

# ALL I NEED IS SUNLIGHT: OVIDIAN METAMORPHOSIS AND THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN*

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## ABSTRACT

The language of arboreal metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* not only invokes the Ovidian myth of Daphne and Apollo but also establishes a post-anthropocentric perspective according to which the irreducible material and symbolic connections between humans and other entities are brought to light. Drawing on the Derridean concept of carnophallogocentrism, on one hand, and on posthuman feminist scholarship, on the other, this article argues that the protagonist's gradual release from her bond to Anthropos to embrace forms of plant life highlights feminist posthumanism's attempt to explore the intricate relationships of human beings with each other and other species outside the parameters of anthropocentrism.

## KEYWORDS

posthuman feminism, carnophallogocentrism, Ovid, ekphrasis

*I am a vegetarian in my soul.*

—JACQUES DERRIDA (CERISY CONFERENCE, 1993)

*Of bodies changed to other forms I tell.*

—OVID, *METAMORPHOSES* BOOK I.1

According to the Ovidian myth of Daphne and Apollo, Daphne asked to be turned into a laurel tree to be saved from Apollo's sexual assault. Contemporary feminist interpretations of the myth read Apollo's pursuit of Daphne as symbolic of the demand of society for women to acquiesce to societal norms and expectations. In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, a South Korean novel whose translation into English won the Man Booker International Prize in 2016,<sup>1</sup> the title character "turns her back on violence by casting off her human body and transforming into a plant" (Shin 2016). Although Han Kang does not name Ovid in her novel and there are no explicit references to the Ovidian myth, one might persuasively argue that the novel grows directly out of the tradition of the metamorphic myth. The author uses feminist revisionist mythology, not just to challenge the programmatic representation of women as victims, as a handful of critics have pointed out,<sup>2</sup> but to resist the continuation of anthropocentric domination and violence by proposing, instead, a posthuman ethics that seeks "to liberate life from . . . the effects of constituting, manipulating and continuing the category, taxonomy and genealogy of the 'human'" (MacCormack 2012, 12). To be sure, *The Vegetarian* is a multilayered narrative about the "questioning of human violence and the (im)possibility of innocence, defining sanity and madness; the (im)possibility of understanding others, body as the last refuge or the last determination," and does not simply aim at a "singular indictment of the Korean patriarchy," as the author herself admitted in an interview (Patrick 2016). In my reading of the novel, however, the metamorphic adventure the heroine undergoes opens up the question of human subjectivity by exposing the self to nonhuman alterity and by bringing to light the irreducible material and symbolic connections between human beings and other entities. Han Kang also suggests this kind of reading when she admits that her protagonist "no longer wants to belong to the human race. She believes she is turning into a plant and that she is saving herself – ironically by approaching death" (Peschel 2016). Han Kang's recourse to metamorphosis as a paradoxical mixture of death and hope of regeneration, solace and doom, horror and reassurance – to paraphrase Rowena Fowler<sup>3</sup> – points toward the viability of the Ovidian myth, which undoubtedly resonates outside Western contexts.

The three interlaced sections that compose *The Vegetarian* record the gradual transformation of the heroine from woman to tree as a challenge to carnophallogocentrism,<sup>4</sup> which, in Jacques Derrida's terms, signifies the power of the dominant human, masculine flesh-eating subject over nonhuman animals and nature. This article argues that, in addition to unsettling humanist epistemologies, Han Kang's transformation of Daphne's myth enhances post-anthropocentric feminist discourse by emphasizing the "radical relationality" (Fraser et al. 2005, 3) that prevails between human embodiment and nonhuman existence.

