

## 7. Almost Encountering Ronsard's Rose

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### Abstract

This chapter takes up the French poet's most famous ode 'Mignonne, allons voir si la rose...' in order to ask a simple but important question: what are the barriers to close-reading a poem such as this one, a poem made of 'signs', if we (also) try to access through it the nature—or Nature—of which it perhaps claims to be an imitation? To explore such a question, Usher experiments with three ways of reading the ode. He first explores the cultural/historical approach offered by book history. A second approach seeks out connections between Ronsard's poem and early modern botany's own discussion of roses. The third and final method strives to get beyond the poem as cultural artefact by drawing on contemporary plant theory (Jeffrey Nealon, Michael Marder, Luce Irigaray).

**Keywords:** Pierre de Ronsard, rose, nature, ode, botany, plant theory

The most famous poem of early modern France—perhaps of all French literature—is a poem about a plant.<sup>1</sup> And yet the combined forces of anthropocentrism, zoocentrism, and historicism have made it very difficult to perceive that plant *as plant*, trapping the poem and its readers, across the centuries, in the purified domain of the cultural. The poem in question, of course, is Ronsard's 'Mignonne, allons voir si la rose...' ('Beloved, let us go see if the rose...'), which first appeared in a sort of

<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas in this chapter were presented in keynotes given at a recent conference titled 'Parenthetic Modernity' at Linköping University, Sweden, and at the 'Joy of Close Reading' conference organized at Syracuse University, USA, in honor of the late Hope Glidden. I should like to thank Carin Franzén and Jesper Olsson, and Albrecht Diem and Stephanie Shirilan for their respective invitations, and fellow speakers and audience members for their productive questions and useful feedback.

appendix to the 1553 edition of the poet's *Amours*, one of what the volume's title refers to as 'quelques Odes de L'auteur, non encor imprimées' ('a few odes by the author, not previously printed').<sup>2</sup> In these verses, the poet and his beloved head out to look at a rose that had been in full bloom that very morning, only to discover that its petals have fallen to the ground over the course of just one day. In the third stanza, the poet concludes by offering up a lesson *not* about the rose or about plant life, but about human mortality: 'cueillés, vôtre jeunesse' ('gather the bloom of your youth'), a version of the *carpe diem* motif that is omnipresent in Ronsard's writings.<sup>3</sup> The poem clearly *is*, as we have all been taught, about the passing of youth, about seizing the day, and about human joy and sadness—but need that necessarily lead us to ignore the rose *as rose*? Might we not ask: what of the plant itself? Must our cultural readings delete it?

This is, for sure, far from the only poem in which Ronsard features a rose. The word appears a total of 264 times throughout his collected works.<sup>4</sup> But it is without a doubt this poem that inspires critics refer to Ronsard not only as the 'prince of poets' and the 'poet of princes', but also as the 'poet of roses', and it is thus the best place to open the present reflection.<sup>5</sup> The cultural hold on the poem is powerful: almost all commentary on the poem foregrounds the *carpe diem* motif to the exclusion of the rose as rose. The point barely needs a footnote, but a useful and representative flashpoint can be found in the entry for 'Fleurs' (Flowers) in the *Dictionnaire de Pierre de Ronsard*, which emphasizes how, in Ronsard, flowers are turned into metaphors and symbols or otherwise mythologized, most frequently to sketch out a comparison between flowers and (female) beauty.<sup>6</sup> Dominique Brancher, in an otherwise compelling book about libertine botany, paints

2 Ronsard, *Les Amours de P. de Ronsard Vandomois*. On this edition, see Barbier, *Ma Bibliothèque poétique*, pp. 36–43 (items 10–11). The publication of 'Mignonne' was far from the only important literary event in 1553, although it has come to overshadow everything else, a situation explored in a conference at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in 2008, 'Paris, 1553. Audaces et innovations poétiques' (Paris, 1553. Poetic Boldness and Innovations). For a summary of the conference's main points, see Halévy and Vignes, 'Paris, 1553'.

3 On Ronsard's extensive deployment of this *topos*, see especially Yandell, *Carpe corpus*.

4 I base this figure on Creore, *A Word-Index to the Poetic Works of Ronsard*.

5 On this reputation as the 'poet of roses' see Dulmet, 'Ronsard, poète des roses, des femmes et des princes'; Lafont, 'Rose, femme, événement: parcours d'un poncif'; and Livet, 'Sur le rosier: Ronsard fleurit la France'.

