

Apollo's Tree

Monica Westin

Daphne runs through the woods, trying to escape sexual assault by Apollo. As she runs, she desperately prays to a river god for help. Just as Apollo reaches her, the river god morphs Daphne into a laurel tree, rooted and unable to move, but also now safe as she could not be before—not because Apollo cannot touch her, but because she is no longer embodied to wish otherwise. Apollo embraces her branches and kisses her trunk (Ovid tells us that “from his kisses still the wood recoiled”¹). Apollo turns Daphne into an evergreen and cares for her as his tree for all time.

Many of us intuit that plants are at peace. Their seeming lack of desire combined with their seeming lack of selfhood gives the impression of blithe self-sufficiency. Almost a transcendental experience: a way of being without individuality, without subjectivity, without the intentionality that comes with human consciousness and interiority. Is that impression correct? Do plants exist without any sense of identity? If so, can plants help us understand embodiment and life and desire in the absence of a singular self? Or might there be a Daphne recoiling from Apollo's touch within each impenetrable trunk?

We know, of course, that plants exercise desire. We watch the ways they grow towards light, produce fruit to induce other animals to spread their seeds, and we know that they want to avoid death, and to expand life. Within the Western tradition, it seems intuitive that plants' appetite to continue and proliferate is not personal the way our parallel, human desire might be. Given how plants live, it seems more accurate to say the life of a plant is not even a singular life with a real ending or beginning, but a longer, stranger experience of growth and decay that can be divided only superficially into separate entities and lifespans.

In addition to plants' general hope to spread life, they actively respond to singular predators. Researchers at the University of Missouri in 2014 discovered that some plants not only know when they're being eaten but take preventative measures to stop the

¹ Ovid, and A. D. Melville. *Metamorphoses*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 84.

assault.² According to those studies, when thale cress (a common plant related to kale and broccoli) senses a threat—say a caterpillar taking a bite out of a leaf—the plant releases a toxin. Additionally, university scientists determined that thale cress could differentiate vibrations in the area, what we think of as listening. The toxin thale cress releases upon sensing the predator is a defensive mechanism.

Does this change our intuition that plants don't fight to survive as much as we do? Is it fair to say the plant *hopes* its toxin will stop the caterpillar? At the very least, plants aren't as indifferent as tradition might suppose. To listen for the sound of a predator, rally defenses, and shrink from harmful touches: those are now vegetal activities.

More and more people are joining a new, still-hesitant chorus: those things (plants) we have been calling inanimate want things (a caterpillar gone), and not only *wish* for a different environment, but exercise the will to make it so. Daphne recoils from Apollo in tree-form as well.

Imagine plants that are actively out to get rid of humans. In John Wyndham's 1951 post-apocalyptic novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, a species of ambulant plants wages a coordinated attack against humankind. Named "triffids" for their three leg-like root structures, the plants at first simply click their root-legs to communicate with each other and pull themselves along the ground, clumsily. People initially keep triffids as novel specimens—plants that can walk while still remaining plants—in posh backyard gardens, believing them to be harmless when their long, poisonous fronds are trimmed back. But after a catalyzing event blinds almost all humans on earth, the plants escape and embark on an endless killing spree, using their venomous stingers as weapons against a handicapped humankind. Liberated triffids join together like armies, scouring for human faces to lash. They don't eat us, they simply want to get us.

The horror at a truly sentient, mobile, and malevolent plant: what if they are all waiting, like so many Daphnes, to get us (back)?

Many hardy plants line my small patio in Northern California: Carolina jasmine, succulents of all kinds, and some aggressive vines I can't name that look a bit like English ivy. The vines grow rapidly, via shoots that deftly wrap around posts and chairs. I often wake up in the morning to see that a vine has grown by at least a foot overnight along the ground next to our house, reaching for sun. Soon it wraps around pots of herbs and geraniums as though (in my imagination) clutching with strong fingers.

² Appel, H.M. and R.B. Cocroft "Plants respond to leaf vibrations caused by insect herbivore chewing." *Oecologia* 175, no. 4 (2014): 1257-1266.

If I leave for a week, I return to a patio nearly blocked by these vines, which suddenly possess an alarming, raw, and material *aliveness*.