In this sense, as much as its original theme owes to the influence of Ovid's myth, *The Vegetarian* may also be read as a contemporary metamorphic myth in its capacity to offer novel insights in relation to feminist posthumanism, ecological posthumanism, and posthuman ethics. To be sure, instead of an abstract and somewhat reified use of metamorphosis as either punishment or perfection, transgression or transcendence, which Kember so persuasively criticizes, the Ovidian myth of metamorphosis in *The Vegetarian* renders visible the processes of relationality between the human subject and vegetal life.<sup>5</sup>

Described by Han Kang as a "trilogy or triptych" (Patrick 2016), the novel consists of three interdependent novellas,<sup>6</sup> each bearing a title rich with semantic and emotive connotations – "The Vegetarian," "Mongolian Mark," and "Flaming Trees" – each employing a different narrative perspective, with the heroine's voice remaining noticeably absent. Like Daphne, in the novel's first part, the heroine tries to rid herself from patriarchal scriptures, an attempt exemplified in her refusal to consume meat. Her abstinence from carnist eating practices sets in motion the severing of her ties with her husband, parents, and siblings. Eventually, her dietary deficiency marginalizes her, as she is considered a threat to the community. The heroine's resistance to carnivorous violence will reach its climax in the third part of the novel, "Flaming Trees," where she gradually delivers herself from her humanness by claiming to undergo an Ovidian vegetal metamorphosis, which is to say, to feel and behave like a tree. Her continuing refusal to ingest any kind of food suggests her desire to cast off her human body and to imagine experiencing a mutation in progress, a flowing into a new body shape of plantlike appearance. By then, she has been deemed insane and confined to a mental institution. The heroine's mental illness and subsequent death reflect the impossibility of representing femininity outside the parameters of patriarchal society. The rupture that her radical transgression from human nature creates, and that cannot be contained within the real world, is recuperated in the world of imagination through Ovid's myth of metamorphosis. The heroine's Daphne-like metamorphosis into a tree opens up the possibility of radical relationality between the human and its surroundings, clearly marking the inclusion of vegetal life "in the discussion of 'living beings'" (Nealon 2017, 107).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the author captures the heroine's incommensurability in the middle section of the novel, entitled "Mongolian Mark." In this most allusively Ovidian section, the recurrent employment of the myth is coupled with the use of notional ekphrasis to suggest the emergence of the female self as an embodied figure in the web of human and nonhuman relations. Han Kang's ekphrastic depiction of an erotic encounter in the form of performance art manages to transcend existing distinctions and ontological differentiations between nature

and culture, between the human and its nonhuman other. Art has the capacity to ruin divisions and limits of the self and to allow space for the transformative potentials of imagination, in short, to present the unrepresentable. Thus, in a sexually charged language, suggestive of the fluidity of desire, Han Kang imagines an ek-static coupling of the heroine with her brother-in-law, a painter and video artist who becomes obsessed with incorporating the petal-like Mongolian birthmark on her buttocks into his art by painting flowers all over her “denuded” (Kang 2015, 64) body and making love to her on film. Han Kang engages with the Ovidian legacy of exploiting the liminal potential of ekphrasis in order to reimagine the heroine’s metamorphosis from a female subject whose autonomy is violated to a reconfigured relational and interdependent posthuman being. This essay, then, proposes a posthuman retelling of the Ovidian myth that includes more explicit considerations of the natural world and its entanglement with more-than-human entities. I contend that the novel’s thematic tropes and use of Ovid’s tale may provide a focused example of a feminist posthuman reading of the relations between human and nonhuman nature as presented in *The Vegetarian*.

“Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way” (3). The first sentence of *The Vegetarian* directly sets the tone of Part One of the novel. The narrative perspective is tightly controlled by the narrator of this part, Mr. Cheong, whose dismissive remarks about his spouse indicate his belief in his superior position as male and his view of women as property. He depicts her as having a “timid and sallow aspect,” a “passive personality” with no freshness or charm, whose diligent homemaking, he adds, “suited me down to the ground” (3). He avoids calling her by her name, Yeong-hye, referring to her as an object in his possession and under his power. Mr. Cheong’s misogynistic attitude toward Yeong-hye, which is reiterated by almost all other male perspectives throughout the novel, is dominated by the objectified view of women and nature. “I thought I could get perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even as a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order” (30), says Mr. Cheong.