6 Rouget, *Dictionnaire de Pierre de Ronsard*, pp. 250–252. Along similar lines, see Simonin, "'Poésie est un pré", "Poème est une fleur": métaphore horticole et imaginaire du texte à la Renaissance' and Dupont, *Les Jardins qui sentent le sauvage. Ronsard et la poésie du paysage*.

a similar picture, stoutly affirming that 'd'Érasme à Cyrano, la plante sert toujours un discours d'homme' ('from Erasmus right up to Cyrano de Bergerac, the plant always serves some human discourse').<sup>7</sup> How did such a situation come about? Why it is all but impossible to perceive a rose in this poem? These are the simple questions with which I begin. To unpack them, with an eye fixed on the wider nature–culture debates to which the Anthropocene forces us to respond, the reflection that follows is situated at the crossroads of opposing modes of reading—namely at the intersection of historicism and the nascent field of plant theory—in order to see how the tension between the two modes can ultimately enrich and nuance both.<sup>8</sup>

Although the poem is very well known, it is important first that we reread it:

Mignonne, allons voir si la rose  
 Qui ce matin avoit declose  
 Sa robe de pourpre au soleil,  
 A point perdu, cette vesprée,  
 Les plis de sa robe pourprée,  
 Et son teint au vostre pareil.

Las, voiés comme en peu d'espace,  
 Mignonne, elle a dessus la place  
 Las, las, ses beautés laissé choir!  
 O vraiment maratre Nature,  
 Puis qu'une telle fleur ne dure  
 Que du matin jusques au soir.

Donc, si vous me croiés, mignonne:  
 Tandis que vôtre âge fleuronne  
 En sa plus verte nouveauté,  
 Cueillés, cueillés, vôtre jeunesse  
 Comme à cette fleur, la vieillesse  
 Fera ternir vôtre beauté.<sup>9</sup>

7 Brancher, *Quand l'esprit vient aux plantes*, p. 104.

8 The bibliography for the nature-culture debates grows daily. See essentially Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*; Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto*; and Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*.

9 Ronsard, *Œuvres complètes*, 5, 196–197.

(Beloved, let us go see if the rose, which this morning had unfurled her crimson gown to the Sun, has not lost this evening the folds of her crimson gown and her complexion that resembles your own.

Alas! See how in a short space of time, beloved, she has shed around her on the ground, alas, alas! her beauteous charms. O Nature, you are a truly unnatural mother, since such a flower lives only from morning until evening!

So, if you will trust me, beloved, while your age is blossoming in its most verdant freshness, gather, gather the bloom of your youth; just as it does to this flower, old age will blight your beauty).<sup>10</sup>

It would be possible to write a long and very interesting study of the cultural history of the ascendancy or canonization of Ronsard's ode. Such a study would trace the progressive layering that made and still make the ode *that poem*. It would discuss how those verses were quickly set to music in *Le recueil des plus belles et excellentes chansons [...] tirées de divers auteurs* ('Compendium of the Most Beautiful and Excellent Songs [...] drawn from Various Authors', 1576).<sup>11</sup> It would examine how, very early on, the poem became a metonym for Ronsard's poetic output as a whole: in *La Cresme des bons vers* ('A Crop of Good Verses', 1622), the poem is featured at the very beginning of the florilegium's Ronsard section.<sup>12</sup> It would likely posit that, in addition to becoming quickly canonical, the poem swiftly received its canonical 'meaning', quoting such commentary as that found in the 1623 edition, which reads: 'La fleur et la jeunesse, sont de peu de durée, & leur usage encore a sa saison, laquelle il ne faut pas laisser perdre' ('Flower and youth do not last long—and they should be used in their correct season, which must not be allowed to pass').<sup>13</sup>

Such a study would have thus already established that by the early seventeenth-century, the poem's (cultural) status and its (cultural) meaning were largely in place. The trajectory could continue up until our own moment,

10 Ronsard, *Selected Poems*, ed. Quainton and Vinestock, p. 78. For an alternative (rhymed) translation see Shapiro (ed.), *Lyrics of the French Renaissance*, pp. 300–301.

