



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

LETTUCE ENTERTAIN YOU: FLORAL AGENCY IN RALPH KNEVET'S *RHODON AND IRIS*

ASHLEY HOWARD UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

On 3 May 1631, the Norwich Society of Florists held a feast to celebrate their flowers and the art of floriculture. It was a day of firsts: the society was newly founded and presented what is currently the earliest known florists' feast recorded in the city (Duthie 1982, 18). Among its entertainments, the feast included Ralph Knevet's *Rhodon and Iris*, a quirky floral play written and performed for the occasion. The play was Knevet's first and only known venture into writing for the stage. With his green pen—in the many senses of the phrase—Knevet invites a theory of floral agency where plants are co-artists, capable of affecting and being affected by the world.

Rhodon and Iris presents two entwining plots, the first of which depicts the characters' misadventures in love. Rhodon loses interest in his courtship with Eglantine and falls in love with Iris. Intense jealousy ensues as Eglantine seeks to regain her lover's affection; she disguises herself as Iris and gives Rhodon a love potion under the pretence that the powerful philter will bring him strength. Another narrative follows a dispute between Violetta and the tyrannical Martagon, who unjustly tramples her gardens. Violetta asks her brother Rhodon for help. Failing to resolve the dispute through conversation, Rhodon and his friends (Acanthus and Anthophotus) declare war against Martagon and his supporters (his friend Cynosbatus, the witch Poneria, and the latter's accomplice Agnostus). Rhodon drinks the love potion before the battle, but the concoction proves poisonous—a fact Eglantine did not know when she acquired the potion from Poneria. Only the precious lettuce, a gift from Violetta, saves Rhodon and renews his strength. He meets Martagon

in a battlefield of armed flowers, where the fight ends just moments before their weapons strike. The goddess Flora descends and restores peace among the flowers: Rhodon and Iris become engaged, Martagon must repair the damage caused by his tyranny, Eglantine must atone for her abuse of love, and Poneria and Agnostus are banished.

The play has received little critical attention apart from a semi-diplomatic transcription in Amy Charles's 1966 *The Shorter Poems of Ralph Knevet*, and scholarship tends to focus on the play's pastoralism (Smith 1897; Laidler 1905; Greg 1959; Yang 2011). Beyond its generic use of the pastoral, however, *Rhodon and Iris* presents a complex philosophy of plant performativity and floral agency. Specifically, floral agency energizes the narratives that plants and humans co-author on the early modern stage, the primary setting for grappling with my questions in this essay. How and to what extent do plants author themselves? Is this authorship a form of vegetable agency? How does theatre offer special attention to the performativity of plants in art and nature? My approach to these questions combines two prevalent yet sometimes opposing threads within critical plant studies—Michael Marder's plant agency and Mel Y. Chen's and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's material agencies—and queries the tensions between these theories.

In an interview with Prudence Gibson, Marder describes plant agency in terms of the performativity of plants; the affective exchange between plants and their environments is an exchange upon which their being depends (Gibson 2018, 29).¹ Crucially, Marder specifies that "plants are the artists of themselves: they create themselves and their environments all the time: losing parts and acquiring new ones, changing the landscape and the airscape, moulding themselves and their world through forms inseparable from vegetal matter" (Gibson 2018, 29). Marder expands here on his earlier work in *Plant-Thinking* (2013) and outlines a philosophy that holds special utility for reading early modern texts. In *Radical Botany*, Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari observe Marder's tendency to locate plant-thinking and plant-like thoughts in art and philosophy—a tendency that manifests despite his wariness of imposing human meaning onto plants (2020, 22). Meeker and Szabari also identify art and philosophy as "early modern technologies of animating plants" (2020, 24), emphasizing a sympathy between the plant agency of Marder and of early modern writers.² Marder shares key assumptions with historicist texts that make his work particularly useful when examining early modern plant agency, which in turn reflects new light back onto his own plant philosophies.

Theatrical representations of plants may seem too anthropocentric given that human actors embody the flowers, but the play relies just as much on linguistic and vegetable affects as on human actors. Language collaborates with nature, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen finds in his study of minerals and stone agency: "Narrative has power over human reality: it can mediate. But that compositional power is contingent rather than absolute, deriving in part from the thing described. Language is inhuman, exerting its own resistance, slide, and material force" (2015, 33). What this analysis means for *Rhodon and Iris* is that (a) the performed play and printed playbook exert linguistic agency upon human and non-human audiences, and (b) floral narratives (such as those written in playbooks and herbals) rely on floral agency, from which they gain compositional power. In other words, narratives about plants are co-authored by the very plants after which they derive.