His wife’s sudden shift from meat-eater to vegetarian, however, upsets the power hierarchies and threatens to disrupt entrenched ideas of masculine patriarchal authority and dominance. Although the explanation Yeong-hye provides for the drastic change in her eating habits is just that she “had a dream,” her unspoken thoughts, which are conveyed to the reader as narrative interruptions with the use of italics and ellipses, reveal a deep concern for the ethical implications of sacrificing and consuming the nonhuman animal. “*Dreams overlaid with dreams, a palimpsest of horror*” (28; italics in the original); all this indicates that raising and killing animals for food is morally wrong. Her nightmarish musings

unveil that much: “*My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood*” (12; italics in the original). And again, elsewhere: “*The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides*” (49; italics in the original). Yeong-hye’s revulsion against meat-eating suggests her attempt to extricate herself from the species supremacy of Anthropos that allows humans to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the book’s title, *The Vegetarian* does not seek to promote a diet that refrains from consuming meat. Rather, Yeong-hye’s visceral reaction to meat sets in motion a chain of violent events that bring into the forefront questions pertaining to Derrida’s concept of carnophallogocentrism. In his interview with French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject,” Derrida (1991) explains how “carnivorous virility” is essential to the constitution of subjectivity. In particular, he suggests that male dominance is linked to the consumption of animal flesh: “The virile strength of the adult male, the father, husband, or brother . . . belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh” (281).<sup>8</sup> Ecofeminist critic Carol Adams concurs with Derrida, asserting the connection between sexual politics and the structure of carnophallogocentric subjectivity. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams (1990) makes the crucial critical insight of associating meat-eating with notions of masculinity and virility. She proposes

a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption which links butchering and sexual violence in our culture. Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. The oppressor then violates this being by object-like treatment: e.g., the rape of women that denies women freedom to say no, or the butchering of animals from living breathing beings into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation, or brutal dismemberment, and finally consumption. (47)

Echoing Derrida, Adams posits that “[m]eat eating measures individual and societal virility” (26); it is, as a matter of fact, “an act of self-definition as a privileged (male-identified) human” (Adams and Calarco 2017, 34). In the novel, the inextricable link between the two is reinforced by Mr. Cheong’s sexual abuse of his wife. As if to compensate for the failure to consume meat foods prepared by her and in an attempt to restore his wounded manhood, he assaults her sexually. In his own words, “I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers,

I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully” (Kang 2015, 30). He does not even hesitate to evoke Japan’s sexual enslavement of Korean women during WWII, alluding to the relationship of patriarchal power with colonialism. He rapes his wife “as though she were a ‘comfort woman’ dragged in against her will, and [he] was the Japanese soldier demanding her services” (30).

Similarly, the interconnection of patriarchal authority, meat eating, and disciplinary violence becomes evident in the way Yeong-hye’s father, who is a Vietnam veteran, responds to her unorthodox vegetarian diet.<sup>9</sup> In one family dinner, he tries to reinstate his authority by forcing a piece of meat into his daughter’s mouth. Says Mr. Cheong,

My father-in-law mashed the pork to a pulp on my wife’s lips as she struggled in agony. Though he parted her lips with his strong fingers, he could do nothing about her clenched teeth. Eventually he flew into a passion again, and struck her in the face once more . . . [I]n the instant that the force of the slap had knocked my wife’s mouth open he’d managed to jam the pork in. (40)

To a certain extent the father’s violent behavior may be attributed to his own traumatic Vietnam experience. However, his assumption that he has a legitimized and acceptable right over his daughter’s body and identity is also conditioned by the cultural sedimentation of gender norms. This brutal scene could serve as an illustration of Carol Adams’s claim that the cultural practice of meat-eating is linked to the subjugation of women, in order to reinforce patriarchal values. As mentioned already, Adams argues that the privileged, male-identified human is committed to the literal and symbolic consumption of flesh and that carnivorous masculine identity has to be repeatedly enacted in order to achieve stability and reinforce its dominance (Adams and Calarco 2017, 44).

