

Hall, "The Imagination of Plants: A Book of Botanical Mythology"

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Book Review

Hall, Matthew. *The Imagination of Plants: A Book of Botanical Mythology*. State University of New York Press, 2019.

“If you have a garden and a library,” Cicero once mused, “you have everything you need.” In Mathew Hall’s latest book, *The Imagination of Plants*, the author invites the reader to reflect on Cicero’s *arbiter dictum* by exploring the links between mythology, philosophy, and the plant kingdom. To better understand Hall’s motive for writing this book, however, it might be useful to begin at the end. In the epilogue of his book Hall states: “The prevailing human imagination of plants is limited to viewing them as a resource to meet our needs...I hope that the botanical myths contained here challenge readers to re-imagine plants as fully alive, as having their own purposes, [and] as deserving respect...” Mathew Hall does not simply use mythology to explore nature, however, he tries to imbue the reader with a sense of praxis. Consequently, this book is as much a programmatic statement about our relationship with the environment as it is a study of myth, philosophy, and the plant kingdom.

Hall’s book is a tree with many branches. He begins by contextualizing myth, and explains how it differs from science. Science can tell us how gravity effects plants, for example, but it cannot tell us why gravity exists in the first place. Clearly, myth is a different kind of truth than science: myth is a universal truth, it is emotive rather than referential, and it creates a sense of organic wholeness instead of breaking the world up into pieces to be viewed under a microscope. By engaging with botanical mythology, Hall seeks to explore the world of plants in a more active voice by replacing the conventional anthropocentric viewpoint with a more imaginative approach. He uses mythology to examine plants as sentient beings, and encourages us to uncover our own ambivalent feelings toward nature. It is this reciprocity between ourselves and the natural world that Hall seeks to explore. How he does this is very creative.

Hall divides his narrative into six thematic chapters: roots, gods, metamorphosis, legend, sentience, and violence. At the beginning of each chapter he provides us with a brief overview using a variety of subtopics, such as kinship, world trees, magical healing, the vegetable soul, and the consequences of senseless violence. Each of the six chapters concludes with a generous selection of thought-provoking myths to help illustrate his discussion. *The Imagination of Plants* is quite breathtaking in scope, and draws upon no less than 40 different myths from across the globe. Clearly, Hall has considerable expertise in this literary genre, and his articulation of these myths contributes immensely to the originality of the book. To further illustrate this point, some of the myths he chooses come from Babylonia, Greece and Rome, such as the *Epic of*

Gilgamesh, the writings of Diodorus Siculus, and the *Aeneid*; others originate in Europe, India, and the Americas, such as the Eddas, the *Upanishads*, and the *Popul Vuh*; and still more come from Polynesia, Australasia, and Japan, such as the story of Rata, the legend of Warramurrungundji (*sic*), and the *Kojiki*. And this by no means exhausts the list. In addition, *The Imagination of Plants* makes extensive use of endnotes, has a very impressive bibliography, and is generously illustrated with colour plates.

As a compendium of botanical mythology, this book is a delightful experience to read. But it's not just a *collectanea* of myths. Hall clearly has an agenda. His methodology is inductive, and he draws upon the world's rich botanical mythology to support his thesis. What is really refreshing, however, is how Hall challenges the traditional view of plants as passive recipients of our gaze by encouraging us to see the continuities between plants and animal bodies. Hall seeks to bring plants (and nature) within the moral sphere and, *a fortiori*, invites us to use our imagination to convert these ideas into action. *The Imagination of Plants* is highly original in both its scope and the way it has been organized.

I have few faults with the manuscript. I was curious to know, however, how the author came up with his six thematic categories. Hall notes in his introduction that they are underpinned by two major themes—kinship and sentience; but eros and thanatos (Freud), and individuation (Jung), might have provided useful grist for a seventh chapter. *Pari passu*, Jung's insightful quote that "Christ saved man, but he didn't save nature," might also have served as a useful fulcrum for Hall's central thesis. Curiously, whilst Lévi-Strauss gets a place in the introduction, Lévy-Bruhl is not mentioned. One last point: the use of the words 'primitive peoples' might have been better phrased as 'primordial peoples' or 'indigenous peoples.' Nevertheless, I am impressed with Hall's latest project. I think this is the kind of book Cicero would recommend you read in the garden. But don't sit in your deckchair too long. This is a book that inspires the reader to act. As a wise man once said: "Go, and do thou likewise."

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