Theatre is a useful mediating tool given that vegetable affect becomes more recognizable when presented on the early modern stage or in a playbook—in microcosms of the world.

This essay examines performances *for*, *as*, and *with* plants—three interconnected modes of performativity that demonstrate floral agency in *Rhodon and Iris*. Responding to Marder’s emphasis on affective exchanges, I begin by exploring how agency manifests when plants are affected by their environments, focusing on the affective consequences of performances that are staged *for* plants. The florists’ feast builds upon a history of floral celebrations that have had material consequences for the vegetable world, such as the Roman *ludi Florales* which was first held to revitalize withered plants. The otherness of plants, as Marder presents it, also invites different modes of performativity: do plants exert agency by inspiring and witnessing theatrical performances? Flowers inspire a kind of self-reflexive art that features floral characters who then act with flowers; within this somewhat disorienting interplay, flowers become the artists of themselves.

In the second section, I consider how plants affect their environments—the complementary side of Marder’s philosophy—through an analysis of human characters who perform *as* plants. The play deploys florally-named allegorical characters who perform and embody the virtues of flowers, imagining and staging a form of floral agency as the plants move consciously and freely about the stage. This section invokes Marder’s artistic plants and Cohen’s linguistic agency as it examines how three floral characters embody the virtues described in early modern herbals. The play thus presents floral agency through the mediating agency of language, with particular attention to the language of plays and herbals. *Rhodon and Iris* is far from being a solely human production; it is artwork co-produced with plant, human, and material agencies. To reiterate the point, I query Marder’s plant otherness by considering the allegorical others of the play—two characters who represent Ignorance and Envy and who lack agency due to their status as non-floral characters.

The third section combines both aspects of Marder’s performative plants in its examination of performing *with* plants. The floral characters use plants as ingredients in cosmetics, poisons, and antidotes to affect other floral characters, so that plants simultaneously affect and are affected by floral agency. These ingredients exert the vegetable affect that Chen theorizes in *Animacies*, particularly in relation to the transformative capacities of food. In an oft-quoted passage, Chen also articulates a theory of affective exchange between plants and their environments: “it is possible to conceive of something like the ‘affect’ of a vegetable, wherein both the vegetable’s receptivity to other affects and its ability to affect outside itself, as well as its own animating principle, its capacity to animate itself, become viable considerations” (2012, 4). I build upon the work of Marder, Chen, and Cohen to show how floral characters and floral ingredients become actors whose performances demonstrate floral agency. By examining performances *for*, *as*, and *with* plants in *Rhodon and Iris*, this essay outlines and queries the roles that plants can assume as the artists of themselves.

Performing for Plants

Performances staged *for* the vegetable world exhibit one half of Marder's plant performativity, wherein the being of a plant is conceived in part by its ability to be affected by its environment. Just as plants affect their environments by inspiring theatrical performances, these theatrical performances in turn affect the vegetable world. This section outlines a brief history of Roman and English entertainments that celebrated flowers and explores how these festivals facilitated affective exchanges between the floral and non-floral worlds.

Performances for plants reach at least to the Roman *ludi Florales*, a festival for the goddess of flowers that was held annually beginning in 173 BCE. The festival included performances, circus games, and a sacrifice to Flora (Scullard 1981, 110). Much like the Festival of Dionysus at Athens, the *ludi Florales* included among its entertainments *ludi scaenici*, or theatrical performances. These performances took many forms from early musical entertainments to later Latin adaptations of Greek comedies and tragedies, as well as mimes that were "associated with the sexually charged atmosphere of the *ludi Florales*" (Dunkle 2014, 385). *Ludi scaenici* were often performed on wooden structures erected near the appropriate temple for the occasion; between Flora's temples on the Quirinal Hill and the Circus Maximus, the performances were likely held in the Circus (Wiseman 2015, 89).