Nevertheless, Yeong-hye’s literal (refusing to eat meat) as well as symbolic (avoiding marital sex) break from the carnophallogocentric tradition leads to more violence, coercive mistreatment and harm. Narrated from the point of view of Yeong-hye’s sister, the novel’s third section, “Flaming Trees,” traces the heroine’s “crazy” (8), “unreasonable” (23), and “preposterous” (39) conduct, which must be regulated by the guardians of dominant patriarchal values. As a consequence, Yeong-hye is committed to a mental institution which, as Foucault insightfully argued, operates within the ethos of disciplinary bio-power. According to the medical diagnosis, Yeong-hye suffers concurrently from anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia (Kang 2015, 140, 141).

Forcible feeding is applied to her as treatment with the intended purpose of preserving her life and restoring her health. Interestingly enough, the degrading procedure of forced feeding had also been used on hunger striking suffragettes who were imprisoned between 1905 and 1913 in protest against the British government's refusal to acknowledge their embodied resistance as political in intent. According to historical records, suffragettes' accounts of forcible feeding make for "horrifying reading. Many describe the terror they felt when restrained by wardresses and doctors . . . Some suffered the physical consequences of having been forcibly fed for the rest of their lives" (Mayhall 2003, 84). Moreover, the forcible feeding of suffragette hunger strikers was often represented "as sexual violation" (84). "Although the word 'rape' was not used . . . the instrumental invasion of the body, accompanied by overpowering physical force, suffering and humiliation was akin to it and commonly described as an 'outrage'" ("Cat and Mouse: Force Feeding the Suffragettes" 2018). Without wishing to equate the literary with the historical event, it is important to note that in both cases the degrading procedure of compulsory feeding involves the abuse of female body, and that resistance to masculine authority takes on "gendered attributes" (Mayhall 2003, 89). As had happened with the suffragette hunger strikers, the violent and brutal force-feeding of Yeong-hye entirely denies her right to assert control over her body and determine her own fate.

As in Part One of the novel, in the third part, too, the heroine rarely resorts to language to articulate the reasons of her dissent, partly because "no one can understand me" (156), as she admits, and partly because what leads to her self-starvation seems to exceed rationalization and is therefore irreducible to knowledge and analysis. "I heard something . . . I heard something calling me . . . It melted in the rain . . . it all melted . . . I'd been just about to go down into the earth" (160), Yeong-hye mutters to her sister, trying to convert to language what drove her to escape the confines of the hospital and find refuge in the forest. The desire to be nourished like a tree and acquire the shape of a tree that consigned her to a psychiatric hospital goes well beyond the heroine's defiance of gender-specific dietary patterns.<sup>10</sup> In fact, her openness to a radically different form of tree-like existence has positioned her beyond the limits of human ontology, having embraced the "vitalistic, prehuman, generative life" that Braidotti has coded as *zoe* (Braidotti 2008, 177). However, in contradistinction to Daphne, whose metamorphosis is usually depicted as "painless and dazzling" (Elkins 1999, 26), Yeong-hye seems to undergo a long and tortuous gestation, as she struggles to pull the IV needles out of her veins or the nasogastric tube out of her nose. In Daphne-like manner, she imagines morphing into a tree when she stands on her head for hours or when she looks for a "sunny spot" to squat down in (Kang 2015, 138). She believes that "leaves were growing from

my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands . . . so I dug down into the earth. On and on . . . I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my legs; I spread them wide . . . I need to water my body . . . I need water” (148).