11 Chardavoine, *Le recueil des plus belles et excellentes chansons en forme de voix de ville*, pp. 4–5. The setting to music of Ronsard's poetry has been studied *inter alia* in Thibault and Perceau, *Bibliographie des poésies de P. de Ronsard mises en musique au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* and in Collarile, *Ronsard et la mise en musique des Amours (1552–1553)*.

12 *La Cresme des bons vers, trieux du meslange & cabinet des sieurs de Ronsard, dv Perron, de Malerbe, de Sigongnes, de Lingendes, Motin, Maynard, de Bellan, d'Vrfé, Theophile & autres*, pp. 181–182.

13 Ronsard, *Les Œuvres de Pierre de Ronsard* (1623), vol. 1, p. 384.

telling the story of the 1987 creation of the so-called 'Pierre de Ronsard rose', enumerating all the rose-derived products (soap, tea, rose-decorated porcelain) on sale at the gift shop at Sainte-Cosme, and commenting on screen shots of references to Ronsard's ode in *Pokémon Go*.<sup>14</sup> The cultural grasp on the poem is further strengthened by the fact that, as was known even by Ronsard's earliest readers, 'Mignonne' reworks a poem by the Latin poet Ausonius, 'De rosis nascentibus' ('On Budding Roses'). A glance at the closing verses confirms the proximity of the two poems: 'Conquerimur, Natura, brevis quod gratia talis' ('Nature, we grieve that such beauty is short-lived'); 'sed bene, quod paucis licet interitura diebus | succedens aevum prorogat ipsa suum. | collige, virgo, rosas, dum flos novus et nova pubes, | et memor esto aevum sic properare tuum' ('But 'tis well; for though in a few days the rose must die, she springs anew prolonging her own life. Then, maidens, gather roses, while blooms are fresh and youth is fresh, and be mindful that so your life-time hastes away').<sup>15</sup> When we read the ode, then, we can all too easily find ourselves caught up in our memory of the Latin text, and caught up in the reception history of the poem that makes it cultural artefact.<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, part of the story—but, again, what about the rose?

There are multiple ways in which a reader might inquire into the plantness of Ronsard's rose. From an historicist point of view, it is tempting to pay attention to the contemporaneity of Ronsard's ode and the development of early modern botany, an approach that (as far as I can tell) has not been attempted. Only one article is listed under the heading 'botany' in François Rouget's recent Ronsard bibliography—one which, moreover, deals with the poem 'La salade' ('The Salad'), as if the roses in the *Œuvres* do not in fact qualify for such treatment.<sup>17</sup> It is indeed surprising that the botanical context has been set aside; if the history of botany is long—winding back to Ancient Egypt and Greece, to founding figures such as Theophrastus, Empedocles, Aristotle, Anaxagoras, and Dioscorides—the sixteenth century

14 Ondra, *Taylor's Guide to Roses*, p. 215 and p. 390. The boutique is part of the Prieuré Saint-Cosme, rue Ronsard in La Riche, not far from the Université de Tours—see <http://www.prieure-ronsard.fr/> (accessed 27 September 2019). I should like to thank Charles-Louis Morand-Métivier of the University of Vermont for alerting me to the presence of a reference to Ronsard's ode in *Pokémon Go*.

15 Ausonius, 'De rosis nascentibus' in Ausonius, *Works*, 2. 276–281, vv. 41 and 47–50.

16 On the intertextual ties that bind Ausonius and Ronsard, see Laumonier, *Ronsard, poète lyrique*, p. 583 and Lafont, 'Rose, femme, événement'. See also Cuadraro, 'Ronsard en el arco tensado entre Ausonio y Guillen'.

17 Johnson, 'La salade tourangelle de Ronsard'.

witnesses a number of key evolutions. An iconic instant in this respect is Luca Ghini's foundation, eight years before the first publication of 'Mignonne, allon voir si la rose', of Europe's first botanical garden in Pisa (the *Orto Botanico*), which inaugurated in a very concrete way a shift from thinking about plants in terms of their properties and uses in human medicine, to recognizing their plant-ness.<sup>18</sup> But it is not just this one moment that counts: over the past couple of decades, scholars such as Paula Findlen, Brian Ogilvie, Sachiko Kusukawa, and Florike Egmond have shown the extent to which botany reinvents itself in the sixteenth century, for various reasons and with various consequences.<sup>19</sup> These authors show that *inter alia* the science of plants comes to be progressively less interested in the medical properties of plants and more in plants as plants, and in plants for plants' sake.