Importantly, the festival sought to propagate vegetable life. As Ovid explains in the *Fasti* ([1 century CE] 1931, 5.183–378), Flora fell into a deep despair that led her plants to wither from neglect. Attempting to save the crops and flowers, the Roman senate pledged to celebrate Flora with annual games if she returned to her plants. Flora accepted the exchange (5.327–330). Whether these performances enhanced plant growth, they certainly held material implications for the vegetal world. Given that the temporary stages of the *ludi scaenici* were made of wood, even the physical infrastructure of the performances can be understood as a collection of vegetable actors who exert artistic agency. Vin Nardizzi takes up a similar idea in relation to the early modern stage when he considers how the stage post (a tree prop) represents at once a post, a tree, and even an actor's body. When an actor invites the audience to perceive the wood as post and tree simultaneously, "He revivifies the wood of theatre, suggesting that in these moments there is no distinction between 'nature' (living wood) and 'culture' (lumbered wood)" (Nardizzi 2013, 22). Collapsing distinctions between art and nature also appear in *Rhodon and Iris*, as explored below.

The Roman *ludi Florales* took place from 28 April to 3 May, the final day correlating to the Norwich florists' feast on 3 May 1631. As a festival for fertility, the *ludi Florales* implied lewd connotations in the seventeenth century—so much so that the Norwich florists felt compelled to deny any connection to the ancient celebration. Knevet defends the play against potential criticism when he comically denounces "Bacchanalian riot" (1631, sig. ar) in his dedicatory letter to the Society of Florists. William Strode takes a similar stance in his poem "A Prologe crownd with Flowres. On the Florists Feast at Norwich" (c.1632–1635), which calls Flora a harlot and states that "Our feast we call / Only with Flowres, from Flora not at all" (quoted in Duthie 1982, 20). Whether early modern poets really saw danger in celebrating Flora, whose status as a courtesan is ambiguous even in Ovid, their

need to address her controversial role suggests that the affective agency of flowers persists across centuries of stage performances for plants.

Early modern florists did not sell cut flowers in shops as a modern audience might expect. Rather, they were cultivators trained in the art of floriculture who, as Brent Elliott notes, were interested in growing new varieties of plants. They grew these variations largely by propagating cuttings from naturally occurring sports, or the parts of a plant with morphological anomalies (2001, 171). By propagating these variations, florists encouraged a wider range of plant performativity as human and vegetable co-produced new iterations of a given plant. The emerging forms of plant performativity flourished in part due to festivities such as the florists' feast, which could accelerate an exchange of floral knowledge among attendees. One might expect that a play written and performed for florists would celebrate human manipulation of and domination over nature, but *Rhodon and Iris* celebrates the vitality of plants within a collaborative human-vegetal ecology.

Celebrations of English floriculture continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as flower shows gained popularity. The Horticultural Society of London was founded in 1804 and its rival, the Metropolitan Society of Florists and Amateurs, was founded by George Glenny in 1832. As Elliott writes, the latter "was perhaps the most prominent of a number of organisations that tried to extend the traditional range of florists' flowers" (172). The former was renamed the Royal Horticultural Society in 1861 and still holds flower shows today. Several scholars have explored these early histories of flower shows in greater detail (Duthie 1982; Elliott 2001; Ziegler 2007; Willes 2014a). Joseph Breck's *The Young Florist* (1833), a text that contains dialogues that aim to persuade readers to become flower cultivators, offers a nineteenth-century perspective on floristry. Other forms of flower shows have also emerged in recent years, including the Netflix series *The Big Flower Fight* (2020), which depicts florists, sculptors, and garden designers competing to create floral sculptures to display at the famous Kew Gardens in London.

Performing *as* Plants

On the other side of Marder's performative plants is the vegetable's capacity to affect its environment. In the literary context of *Rhodon and Iris*, plants demonstrate affective agency when human actors perform allegorically *as* plants. Although the characters in *Rhodon and Iris* are primarily shepherds and shepherdesses, their virtues map onto the early modern plants after which they are named. The rose is strong of heart, the lily poisonous, the iris clarifying. Homer Smith offers an early attempt to explicate the allegorical relationships between the characters and their floral counterparts: "Martagon, the Red Lily, is haughty and overbearing; Violetta, timid and easily oppressed. The servant appropriately receives the name of the dependent and clinging Eglantine. The fair physician is called Panace (All-heal); Acanthus (the Thistle) and Cynosbatus (the Bramble) are both defiant and headstrong warriors" (1897, 437). These qualities are somewhat misleading and anachronistic, however, and the reading includes minor errors. For instance, the servant is Clematis rather than Eglantine, and Violetta is hardly timid when she petitions Rhodon for his assistance.