One particular plant by the side of the house has stalks as thick as my wrist that are almost impossible to cut back. When a stalk is cut, something milky comes out that makes my skin break out in a rash where I touch it. The plant is several feet high, with a large flowering structure at the top, like a head. Its resemblance to a human stick figure—along with its poisonousness—sometimes disturbs me. I think of it as my triffid—a term that has since become British slang for a plant's growing out of control—with suspicious, maybe even harmful, intentions.

The Day of the Triffids is ultimately a novel about human social structures and their ethical problems. Thousands of years before, three philosophers—Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus—are equally interested in society's forms and what it might mean to access The Good, and to live good lives. They lived culturally among the myths of human-plant metamorphosis that Ovid recounted in poetry, and they took up the problem of plant desire without measuring toxins and caterpillar vibrations. Nevertheless, and like Wyndham writing in the wake of World War II, these thinkers locate ethical insight at the intersection and interrelation of human and nonhuman life.

For Aristotle, plants have souls by definition, though at the lowest possible level: they seek out nutrition from the world around them in order to thrive. To the extent that there is a potentiality for any organic body to be actualized, its realization is set in motion for Aristotle by some kind of soul. In other words, for all living things with dividing cells, embodiment itself—making pre-coded material come alive—is the work of the soul. That is the primary desire of life. While animals can feel (the second level of the soul), and humans can be rational (the soul's highest level), the "nutritive soul" nonetheless helps us to understand what Aristotle's "soul" consists of: the first level of actuality for a natural organized body.

The soul of a plant is evolved only in as much as plants seek to keep themselves alive, seeking nutrition in all its forms. Plants can be in touch with the divine simply through this striving to expand life: "the most natural act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that, as far its nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and the divine."³ But Aristotle thought that plants couldn't feel, which kept them from having a soul in the way animals do. Sentience keeps plants from having animal souls, just as thinking keeps animals from having human souls. Aristotle's plants are the baseline of life itself.

³ Aristotle. *De Anima*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 415^a27-^b2, trans. Smith.

Plato, somewhat surprisingly, is more liberal than Aristotle on the capability of plants to comprehend the world and act within it. In the *Timeaus* dialogue, Plato expands his concept of “to *phronimon*,” or “that which is intelligent,” to include plants. The admission makes him redefine intelligence away from something that is personal and distinctive to each individual plant. Rather, Plato allows for a more governing intelligence that guides the plants’ (as a collective group) growth toward thriving.

That model for depersonalized intelligence fits with Plato’s larger commitments to forms of knowledge and truth that predate and transcend individuals. Plants can actually be seen as privileged life forms for Plato: they will never be able to practice dialectic and know the ultimate form of The Good, but neither will they be distracted by shadows on a cave wall, falling prey to sophistic traps of language. Plants reach for light.

A few hundred years later, the Neoplatonist Plotinus also wrestled with the question of desire and the good life. Plotinus decided that only well-being could measure happiness, not any abstract notion of goodness, and concluded, “Those that deny the happy life to the plants on the ground that they lack sensation are really denying it to all living things.”⁴

How does he get here? Plotinus argues compellingly against a model of happiness based on reason or sensation, preferring instead one that is “inherent in the bare being-alive, the common ground in which the cause of happiness could always take root would simply be life.”⁵ The way that a born singer is happy when she sings, plants are happy when they are allowed to flourish unhindered in their own way.

It may be distasteful, Plotinus admits, “this bringing-down of happiness so low ... not withholding it even from the plants, living they too and having a life unfolding to a Term.” The possibility for a good life—thriving instead of withering, bearing fruit or being barren—exists: Why desire anything else? And yet in their bare being-alive itself we know plants are capable of hoping that things will change: thale cress wants the caterpillar to move elsewhere, my trifid wants to cover the ground of my yard, and Daphne is physically paralyzed but nevertheless passively desirous.

The myth of Daphne and Apollo points towards a profound intersection between embodiment, agency, happiness, alienation, and ethics. Apollo is a powerful god, but he is incapable of accessing the tree’s subjectivity: he fundamentally can’t get at Daphne

while she is in tree-form. The tree, Daphne, is similarly incapable of appropriately answering—by evasion—the god Apollo. They are nevertheless inextricably bound to one another by way of the ground and the relationship of care that Apollo assigns to himself—an uneasy role given how the story starts. What is the good life within that intersection?

4 Plotinus, Stephen Mackenna, and John M. Dillon. *The Enneads*. London: Penguin Books, 1991, 31.

5 Plotinus, *The Enneads*. 33.