The first botanical garden in France would only appear at the end of the century when Henri IV established by *lettres patentes* Montpellier's *jardin des plantes* in 1593, to be directed by French botanist Richer de Belleval (i.e. almost a decade too late for Ronsard to have visited), but botanical sciences were nonetheless in full evolution in France earlier in the century.<sup>20</sup> To establish this, a few key names and dates will suffice. According to historians of botany, the French physician Jean Ruel, Ruelle, or Ruellius (1474–1537), a contemporary of Rabelais and predecessor of Ronsard, made a major intervention in thinking about plants and plant-ness. Although he was a physician and although in 1516 he published a Latin translation of Dioscorides's *De materia medica* (a pharmacopoeia that details the medicines that can be obtained from plants), in his own work, especially the *De Natura stirpium* (1536), Ruel asserted that 'botany is botany, and that pharmacy, like agriculture, pomology, and horticulture, is but one of its departments' and that all of them must remain 'subsidiary to the philosophy of plant life as a whole'.<sup>21</sup> The most famous botanical treatise of the time—written by

18 For a brief introduction to the history of Pisa's botanical garden, see Bedini, *L'Orto Botanico di Pisa: Piante, storia, personaggi, ruoli*.

19 Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*; Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe*; Kusukawa, Sachiko, *Picturing the Book of Nature: Image, Text, and Argument in Sixteenth-Century Human Anatomy and Medical Botany*; Egmond, *The World of Carolus Clusius: Natural History in the Making, 1550–1610 and Eye for Detail: Images of Plants and Animals in Art and Science, 1500–1630*. See also the collective volume by Egmond, Hoftijer, and Visser, *Carolus Clusius: Toward a Cultural History of a Renaissance Naturalist*.

20 On the foundation and evolution of France's first botanical garden, Rossi, *Le Jardin des plantes de Montpellier: de la médecine à la botanique* and Rioux, *Le Jardin des plantes de Montpellier: quatre siècles d'histoire*.

21 Greene, *Landmarks of Botanical History*, p. 598.

Leonhart Fuch and also called *De Historia Stirpium* (1542)—was soon translated into French under the title *Commentaires tres excellens de l'hystoire des plantes* ('Most Excellent Commentaries on the History of Plants'), probably in 1549 and almost certainly before Ronsard published his famous ode.<sup>22</sup> Finally, in 1557, the French botanist Charles de l'Écluse (then at the start of his career) would translate Rembert Dodoens's *Cruydeboeck* under the title *Histoire des plantes* ('History of Plants').<sup>23</sup> In other words—and in historicist mode—there is certainly grounds for asserting that there is a clear historical overlap between the rise of botany in early modern France and the writing of Ronsard's famous ode, and potential to infer some kind of circulation (of ideas, of percepts, etc.) common to the two.

There is, however, no evidence (as far as I can tell) that Ronsard ever owned, consulted, or cared about Luca Ghini, Jean Ruel, Leonhart Fuchs, Rembert Dodoens, Charles de l'Écluse, or any other contemporary botanist. There is some reason to think that he *might* have read them, and that those texts *might* have had a direct impact on his poetry—Ronsard did, after all, draw on a whole host of non-literary texts while writing poetry. His 1560 edition of Gerolamo Cardano's *De subtilitate libri XX*, in which he underlined three lines about the notion of fire ('Ignem/flamma')—*fire is burning air*—shaped the poet's conception of the mechanics and effect of the flame of love;<sup>24</sup> his 1530 copy of a Greek poem on the nature of venomous snakes, Nicander of Colophon's *Theriaca*, informed several sonnets about the poison of love;<sup>25</sup> and it has been shown that in his poetry he drew heavily on his 1558 editions of the *Works* of Hippocrates, especially regarding the symptoms and causes of disequilibria caused by humoral imbalances, fevers, melancholy, *hydropsie* (i.e. edema), coughing, and other illnesses, all of which leave their mark in Ronsard's poems. But none of the countless articles and studies about Ronsard's library, books, or reading habits mention works of early modern botany.<sup>26</sup>

Such historicist inquiries already suggest that there might be more to 'Mignonne' than the *carpe diem* motif, but they can only take us so far. In order to suggest another way of shifting the nature–culture balance in our

22 Fuchs, *Commentaires tres excellens de l'hystoire des plantes*.

23 Dodoens, *Histoire des plantes*. Charles de l'Écluse (aka Carolus Clusius) has received much attention of late, especially in Egmond, *The World of Carolus Clusius*.