These floral allegories are better served through a reading grounded in early modern herbals and herbaria. This section investigates the performativity of three floral characters (Rhodon, Martagon, and Iris) as they relate to accounts of these flowers in early modern herbals such as John Gerard's popular 1597 *Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes*. By contrasting these characters against non-floral characters (Poneria and Agnostus) who are eventually banished from the pastoral world, the essay pinpoints floral agency as the prevailing affective force of the play. Floral agency is made visible to a human audience through the virtues associated with each plant. Jessica Rosenberg articulates the role of virtue in representing a collaboration between plants and literature: "'vertue' acts as a specific term of art, prescribing the use of a figure and its characteristic property. It names a force inherent in a specimen or figure, what we might think of as an innate vigor or potential energy waiting to be put into operation by a skilled artisan. Whether in distilled plant material or in figured language, vertue blurs the line between art and nature, between human craft and the nonhuman material it manipulates" (2016, 61). The plant philosophy in *Rhodon and Iris* expands this reading to suggest that art is not an exclusively human craft: virtuous plants can act without humans because they themselves are the artisans. The floral characters combine art and nature and demonstrate their inherent virtues even without human interference. The non-floral allegorical characters lack such herbal virtues and thus lack agency in the play.

Rhodon takes his name from ῥόδον, an Ancient Greek word for rose. Gerard's *Herball* states that the rose deserves "the chiefest and most principall place among all flowers," praiseworthy for "his beautie, vertues, and his fragrant [fragrant] and odoriferous smell" (1597, 1077). Gerard outlines the qualities of several roses, many of which relate to the vitality of the heart: "The distilled water of Roses is good for the strengthening of the hart, and refreshing of the spirits" (1082). The red rose is especially apt to "strengthen the hart, and helpe the trembling and beating thereof" (1082). Rhodon's heart is strong in the realm of love, as evident in his familial love for Violetta, romantic love for Iris, and friendship with Acanthus. But his heart is also strong in its courage to confront injustice and for its measured control over the passions. Rhodon's performance of the rose demonstrates affective agency when he influences the actions of other flowers. For example, when Acanthus tells Martagon he will not surrender, the former finds courage in his proximity to Rhodon's own courageous heart: "Nay, be assured, proud man, not any smart / Can cure the courage of a valiant heart" (2.4.5).³ Much like the distilled rose waters described in Gerard, Rhodon's performativity as the rose yields affective changes in his environment.

Martagon, a tyrant who tramples Violetta's gardens and whom Rhodon must confront in battle, performs the qualities of the lily. While Gerard records several lilies, the martagon being a variation with a strongly reflexed perianth segment, the *Herball* does not list their associated virtues. Smith suggests that Martagon is the "Red Lily" because he is "haughty and overbearing" (1897, 437), but the toxicity of lilies is more relevant. Other early modern texts reference the plant's association with poison, as in Ben Jonson's *The Sad Shepherd* when the sage Alken lists martagon among the "venom'd Plants" (1641, 151) a witch uses to enact her wiles. Martagon's association in this scene with mandrakes, hemlock, nightshade, and adder's tongue (all plants that are poisonous to humans) spotlights its toxicity. In Knevet's play, Martagon conspires with Poneria to poison Rhodon—a plot that complements Poneria's scheme to also disrupt the feast of the Norwich

Society of Florists (see her speech at 1.1.6). As a noxious actor, Martagon spreads the affective agency of lilies to the other flowers and audience alike.

Iris invokes multiple meanings when she performs the clarifying virtues described in early modern herbals. Gerard refers to the iris as the flower-de-luce (in Latin, *Iris vulgaris*) and associates the plant with cleansing properties: a preparation made from lupins and the root of flower-de-luce can “cleanseth away the freckels and morpew” (1597, 94)—both of which refer to discoloration of the skin.⁴ According to Nicholas Culpeper’s *The English Physitian*, another popular herbal that combines descriptions of plant virtues with readings of the stars and planets, the iris also offers “a Remedy against the bitings and stingings of Venemous Creatures being boyled in Water and Vineger and drunk” (1652, sig. R2). The character Iris exemplifies the clarifying properties of irises through her unblemished love for Rhodon, which contrasts Eglantine’s deceitful love. Although Iris is accused of poisoning Rhodon under the cover of night, she becomes an astringent when cleared of the false accusation. When Rhodon learns of her innocence, he states that “my Iris is as clear as innocency itself” (5.4.7). Iris (the character) allegorically performs the floral properties of irises (the plant) in order to clarify Rhodon’s ocular iris (a metonym for his vision). Iris embodies clarity in her human-vegetal body, and her floral agency outwardly affects other flowers. To take the human-plant interplay one step further, this agency then influences the audience who experiences floral affect as spectators of the stage performance and, even now, as readers of the printed playbook.

