

Weeping Trees and Bleeding Flowers:

Plant-Thinking and the Power of the Graft in the *Ovide moralisé*

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Paris, Arsenal MS 5069, fol. 118r

The *Ovide moralisé*

The *Ovide moralisé* is an anonymous fourteenth-century poem that translates Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into vernacular French, and in my work, I argue that the *Ovide moralisé* thinks, in many ways, both 'with' plants and 'as' the plant.

Through this 'plant-thinking' (Marder 2013), the text takes on a vegetal nature that welcomes fluidity and the interrogation of fixed identities. Thinking 'as' the plant, I argue that the text itself is produced by and through a vegetal logic, in part encouraged by textual and narrative grafting, favouring a sprawling proliferation of hybridised (merged) text, thought, and theology in its vegetal poiesis.



Orpheus serenading a group of trees, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 250r



Narcissus and Echo, Paris, Arsenal MS 5069 fol. 33v

Mapping the human onto the plant (or the plant onto the human?)

The *Ovide moralisé* routinely envisions and demonstrates the ways that the human body can map onto the plant body (with the arboreal body showing a particular affinity with the human): fingers frequently map onto twigs, arms onto branches, hair to leaves, feet to roots, skin to bark; meanwhile bones become wood, marrow congeals to form plant 'flesh', and blood and tears become sap, resin/amber, or myrrh, transposing human bodily fluids to those of the plant body.

Take Myrrha's transformation into the myrrh tree in Book 10, for example:

Ses os furent mué en fust.

La moulle ne se remua.

Li sans en seve se mua.

Ses bras et ses dois sont fet rain

[...]

Sa pel fu muee en escorce,

[*Her bones transformed into wood. The marrow congealed. Her blood transformed into sap. Her arms and fingers became branches [...]. Her skin was transformed into bark*] (X, 1941-1947)

Weeping Trees

Arboreal figures often continue to emote humanly, preserving human affects, seemingly maintaining part of their human identity and cognition in their new vegetal body. This is often expressed through grief and tears which become sap (the Heliades II, 1096-1118), or fragrant resins like frankincense and myrrh. Myrrha, for example, still weeps in shame over her crime of incest in her myrrh tree form:

Pourquant plore elle goute à goute.

Li plours qui de l'arbre degoute

Et l'arbre fu „mirre” apelé.

[*And still she wept, drop by drop. The tears that dripped from the tree, and the tree itself, were called "myrrh."*] (X, 1956-1958)

Note, also, that the fruit of Myrrha's incestuous union with Cinyras, her father, is birthed in a remarkably human way from her tree body as the myrrh: the tree's bark swells, and eventually this bark/flesh cleaves open (X, 1965-1966) to deliver the human child Adonis from the tree body: '**L'arbre convint fendre et partir, / Ains que li enfes peüst nestre**' (X, 1965-1966)



Myrrha being chased Cinyras and then transforming into the myrrh tree, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 258r



Myrrha-tree giving birth to Adonis, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 258r

Grafting as a powerful tool for analysing the *Ovide moralisé*

Grafting can refer to the vegetal operation of inserting a branch, scion, or shoot (this can also be called a 'graft') into the body of another plant, which is often referred to as the 'rootstock'. However, grafting can also denote a surgical procedure (transplanting human/animal tissue), and can even refer to writing and textual production (i.e. the grafting of one text with another).

Textual or epistemological grafting sees texts, narratives, and/or genres woven together, and the *Ovide moralisé* is a prime example of a grafted medieval text: as the French poet translates the *Metamorphoses*, he implants various innovations into the translations and grafts a vast number of interpretations and Christian moralisations onto each tale, producing a hybrid text that Christianises Ovid's pagan work and expands the original poem by some 60,000 lines.

Beyond many instances of this epistemological grafting, the *Ovide moralisé* also contains ontological grafting in the countless metamorphoses of humans into nonhuman bodies. My work focuses on the twenty-one human-plant transformations in the text and the grafted bodies these produce.

As Michael Marder writes, grafting foregrounds the 'constitutive capacity for symbiosis and metamorphosis' of vegetal life, 'its openness to the other at the expense of fixed identities [...] revealed, by their very vitality, as illusory' (Marder 2016: 15), and the grafting of human bodies with those of trees, flowers, and plants in the *Ovide moralisé*'s human-plant metamorphoses repeatedly interrogate and disrupt the category of the human, leading us to question our human identity as we repeatedly encounter, and frequently see our human kin become, the nonhuman Other in/as plants.

Bleeding Flowers

Various plants also bleed in uncannily human ways, among them Lotus (or Lotos in the French text). When Dryope innocently picks a flower from a peach tree (or lotus flower in Ovid), unaware that the plant is a former nymph, the tree and its flower bleed heavily as the tree shudders:

'Cueilli ma suer un rain flori / De peschier, et li sans cori / Des flors et dou rain tout ensamble.' [*my sister plucked a flowering branch from a peach tree. Blood started pouring from the flowers and the branch*] (IX, 1212-1214);

'vi des flors le sanc raier / Et l'arbre trambler durement' [*I saw the blood spray from the flowers and the tree shudder violently*] (IX, 1217-1218)



Erysichthon cutting down Ceres's sacred oak, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 219v



Phoebus and the transformed Hyacinthus, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 267r



Apulus becomes the wild olive tree, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 374r



The Heliades transformed into poplars, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 48v



Daphne transforming into the laurel tree, Rouen MS O.4, fol. 33v



The Heliades and their mother Clymene, Paris, Arsenal MS 5069 fol. 13v



Phoebus and Daphne, Paris, Arsenal MS 5069, fol. 4r

Human-plant kinship

Thus the vegetal, and grafting as a vegetal operation, are used extensively in the *Ovide moralisé* as a means of exploring human-nonhuman boundaries, questioning them, and sometimes disrupting or even dissolving them.

Through the process of becoming-other (or becoming-plant), enacted by grafting in the *Ovide moralisé*, the poem also illuminates the kinship felt, seen, and experienced in and through plants in the Middle Ages as movement, speech, affects, bodies and bodily fluids align and intermingle in the hybrid bodies produced throughout its Ovidian tales and across its interpretations.

This human-vegetal hybridity invites – or forces – the reader (both medieval and modern) to reevaluate the category of the human, and to reconsider our relationship with the plant world and plant being.

Literature cited & further information

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