24 Rouget, *Ronsard et le livre*, 1, pp. 58–59.

25 *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 67–68.

26 Laumonier, 'Sur la bibliothèque de Ronsard'; Livingston, 'Notes sur la bibliothèque de Ronsard'; Labaste, 'Un nouveau livre de la bibliothèque de Ronsard'; Veyrin-Forrer, 'La bibliothèque de Ronsard'; Rouget, *Ronsard et le livre*.

reading of the poem, which will remain open to reading poetry alongside early modern botany without assuming direct connections, I should like to take a few steps back from the immediate context to situate the history of reading Ronsard's poem within a longer history of exclusion of plants within Western thought and metaphysics. To do this I turn, then, to the recent work of Emanuele Coccia, Matthew Hall, Luce Irigaray, Michael Marder, and Jeffrey Nealon, which I gather—borrowing the title of Nealon's book—under the general rubric of 'plant theory'.<sup>27</sup> Such works open a collective reflection about the reality of plant/vegetal life, in particular reacting (directly or indirectly) to what Nealon calls the 'foundational abjection of plant life' in Animal Studies', which he accuses of 'kingdomism'.<sup>28</sup> As much as our readings of Ronsard's ode have a history, so too does the exclusion of plants from Western metaphysics, which Hall analyses in the first chapter of his *Plants as People: A Philosophical Botany*, 'The Roots of Disregard'. Hall shows that there is no *originary* exclusion of plants, but rather an exclusion-*in-the-making*, especially after Plato, in whose writings can be detected 'a turning away from plants being viewed as related, active, autonomic beings'.<sup>29</sup> The exclusion of plants is here akin to that of women and slaves in Plato's thought. The exclusion is not total, to be sure: in the *Timaeus*, Plato indeed says that 'everything that partakes of life may be truly called a living being', but only before establishing a zoocentric hierarchy that sets plants apart for their lack of 'opinion or reason or mind' and before summing up by saying that plant nature is 'always in a passive state'.<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, for his part, pursues this 'drive toward separation and discontinuity', with plants now firmly set off as a 'lower class of being'.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle's nested hierarchy (in the *De Anima* and in *Parts of Animals*) of soul functions—growth/reproduction, locomotion/perception, and intellect—and the corresponding three degrees of soul—the nutritive soul of plants, the sensitive soul of animals, and the rational soul of human beings—'extends the Platonic separation of plants and animals', even as—via the *nesting*—it also recognizes certain continuities.<sup>32</sup>

27 Coccia, *La Vie des plantes. Une métaphysique du mélange*; Hall, *Plants as People: A Philosophical Botany*; Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*; Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* and *Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*; and Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*. This is a burgeoning field of intellectual inquiry; many other titles could be adduced.

28 Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life*, p. 12.

29 Hall, *Plants as People: A Philosophical Botany*, p. 19.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 23.



In his *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), Michael Marder summarizes the problem in a slightly different way: 'If animals have suffered marginalization throughout the history of Western thought, then non-human, non-animal living beings, such as plants, have populated *the margin of the margin*, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of our conceptualities', such that the 'suppression of the most basic question regarding plants became the breeding ground for their ethical neglect'.<sup>33</sup> If, in such a situation, the task at hand thus becomes that of giving 'a new prominence to vegetal life', it is by attending to the simplest of questions: 'How is it possible for us to encounter plants? And how can we maintain and nurture, without fetishizing it, their otherness in the course of this encounter?'<sup>34</sup> Such questions as these might, perhaps, help us read Ronsard's ode with fresh eyes. Responding to this challenge via concepts, nomenclature, and classification risks, in Marder's words, 'violating the flower' via a 'cognitive plucking' that leaves us only with a plant 'already dead and dry'.<sup>35</sup> Such is the 'Ronsard's rose' that the history of Ronsardian criticism hands us: a rose that is all cultural, that is symbol and symbol alone. In opposition to nominalism, conceptualism, and other cultural deadenings, Marder advocates recourse to 'hermeneutic phenomenology, deconstruction, non-Western thought, feminism, as well as to weak thought', the latter a reference to the *pensiero debole* of Gianni Vattimo.<sup>36</sup> Marder gathers these various resources because of what he calls their 'quasi-aesthetic receptivity' that can open up 'just enough space for the sunflower to grow without trimming it down to an object readily available for the subject's manipulation'—that is, to return to our present context, a method for allowing Ronsard's rose to be (also) *just a plant*.<sup>37</sup> Such a philosophical infrastructure as the one Marder proposes is weary of itself and chooses to be sympathetic to the methods of its object of study. The challenge, as Marder puts it, is 'to let plants be within the framework of what, from our standpoint, entails profound obscurity, which, throughout the history of Western philosophy, has been the marker of their life, [in other words] to allow plants to flourish on the edge or at the limits of phenomenality, of visibility and, in some sense of "the world"'.<sup>38</sup> Marder ultimately refers to this *debole* 'grasp' using the Portuguese word *desencontro*: an *encontro* that