Expanding Madhavi Menon’s suggestion in *Wanton Words* (2004) that allegories require both light and dark (the illuminating purpose of the allegory and its antithesis), Corey McEleney observes that allegory relies on disfigurement and otherness to convey meaning. As far as allegory “attempts to convey a meaning by indirect means, it necessarily relies on a form of otherness, inherent in the very word ‘allegory’ (from the Greek *allos*, or ‘other’)” (2018, 69). Although plants are often considered others, an idea that empowers plants in Marder’s *Plant-Thinking*, the allegorical others of *Rhodon and Iris* are two non-floral characters.⁵ The contrast between floral and non-floral produces in part the uniquely vegetal agency of the play.

Agnostus and Poneria are the only non-floral characters, allegorizing Ignorance and Envy. These allegories frame vice as a violation of the pastoral world and hearken to prelapsarian Eden. The name Agnostus derives from the Ancient Greek *ἄγνωστος*, or unknown. A famous example of the adjective appears in Acts of the Apostles 17:23, during Paul’s speech to the Gerousia in Athens. Paul mocks the pagans for having an unknown god (*ἄγνωστος Θεός*) rather than his ubiquitous Christian god. Knevet’s audience may have recognized the passage from the 1611 King James Bible: “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”⁶ Akin to the god whose identity is indecipherable, Agnostus’s character appears eroded and indistinct. Deemed “an Impostor” (1631, sig. a4r) in the *dramatis personae*, Agnostus shifts from one persona to another. He is a poorly disguised scholar one moment, a colonel the next. By depicting the non-floral allegories as unstable and unconvincing, Knevet suggests that the floral characters are agential not because of costumes or names, but because they embody the affects—the virtues—of each plant.

Poneria derives from the Ancient Greek πονηρία—a reference to vice or wickedness that Knevet interprets as envy in a dedicatory letter to the Society of Florists. Poneria attempts to undermine the vegetal world through a literal contrast between light and dark, desiring a return to the shades of night and its promise of chaos. Referring to the Norwich florists' feast itself, she tells Agnostus that the pair needs to "be prepared to act some stratagem / To eclipse the glory of these festivals" (2.1.1). While some plants such as moonflowers and four o'clocks bloom at night, the idea is that Poneria hopes to extinguish the source of vegetable life: the sun. Her envy threatens the vegetal world, but this world ultimately reasserts authority. Although Rhodon advises moderation and mercy throughout the play, he refuses Poneria's plea for clemency (5.6.4) and keeps her in custody until the goddess Flora banishes the two "intruders" (5.6.17). Vin Nardizzi has noted that Gerard describes the harmful virtues of several plants, such as the "danger" of mad apples (1597, 274) and the "hurts" caused by leeks (138).⁷ Unlike these harmful virtues, the vices that Poneria and Agnostus allegorize are not floral in nature and thus prove impotent; their status as non-floral allegories may explain why these vices are easily remedied and supplanted by virtuous flowers.

These allegories place *Rhodon and Iris* in conversation with early modern herbals that outlined floral virtues in literary contexts. These allegories also propose a link between the printed playbook and another herbal book: the herbarium. Leah Knight's *Of Books and Botany in Early Modern England* explores the interchange between early modern herbals and poetry (2009, 103), and at several points considers the vegetable-book hybridity of the early modern herbarium. Unlike herbals, herbaria contained within their pages dried plant specimens, and were aptly called dried gardens or winter gardens (Knight 2009, 31). Knight observes that herbaria preserved plants which could then return to a lifelike appearance when soaked in water. This process mirrors the life-giving act of reading verse aloud: "This aspect of the herbarium is especially suggestive when considered in light of the literary metaphor of the garden of verse: like flowers in the herbarium, poems rendered two-dimensional by being placed on the printed page could be resurrected to a metaphorically three-dimensional form when projected into space by being read aloud" (32).