Although on the level of narrative plot the heroine is diagnosed with delusional disorder, in light of the Ovidian myth, the heroine’s imaginary metamorphosis into a tree suggests an encounter with alterity beyond human ontology or, as her sister mutters to herself, the “other dimension” Yeong-hye’s soul might “have passed into” (170). In the end, Yeong-hye triumphantly announces to her sister who sits down in a hospital chair beside her gaunt and emaciated body, “I’m not an animal any more . . . I don’t need to eat . . . All I need is sunlight” (153–54). As with Daphne, whose heart trembles under the new bark, Yeong-hye’s subjectivity lies at the intersection between woman and plant. Her hybrid embodiment underscores the central tenet of posthumanist feminism that conceptualizes the (human) subject as inextricably interlinked with others, including nonhuman or earth others. Her metamorphosis, to cite Braidotti again, “is no metaphor but something closer to a metabolic mutation” (Braidotti 2002, 14). It offers an expanded relational vision of the self that challenges the nature/culture divide and embraces a nonhuman, zoe-driven life, “independent of the will, the demands and expectations of the sovereign consciousness” (14). It is life experienced as “an alien other, the monstrous other” (14).

Daphne, “the undutiful daughter” (Braidotti 2012), who not only betrays the patriarchal social contract but also shrugs off her anthropocentric subjectivity “like a snake shedding its skin” (Kang 2015, 170), is what Yeong-hye wants to become. The metamorphosis to more-than-human, however, can only be made legible by imaginative forms of aesthetic mediation, and it is in the second part of the novel that Han Kang comes closer to thinking empathetically about vegetable plant life. The author ingeniously captures Yeong-hye’s encounter with the radical alterity of plants in “Mongolian Mark,” where ekphrastic description of a posthuman performativity is employed to recover in language the relational, embodied hybridization of the heroine.

“Mongolian Mark” begins with Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, who finds out about the birthmark on Yeong-hye’s buttocks – which he imagines as “a blue flower . . . its petals opening outwards” (59). Struggling to give creative expression to his aesthetic vision, he draws flowers on her “denuded” (64)<sup>11</sup> body with the Mongolian mark as the central piece, while all the time he insists he regards the mark as “something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realize[s] to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual” (83). Like Apollo in Ovid’s myth, Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law has been seen as both a predator seeking self-gratification and a mediator in the heroine’s transition from one



form of life to another. In fact, his role as mediator is crucial in the narrative in that it sets the stage for Yeong-hye's queer *mutando perde figuram*, to quote Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1995, Book 1, line 545). He is also the unnamed narrator of this narrative part, bearing witness to Yeong-hye's metamorphosis and, to a certain extent, his own. Gradually, his obsession with the Mongolian mark morphs into an image involving an ek-static intercourse of men and women, "their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers" (Kang 2015, 59).

As in Daphne's case, the heroine's radical immanence is foregrounded, engendering other ways of nonanthropocentric being: "Whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a 'person', but then she wasn't exactly some feral creature either – more like a mysterious being with qualities of both" (88), Yeong-hye's brother-in-law ruminates. At a later stage of his artistic project, he has his own body decorated by flowers and visits Yeong-hye, where the two engage in a filmed scene of intercourse.<sup>12</sup> And while this may appear as exploitative conduct on his part, emphasis is placed on their other-than-human interaction, as the "two look like overlapping petals," "like one body, a hybrid of plant, animal and human" (113). Moreover, Kang makes it clear that Yeong-hye's participation in the sexual act occurs as a result of her embodied agency, even though her arousal comes from the touch and feel of the painted flowers on her lover's body. "I really wanted to do it . . . I've never wanted it so much before. It was the flowers on his body . . . I couldn't help myself" (107), she admits. Rather than her being transformed into a beautiful object of sight, Yeong-hye's somatic engagement in this intense burst of desire challenges the underlying patriarchal logic of male agency and female passivity, asserting instead a multifaceted ambiguous sexuality.