33 Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, pp. 2–3.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6. See Vattimo and Rovatti (ed.), *Il Pensiero debole*.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

is not one, a *not-meeting*, a ‘crossing of paths’, since all ‘we can hope for is to brush upon the edges of [the] being [of plants]’.<sup>39</sup>

In his book *Philosopher’s Plant*, Marder occasions such a *desencontro* by nudging us in the direction of the thought of Luce Irigaray, who (he writes) ‘urges us to listen to the muted vegetal rhythms in our life and thought, where growth has been stunted by the prejudices of metaphysics and the arrhythmia of modern existence’.<sup>40</sup> To unpack Marder’s point and to gather materials for our method, we can turn to Irigaray’s *J’aime à toi (I Love To You)* and in particular to a chapter titled ‘L’amour entre nous’, which we might render as ‘Love Between Us’, or perhaps—less literally, but perhaps more fully—as ‘That Love We Share’.<sup>41</sup> There, we find an opposition between two manners of perceiving: one, which she calls (admittedly a little simplistically) ‘Western’, is appropriative, conceptually bound, intent on closure; the other, in which bodies are not a given but part of an ongoing sense of *being with*, posits a relationship to the world exemplified by the way that Buddha looks at a flower ‘sans la cueillir’ (‘without plucking it’). In Irigaray’s words: Buddha ‘regarde l’autre que lui sans l’enlever à ses racines’ (‘looks at that which is other than himself without detaching it from its roots’).<sup>42</sup> The human-plant *desencontro* is a communion, a *vivre-avec* or *living-with*; it is about looking at plant being *not* to learn something (such as the shortness of human life), *not* to compare and contrast (my youth, too, passes like that of the flower), but in order to simply *be with*. Irigaray pursues this line of thought further in a book she subsequently co-wrote with Marder, *Through Vegetal Being*, which sketches out a manner of arriving at a dialogue across difference that *passes through the vegetal world*. All depends on how we *see*, about how we encounter the plant without making it merely a named something in our own world. Instead of a world that ‘looks like a sort of museum composed of inanimate things invested with our projections’ (such as Ronsard’s poems have perhaps become), Irigaray wants to ‘pass through the vegetal’ to perceive a being-with-the-living.<sup>43</sup> Central to this is how she herself never says that Buddha looks at a lotus flower—she only ever says *flower*.

What happens if, after Marder and Irigaray, we relax our grasp on Ronsard’s ode? We need not jettison the *carpe diem* motif completely, but we can set it aside temporarily, so that it might in fact return with greater

39 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

40 Marder, *Philosopher’s Plant*, p. 217.

41 Irigaray, *J’aime à toi*. All translations are mine.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

43 Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being*, p. 85.