Rhodon and Iris puts this idea into action in the realm of drama. Resembling the herbarium, the printed playbook preserves two-dimensional flower specimens which are then revived through theatrical performance. What is at stake in identifying a similarity between the playbook and herbarium? An answer lies in Knight's assertion: "Herbaria are thus notable for their unusual ability to narrow the gap between a representation and the thing represented, and they could therefore be said to problematize the broader gap between those overarching categories, art and nature" (32). In both the playbook and herbarium, flowers are simultaneously author and subject, art and nature. The playbook can then facilitate a staged performance of plants as three-dimensional beings where the allegories spotlight (not merely humanize) vegetable affect.

Performing with Plants

The two modes of affecting and being affected by one's environment come together when the floral characters use plants as vegetable ingredients in their plots. Plant-based cosmetics trick the eye, love potions beguile the heart, and antidotes clarify the senses. Such botanical potions are

common in early modern plays: a love potion is extracted from a flower wounded by Cupid in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Macbeth* depicts a poison of hemlock and yew. What sets *Rhodon and Iris* apart is the compounded agency of plants (or at least characters who are more plant-like than human) performing *with* plants.

Cosmetics mediate the appearances and senses of characters with help from the vegetable world. Eglantine is particularly skilled in the art of preparing and applying cosmetics, and as an unrequited and jealous lover of Rhodon uses these skills to compensate for her shortcomings in love. Her servant Clematis enumerates, at great length, the many beauty products Eglantine uses. These substances include products that can be ingested or applied topically, either to alter one's disposition or physical appearance. Plant-based cosmetics exhibit an agency that is comparable to that of vegetable foods. Drawing from Jane Bennett's argument that food is an actant, Mel Y. Chen argues that one can know the affect of a plant by eating it: "when humans and nonhuman animals eat them, they have specific effects and can be either nourishing or toxic to bodily systems" (2012, 41).

The principles of Chen's argument apply here as plant-based products mediate the body externally and internally. Eglantine improves her complexion with distilled water from "flowers of oranges, woodbine, or roses" (3.1.3), and extracts skincare products from the rinds (another form of skin) and juices of plants:

Some made of daffodils, some of lees,
Of scarwolfe some, and some of rinds of trees,
With centaury, sour grapes, and tarragon,
She maketh many a strange lotion.
Her skin she can both supple and refine
With juice of lemons and with turpentine. (3.1.3)

Used externally, these products alter Eglantine's visual appearance to elicit a desired response in the beholder, thus bearing affective consequences on Eglantine's environment. Used internally, the topical applications are absorbed into the skin and infuse the floral character with new vegetal properties. The cosmetics further affect Eglantine as she becomes a hybrid performance of eglantines and of the many other plants she absorbs.

The extracted aromas of plants can also alter the body and its disposition. For instance, Eglantine infuses herself with nourishing properties when she burns storax and spikenard in her room (3.1.3). The first is a fragrant tree resin that can soothe the throat, and the second is an essential plant oil used to soothe the mind. Eglantine also prepares perfume to entice her beloved:

The virtue of jasmine and three-leaved grass,
She doth imprison in a brittle glass,
With civet, musk, and odors far more rare,
These liquors sweet incorporated are. (3.1.3)

Notably, Eglantine captures the “virtue” of jasmine, signalling both its scent and agency. One might perceive Eglantine’s cosmetology as an exertion of human agency over the vegetable world, but her status as a florally-named allegorical character suggests that the plants collaborate to perform new floral affects. Furthermore, these properties are intrinsic to the plants themselves—not to Eglantine’s knowledge and ability to harness them in little jars.

Plant ingredients exert further affective changes when ingested, as when Eglantine administers a love potion to her beloved Rhodon. Unbeknownst to Eglantine, the philter contains “vipers’ blood mixed with the juice of aconite” (4.2.13). Gerard describes the virtues of aconite, more popularly known as wolfsbane: “The force of these Woolfes banes, are most pernicious and poisonous,” capable of killing a man or beast within half an hour without remedy (1597, 818). Its name likely derives from the Ancient Greek ἀκόνιτος, which refers to something invincible. The potion reflects the poisonous qualities of Eglantine’s jealous and insincere love, parodying the oft-quoted phrase from Virgil’s *Eclogues*: “omnia vincit Amor” [“Love conquers all”] ([c.37 BCE] 1916, 10.69). Eglantine’s love unintentionally conquers the beloved with the invincible agency of aconite.