Paradoxically, unlike Daphne, whose arboreal transformation frees her from her sexuality and renders her "incapable of passion" (Barnard 36),<sup>13</sup> Yeong-hye's liminal existence between human and plant seems to enhance her sexual blossoming. In Braidottian language, Yeong-hye and her brother-in-law are immersed and enmeshed in a nonhierarchical co-becoming, a set of figurations that materially embody stages of metamorphosis and instantiate alternative sexualities (Braidotti 2016b).<sup>14</sup> Braidotti, in particular, advocates "a vision of the body as a sexually preconstituted, dynamic bundle of relations" that "precedes and exceeds the normative social apparatus of gender" (Braidotti 2016a, 688). Though the scene represents a heterosexual union, "a union of images . . . somehow repellent and yet compellingly beautiful" (Kang 113), sexuality is experienced "as a polymorphous and complex visceral force," disengaged from gender polarities and hierarchization (Braidotti 2016a, 688). Extending Braidotti's view, and in line with Hustak and Myers (2012), one might argue that some of those human–nonhuman encounters could be "conditioned not just by a calculating economy that aims to maximize fitness but also by

an *affective ecology* shaped by pleasure, play, and experimental propositions” (78, emphasis in the original). As a matter of fact, according to Hustak and Myers, the above entanglements are affected by affirmative desire that goes beyond the anthropocentric psychosexual economy toward a nonhierarchical co-becoming.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, the aesthetic of Yayoi Kusama’s 1960s avant-garde work haunts the brother-in-law’s artistic vision (Kang 2015, 56). Kusama’s recurring motifs of polka dots painted on real bodies<sup>16</sup> or canvases and her environmental installations characterized by obsessive repetitions, proliferation, growth, and accumulation make human and nonhuman entities look as “if they’re in the process of being devoured by biomorphic growths,” as one reviewer observes (Miller 2016). For Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, Kusama’s work is an influence he wants both to cope with and overcome: while the featured women and men, “each of them daubed all over with coloured paint” (57), forge an image comparable with his own vision, he is averse to their display of “promiscuous sexual practices” (56–57). His union with Yeong-hue resembles more an anthropobiotic symbiosis than heterosexual copulation. Artistic representation of sexual activity as pollination reveals the extent to which Han Kang’s conception of culture is also a conception of nature, within the nature–culture continuum. Even his wife, Yeong-hye’s sister, after her initial shock from watching the video tapes recording their lovemaking, admits that “the sight of those two naked bodies, twined together like jungle creepers” (179) has nothing sexual. “Covered with flowers and leaves and twisting green stems, those bodies were so altered it was as though they no longer belonged to human beings. The writhing movements of those bodies made it seem as though they were trying to shuck off the human” (179). It is important that, in addition to referencing Kusama’s art work, this second part of the novel is staged as a performance art project, because it is through the art-encounter that new ways of opening up to alterity become possible. “Art shows the seeming incommensurable, contradictory but ultimately infinite relation with the outside that is always available,” writes Patricia MacCormack in *Posthuman Ethics* (MacCormack 2012, 51).<sup>17</sup> More specifically, if seen as performance art, “Mongolian Mark” can be understood as attempting “to incite liminal transitions beyond nature-culture divide, acknowledging participation from human and more-than-human agencies” (nikolić and Radulovic 2018). By shifting the center of the artistic performance from the human body to human–vegetal interactivity, the novel’s middle section compellingly reasserts radical openness, “extending hospitality to difference” and “response-ability” (nikolić and Radulovic 2018).

In an essay tellingly called “Ovid and Universal Contiguity,” Italo Calvino (1989, 147) argued that the poetry of the *Metamorphoses* is mainly rooted in the “indistinct borderlands between diverse worlds.” He goes on to say that the contiguity between gods and human beings is but one instance of “the contiguity

