholars involved in the Vcologies collective (at <v-cologies.org>) are exploring a wide range of related topics, including the scale and intensification of climate change in a globalized nineteenth-century Britain, the emergence of carbon and oil cultures, and the rising awareness of species extinction, to name just a few. It could easily be argued that a focus on plants is essential to each of these areas. And yet, the humanist and posthumanist analysis of plants is only just beginning to root itself as a significant source of the new Victorianist ecocriticism. *Novel Cultivations* is an important step in that direction, with Chang's focus on plants in fiction opening our eyes to an overlooked type of mediation in the literary form we thought we knew best.

Chang's literary terrain of choice—the Victorian novel—is, of course, very well-traveled ground. She reenlivens this terrain by foregrounding plants—fictional elements that are usually noticed only as features of fictional backgrounds or settings—and showing how “fictional plant life mediates the possibilities of character and selfhood” (p. 2), most notably in nonrealist genres like detective and adventure stories, scientific romances, Gothic tales, and children's fiction. Specifically, Chang argues that plants in books function as “a buttonhole” that links fiction and reality (p. 2), and she shows how plants both illuminate human character and function as subjects on their own. As she puts it, “I recognize novel plants both as part of the thickly descriptive background to the operations of a singular subject

and, intermittently but equally, as the operative singular subjects drawn out from that background” (p. 4). This assertion is significant because scholarship on the Victorian novel in the past several decades has explored character and human subjectivity from a range of standpoints—gendered interiority (and exteriority), psychoanalytic selfhood, cosmopolitan character, colonial and postcolonial identity, and so on—while plants have been treated (if at all) merely as context or, at best, as evocative “things” in the background. In Chang’s hands, however, plants are vital, mobile, sometimes even sentient subjects who are often as active as their human counterparts. Conversely, the specimen plants that Chang examines require us to theorize human character anew, in order “to account for the ways,” as she notes, “that plants have cultivated the human” (p. 6).

Equally crucial to the moves Chang makes in this book is her awareness that Victorian plant life expanded globally and exponentially throughout the century, powered by “the operations of empire” (p. 10). To some degree, the novels she has selected—which extend from mid-nineteenth-century detective fiction to early-twentieth-century eco-Gothic tales, from Wilkie Collins to Algernon Blackwood—thus generally parallel the range of novels that register the increasingly obvious imperialist discourse that scholars like Edward Said and Patrick Brantlinger first began to track. Exotic plant specimens, in other words, grow more numerous and more luxuriant in novels as their imperial context flourishes. More to the point of Chang’s argument, however, are the ways in which late-century genre fiction authorized the imagination of alternative realities and subjectivities, thereby enabling new relations between form and character. “Plants, when they appear in such globally expansive novel plots,” says Chang, “link the distant and the near in ways that supplement the limitations of human perception” (p. 16). In nonrealist narrative circumstances, that is, plants become more than “things,” and plant life assumes features of character and consciousness previously identified exclusively with the human.

Novel Cultivations is composed of a substantial introduction and five chapters, and it considers fiction by both canonical and noncanonical Victorian authors, including Arthur Conan Doyle, Charlotte Brontë, Oscar Wilde, Frances Hodgson Burnett, H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and H. G. Wells, as well as the aforementioned Collins and Blackwood. The chapters are loosely arranged by the roles of plant life in the texts under consideration, from plants that function as narrative clues to plants that act with aggressive, even intentional, agency. Rather than march through the chapters in

succession, I will select several of Chang's most compelling specimens of plant analysis—thus highlighting the strengths of this excellent book more fully than a consecutive survey would.

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, tremulous plants and strange urban gardens exemplify one configuration of plant-and-human interplay that persuasively exemplifies Chang's argument. While the famous opening to that novel features a rose, a lilac, and a pink-flowering thorn in the first sentence alone (and a laburnum in the second), Chang accentuates the narrative significance over the thematic or symbolic meanings of plants. Immediately in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the "barrage of horticultural sensation" (p. 74) is extreme, overpowering characters and readers alike. But, as Chang demonstrates, the source of narrative perception is ambiguous: is it Lord Henry, the laburnum, or the bee that buzzes lazily around the lilacs? Or is it a fluctuating conflation of all three? Here Chang posits a concept of "free indirect plant discourse" (p. 74) that is but the first example in this novel of perceptual shifts that dehumanize the narrating consciousness. As she puts it, "The novel is constantly seeking ways to find and locate a perceiving consciousness independent of the material boundaries of objects and people" (p. 75). Elsewhere in Wilde's novel, ontological boundaries blur between humans and objects—in Dorian's escalating pursuits of aesthetic gratification, for example—but Chang's analysis of a flickering plant consciousness illuminates this narrative quality in new ways. While Wilde's plants do not themselves manifest independent agency, their "competing claims," says Chang—claims both narratological and phenomenological—"are (at times) allowed to appear more clearly" (p. 80).

If Chang's argument has a teleology, it might be found in the sentient forest that animates Algernon Blackwood's 1907 novella "The Man Whom the Trees Loved." In that tale—a specimen of early-twentieth-century "weird fiction" and a gripping example of eco-Gothic narrative—a Hampshire forest aims to "amalgamate" its human caretaker into its aggregate arboreal consciousness. For Chang, Blackwood's story models important narrative advances, demonstrating in particular a way "to locate narrating consciousness within a form that is both nonhuman and collective" (p. 174). The tale of assertive trees has a provocative and compelling quality of monstrosity, most notably for the caretaker's wife as well as the reader. Chang resists that conclusion, however, focusing instead on its role as a story of environmental awareness. Such stories, she says, should "be read as examples of the growing canon of environmental literature, in which plant life gained a history, a coherent range of cause and effect,

and a particular scale of engagement” (p. 179). This conclusion is a welcome analysis of seemingly sensationalist narratives that nonetheless foreground alternative ways of imagining agency, consciousness, and narrative. As Chang observes, “The narrative model that Blackwood proposes is one in which there is neither genre nor narrative direction, only a kind of wild and windy collective forest consciousness circumnavigating the globe forever” (p. 177).

In *Novel Cultivations*, Chang draws on the work of recent posthuman plant theorists like Michael Marder, Eduardo Kohn, and Jeffrey Nealon. Her book, however, is not a work of theory *per se* but of novel criticism. Chang is an astute critic—one who draws out details of novels you thought you knew intimately and makes those novels seem fresh again—and her most important contribution with this book is to the field of Victorian novel criticism. But its significance does not end there. As Chang argues, cultivated Victorian plants are fictions in themselves, and they “make the environment around them more fictional” (pp. 20–21). Plants, in other words, shape the worlds they inhabit as crucially as those worlds shape and represent them. Readers who love plants and want to study them further—people who want to think about what plants do, “how they grow, where they appear, what they mean, who represents them and why” (p. 21)—should thus be as interested in this book as specialized Victorianists who love nineteenth-century novels because, in Chang’s expert hands, both plants and novels speak to “the complicated multiplicities of selfhood” (p. 21) that mark modernity.

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PENNY FIELDING and ANDREW TAYLOR, eds.,
Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1880s. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 249. \$99.99.

For anyone interested in learning more about this decade, *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1880s* will prove both indispensable and frustrating. The indispensability is thanks to the unexpected and thought-provoking subjects of study offered by some of the most distinguished Victorianists today—critics such as Linda K. Hughes and John Stokes, among others—while the frustration is due to the shocking omissions of key genres and figures. This survey of the period makes no reference to categories such as