The duality of plants as both poisons and remedies signals the ambivalence of vegetable affect, an agency that is far from subservient to human desires. Such duality appears in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, when Friar Laurence describes how one plant’s virtues become harmful when misapplied:

Within the infant rind of this weak flower
Poison hath residence, and medicine power,
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart. ([1599] 2008, 2.2.23–26)

Similarly, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the effects of Cupid’s love flower dissipate only when Puck crushes an herb over the eyes of Lysander ([1600] 2017, 3.3.37–38). Gerard lists the medicinal qualities associated with each plant, and such knowledge expanded as readers, including Elizabeth Freke and Margaret Boscawen, added their own commentaries to herbal writings (Leong 2014). Margaret Willes explores the medicinal qualities of plants and the use and growth of plants for “physick” (2014b), joining other scholars who have begun to explore the many herbal remedies in literary texts (Pollard 2005; Kerwin 2005). In other words, the early modern stage has long been interested in the curative and catastrophic artistry of plants.

The antidote to Eglantine’s love potion is none other than humble lettuce, likely wild lettuce in this case, which is a gift from Violetta. According to Gerard, lettuce is a mild sedative that can induce sleep and “cooleth a hot stomacke, called the hart burning” (1597, 241). Panace calls lettuce the “noblest herb that e’er in garden grew” (4.4.1), and Violetta claims this “precious herb” can thwart the “devilish force / Of strongest poisons or enchantments” (4.1.6). That lettuce should soothe Rhodon’s enflamed heart, poisoned as it was by the burning passions that motivated Eglantine, confirms its affective abilities. Lettuce confers its soothing qualities in an expanding network of healing affects—a network that resembles the venation pattern on its leaves. All at once, Rhodon recovers, Martagon’s tyranny ends, Eglantine’s passions are cooled, and peace returns to Thessaly.

In addition to the lettuce from his sister, Rhodon receives a gem from Iris. Clematis observes that the gifts communicate the virtues of their givers: "These noble gifts, beseeming well / Both the receiver's and the givers' qualities / I will deliver to the honored swain" (4.4.1).

The play seems to work toward a theory of plants that engages the doctrine of signatures, wherein plants resemble the body parts for which they have curative powers, but the play resists the tendency to place vegetables in a subordinate role. Sixteenth-century writers such as Paracelsus described this doctrine in anthropocentric terms, arguing that God designed the plants in a way that made evident their usefulness for humans (Foucault [1966] 1989, 29). In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault emphasizes how certain vegetal and non-vegetal bodies are drawn to one another with a shared affinity: "And what other sign is there that two things are linked to one another unless it is that they have a mutual attraction for each other, as do the sun and the sunflower" (31–32).

Reimagining this plant philosophy, *Rhodon and Iris* deploys the doctrine of signatures in a way that decenters the human. One example lies in the treatment of aconite, a plant that Foucault describes as an instance of signatures: "There exists a sympathy between aconite and our eyes. This unexpected affinity would remain in obscurity if there were not some signature on the plant, some mark, some word, as it were, telling us that it is good for diseases of the eye. This sign is easily legible in its seeds: they are tiny dark globes set in white skinlike coverings whose appearance is much like that of eyelids covering an eye" (30–31). Although aconite might heal ocular afflictions, *Rhodon and Iris* emphasizes its otherness, deploying aconite to instead deceive and betray the eye. Poneria tells Eglantine that the love potion will make Rhodon forget ever seeing Iris: "Iris then shall be forgotten clean / As one whom he had ne'er scarce known or seen" (3.2.21). Aconite can also deceive the eye into perceiving false resemblances, as when Rhodon is convinced beyond doubt that the imitation of Iris (Eglantine in disguise) is in fact Iris. The consequence of this misattribution is that Rhodon and his fellow shepherds doubt the virtue of the real Iris. Aconite may resemble the human eye in physical form, but the plant has the capacity to both distort and clarify vision. Such ambivalence underlies its independence from the human world.