between all the figures and forms of existing things, anthropomorphic or otherwise. Fauna, flora, mineral kingdom, and firmament embrace what we are accustomed to think of as human.” The connections between diverse worlds do not imply, in his words, “hierarchical order, but an intricate system of interrelations in which each level can influence the others” (150). Despite its traditional humanist rhetoric, there is much in Calvino’s view that relates to my Ovidian reading of *The Vegetarian*. As this essay has shown, Yeong-hye’s gradual release of her bond to Anthropos in order to embrace forms of plant life highlights feminist posthumanism’s attempt to explore the intricate relationships with each other and other species outside the parameters of anthropocentrism. Her arboreal transformation points toward an engagement of human life in a more equitable relationship with nonhuman life forms and bears witness to the renewed emphasis on human embodied experience that is “relational and specific rather than coercive and general” (Tsimpouki 2017, 25). Crucially, it is thanks to the deployment of the Ovidian myth in the novel that embodiment is not ignored or cast off, as the text is redolent with the embodied sentience of metamorphosis, the smells and tastes, the textures and sensations, the pain and pleasure of the body as it undergoes vegetal transformation. Thus, in its posthumanist retelling of the myth of Daphne and Apollo, *The Vegetarian* provides a narratable frame for the otherwise unnarratable relational expansionism of posthuman ethics.

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#### NOTES

1. First published in Korean, in 2007, *The Vegetarian* was translated by Deborah Smith and released in English by Portobello Books in 2015.
2. For example, Aline Ferreira (2019, 147) argues that Yeong-hye (among other female protagonists the article examines) feels “trapped and constricted by society’s strong patriarchal conventions.”
3. In “Daphne, Apollo, and Modern Women’s Poetry,” Fowler examines feminist engagement with the Ovidian tale of Daphne and Apollo. In particular, she emphasizes the “continuing vitality” (381) and durability of the myth as a consequence of its elusiveness or what Charles Martindale terms “typical Ovidian ambivalence” (quoted in Fowler 2006, 387).
4. Obviously, the essay offers a Western reading of the novel. Not only is Ovid considered to be one of the most influential poets in Western literary tradition, but Derrida’s philosophical concept of “carnophallogocentrism,” a sacrificial structure of thought that elevates carnivorous masculinity to a position of centrality, is vital to Western culture. Nevertheless, in reference

to the Ovidian tradition, while it is important to note that the myth I am here tracking is not a universalizing one, the processes of cultural globalization and hybridization may be invoked to explain the interaction, sharing, and renegotiation of literary and artistic tropes and traditions from different cultures.

5. My debt is here to Sarah Kember's insightful critique of the conservatism inherent in the contemporary use of the metamorphic myth which, in the attempt to represent radical human/machine transformation, tends to be abstract and reified and "nothing metamorphoses but metamorphoses itself" (Kember 2005, 165). Although in *The Vegetarian* the heroine's metamorphosis is not the result of Darwinian evolutionary possibility, the novel does explore the continuous and contiguous relation between human and plant life, which results in "the transformation of both individual organism and species" (165).
6. Even though it was originally published as three separate novellas, *The Vegetarian* appeared in English in the form of a novel and, as such, it achieved international critical acclaim. Moreover, when asked by an interviewer whether she considered the book a novel or "a trilogy of stories," Han Kang replied, "I think this is a novel" (Patrick 2016). Most critics have taken her comments as evidence that she intended the book as a novel and treat it as a novel in their critical essays and reviews.
7. Nealon's "The Plant and the Sovereign" traces Derrida's deconstructive project of the human/animal binary and reaches the conclusion that Derrida remains uncertain as to whether "what he has to say about animal life should be extended to plant life as well" (Nealon 2017, 107). Indeed, with the exception of *Glas*, Nealon claims, there is a "notable absence of deconstructive thinking about vegetal life in Derrida's work" (118). Importantly, *The Vegetarian*, I argue, extends life beyond the human and animal realm to vegetable life.
8. It is interesting to note that according to Matthew Calarco (2004), although Derrida grants ethical otherness to animals, his deconstructive respect of them does not entail veganism. His pledge is of respectful consumption.
9. Yeong-Hye's mother seems eager to cooperate with and submit to patriarchal dominance sanctioned by tradition. Unable to understand her daughter's rebellious behavior, the mother mutters, embarrassed and confused, "How can that child be so defiant?" (27).
10. According to Ferreira (2019, 155), "the feminine flight into nature" "may convey the possibility of a transgression of patriarchal codes," "the disappearance of [Yeong-hye's] bodily being" may suggest "her release from unwanted sexual advances." In particular, Yeong-hye's urge to erase her body is "a strategic action to circumvent a capitalist and patriarchal logic of domination and exploitation of women and nature (149). In my reading of the novel, however, Yeong-hye's morphing into a tree can be seen not as a sign of female passivity or an attempt "to escape the patriarchal ideology" (147). Instead, Yeong-hye's Ovidian metamorphosis provides insights of the vital and productive inextricability of the human with nature.
11. The term bears connotations to the destruction of vegetation and forests. Interestingly, the term is also used by Levinas (1987) to explain openness to otherness as a "denuding of the skin exposed to wounds and outrage. This openness is the vulnerability of a skin exposed, in wounds and outrage, beyond all that can show itself" (146).
12. As a video artist, the brother-in-law feels compelled to videotape the scene. If we are to read his involvement with Yeong-hye ultimately as performative art that explores the affective and visual entanglements between life and art, its documentation in film becomes a contested issue and brings to the forefront questions about performativity and its representation.