Conclusion: Agential Po(e)sies

Far from serving human interests, the flowers in *Rhodon and Iris* assert their agency by challenging and collaborating with other vegetable and material agencies. Knevet's plants participate in an affective exchange with their environments, engaging Marder's and Chen's theories of vegetable affect. The stage performance and printed playbook historicize these theories in an early modern context, where art and philosophy are also understood as important "technologies of animating plants" (Meeker and Szabari 2020, 24). I have aimed to explore performances *for*, *as*, and *with* plants in *Rhodon and Iris* to articulate the many roles that flowers play as they exert floral agency. In performances *for* plants, actor and observer participate in one such affective exchange. The plant, as a witness to and motivation for the performance, exhibits agency that affects the play; in turn, the play affects plants and the other agencies that interact with them. Language also collaborates with the floral subjects to produce theatrical art—a line of thinking that builds upon Cohen's

linguistic agency. The narrative agency of the play, written in celebration of flowers, holds material consequences for the vegetable world.

Language also collaborates with plants when characters perform *as* plants, embodying the virtues described in early modern herbals. Figurative devices such as allegory and metaphor help Knevet reproduce and represent the performativity of plants on stage; crucially, these performances are co-authored by the flowers themselves. Knevet's use of theatre to articulate this philosophy challenges divisions between art and nature and among literature, philosophy, and science. When the floral characters then perform *with* plants, they combine the role of the human actor with the role of the vegetable ingredient and literary text. Chen's analysis of food helpfully considers how ingesting plants can transfer the vegetable's affective virtues onto the consumer. Perhaps paradoxically, the florists' feast is more invested in celebrating the agency that flowers enact upon their cultivators (rather than vice versa). These virtues are inherent to the plants; neither the florists nor Knevet are responsible for bestowing agency upon the flowers. Although the feast centered around florists and thus may seem to celebrate human dominion over nature, the plants perform a uniquely floral agency.

Knevet's flowers begin to answer the question that began this essay: how and to what extent do plants author themselves? In *Rhodon and Iris*, plants collaborate with language, humans, and other plants whose agencies intermingle over the course of the narrative. Marder's engagement with plants as artists invites a fresh reading of *Rhodon and Iris* that welcomes other modes of performativity. Theatre accommodates these layers of performativity in ways that make it an ideal site to explore the affective exchanges between plants and non-plants. Moreover, with its wooden stages and vegetable props, the theatre itself begins to dismantle any distinction between art and nature. Literary texts such as *Rhodon and Iris* become interactive galleries, spaces to explore the artistry of plants—but always with the knowledge that flowers are by no means limited to human understandings of art.

Notes

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¹ As Marder states, "the performativity of plants is their mode of being in the world—their affecting and being affected by the places of their growth" (Gibson 2018, 29).

² Meeker and Szabari also note that "early modern libertine botanists often rely on literary or textual figures rather than on the visual images that are regularly deployed in botanical works" (2020, 18).

³ All modernized quotations from *Rhodon and Iris* are excerpted from my forthcoming edition of the play for *Digital Renaissance Editions* (https://dre.uvic.ca/emdRho_edition.html). Amy Charles prepared a semi-diplomatic transcription of the play which was published in *The Shorter Poems of Ralph Knevet* (1966), but the edition does not include collations or transcription and editorial principles, and its emendations are inconsistent. The 1631 playbook was printed with two variant title pages: STC 15036 and 15036a. My edition takes as its copytext the

London state preserved at the Boston Public Library; it uses standard American spelling and modernized punctuation to conform to modern grammatical use. The parenthetical citations reflect the anthology's use of act/scene/speech numbers as opposed to act/scene/line numbers.

⁴ The OED (2002) defines morpew as “any of various skin diseases characterized by localized or generalized discoloration of the skin”.

⁵ Marder celebrates this otherness: “Whenever human beings encounter plants, two or more worlds (and temporalities) intersect: to accept this axiom is already to let plants maintain their otherness, respecting the uniqueness of their existence” (2013, 8).

⁶ Many thanks to Gregory Rowe for noting this biblical comparison and alleviating my own *áyvola*.

⁷ I thank Vin Nardizzi for sharing his research on harmful plants and early modern virtue.

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Biography

Ashley Howard is a PhD student in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. She is currently researching fish and waterscapes on the early modern stage, with a focus on drama by amateur playwrights. More broadly, her work explores ecotheory, editorial praxis, and TEI encoding. Using this combination of approaches, she aims to make more non-canonical plays accessible to a wider audience of readers and theatre practitioners. Ashley was an editorial consultant and encoder for *Linked Early Modern Drama Online* from 2017 to 2020. She is currently editing Ralph Knevet's 1631 play *Rhodon and Iris* for *Digital Renaissance Editions*.

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