13. In her book-length study *The Myth of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid to Quevedo*, Mary Barnard (1987) traces the transformations of the myth of Daphne and Apollo from Ovid through the Spanish Golden Age. According to Barnard, Daphne “is converted into a nonhuman form” and, thus, “her fairness [is] now preserved in a sexually unassailable form” (36).
14. Ferreira (2019) compares Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law who objectifies her body turning it to “a work of art to be admired but also an object of lust” (148) to Apollo’s “unwanted sexual advances” (155) toward Daphne even at the very moment of her transformation to a tree. Instead, I extend this critical interpretation to conceptualize Kang’s evocation of tactility as an attempt to explore the kind of interaction that humans envision with non-human relationship partners. In this context, I read Ovid’s sensory depiction of Daphne’s metamorphosis as involving a multisensory experience and an awareness of the materiality of Daphne morphing into a tree: “And yet/ Apollo loves her still; he leans against/ the trunk; he *feels* the heart that *beats* beneath/ the new-made bark; within his arms he *clasps*/ the branches as if they were human limbs;/ and his lips *kiss* the wood, but still it *shrinks*/ from his embrace” (553–57; emphasis added). In the novel, plant-like Yeong-hye does not shrink from her lover’s kisses because she is attracted to the flowers painted on his body.
15. Natasha Myers (2017) proposes that we stop counting on “the inevitability of anthropocentric futures” (299). Instead, she argues that “our futures hinge on creating liveable futures with the plants” (299). In the “ruins of the Anthropocene,” a new episteme takes shape, the Planthropocene, “in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants” (299).
16. Alexandra Munroe (1989) notes that Kusama’s “Love Happenings” or “Orgy” events were staged indoors where, “[d]ressed in a fashion of her own concoction,” she painted polka dots on everybody else’s nude body, and they would occasionally start painting polka dots on each other.” One of the participants noted that “what sex transpired . . . was more about ‘liberation’ than ‘arousal’ . . . a kind of ‘erotic play . . . an overall sexuality versus a genital sexuality’” (29). See also [https://www.theartstory.org/artist/kusama-yayoi/artworks/#pnt\\_4](https://www.theartstory.org/artist/kusama-yayoi/artworks/#pnt_4)
17. Sexuality is another feature that posthumanist feminists consider central in their analysis. In her “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism” Braidotti (2017) argues for the need of a reassessment of sexuality “beyond, beneath, and after gender” (21). In terms of feminist politics, this means that the human and other species are always already sexed. Sexuality is both post- and pre-identity. Braidotti also advocates a posthuman sexuality without genders, polymorphous and, according to Freud “perverse” (playful and nonreproductive).

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