poignancy. What if we *try* to pay attention, 'in the present, to [the rose's] concrete singularity and [to] its sensible qualities, without substituting a name for them'?<sup>44</sup> Questions—simple questions—quickly arrive. Ronsard refers to the rose's 'robe de pourpre' and 'robe pourprée' (crimson gown). Are roses, in the early modern period, generally crimson? Does that matter? And, if we know the colour, can we ask: what kind of rose is this? We could even ask, would it make any difference if this were, say, an orchid or a daisy? Do those plants not also die quickly? What of the language of time here? How literally are we to think about a rose lasting from dawn to dusk? Are roses, more than, say, daffodils, particularly short-lived and hasty beings? Might there be in this respect an echo of early modern botanical sources and, if so, how might our reading of the poem change? And on the boundary of the *carpe diem/desencontro* readings, what of Ronsard's advice 'Cueillés, cueillés, vôtre jeunesse'—Ronsard may indeed encourage his *mignonne* to 'gather the bloom of her youth', but neither of them, in the poem, ever pluck the flower. Perhaps this is because it is too late... But the rose *is* still there at the end of the poem, still alive, albeit minus its petals. Does not this *remaining* matter? Let us pick up some of these threads, focusing first on plant colour, and secondly on plant time.

What, then, of the fact that, Ronsard's rose has a 'robe de pourpre'? Does that detail contribute to how the reader imagines a rose in its plant-ful singularity? How might the term have resonated with Ronsard's first readers? More or less specifically than today? A first point to note is that plant colour is something early modern botanists struggled with in several ways. Ancient authors, such as Pliny, had not paid much attention to the colour of plants; early modern botanists thus found themselves in the position of having to experiment to find a language capable of capturing different hues.<sup>45</sup> The situation, as one specialist has put it, was one of 'chromonymic chaos'.<sup>46</sup> When we read authors such as Leonhart Fuchs and Rembert Dodoens in their original languages or in their early modern French translations, we find all sorts of approximations and comparative paraphrases.

In Charles de L'Écluse's French version of Dodoens we find roses of different colours, described as follows: 'la Rose blanche' ('the white rose'); '[la rose] rouge [dont] les fleurs sont rouges' ('the red rose whose flowers

44 Ibid., p. 47.

45 '[L]es hommes de la Renaissance se trouvent en présence d'une multiplicité de plantes jusque-là inconnue, mais aussi en présence d'une multiplicité de couleurs nouvelles auxquelles les Anciens, comme Pline, n'avaient guère donné d'importance' (Selosse, 'Traduire les termes de couleurs', p. 1).

46 Ibid., p. 3. In French: 'un chaos chromonymique'.

are red'); the Provence rose, which is called 'vne espece moy[en]ne entre la Rose rouge & blanche' ('a type halfway between the red and white roses') whose flowers are 'ne rouges ne blanches' ('neither red nor white') but 'vne couleur moyenne entre le rouge et le blanc, bien pres incarnée' ('a colour midway between red and white, almost flesh coloured'); another kind whose flowers 'sont de belles couleur rouge obscur' ('of a fine dark red colour'); another that smells like cinnamon and which is 'de couleur palle en rouge' ('of a pale red colour'); another that is simply 'de couleur blanche' ('white in colour'); the wild rose that is 'de couleur blanche, ou tirant sur l'incarné' ('white in colour, or else close to flesh coloured'); and another 'de couleur blanche pour la pluspart, aucunes fois rouge' ('normally white in colour, sometimes red').<sup>47</sup> All roses are thus presented as if on a colour continuum that stretches from white to red, with varying blends of both in between. Ronsard's rose with its 'robe de pourpre' would clearly find its place on this continuum, but it would be impossible to say from this which kind of rose it is. As the crossroads of historical verisimilitude and the impossibility of classification, we find ourselves—if we allow ourselves—in a *desencontro*.

Guillaume Guérout's French rendering of Fuchs's text makes for an interesting comparison: there, we read that '[les roses] sont pareillem[en]t differ[en]tes en couleur, & en odeur' ('[roses] are equally different in colour and in smell')—but at no point does the text enumerate these different colours.<sup>48</sup> Most editions of Fuchs's work, in most languages, contain woodcuts, and in certain copies of the work these illustrations have been hand-coloured, for example those copies at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and at the US Agricultural Library. In the former of these, we see a rose plant of which some flowers are white, some pink, and some red—which, of course, means we are looking at an impossible plant! Once again, if we keep Ronsard's verses in mind, we *almost* encounter botany's rose. It is close by, but we escape the close ties of the kind that link 'Mignonne' to 'De rosis nascentibus'—and it is this escape that prepares the potential *desencontro*.

To variegate this *desencontro* and to get to its most important nexus, let us turn from plant colour to plant time. To get up close to the singularity of this rose, to move towards seeing *plant time* in this poem (rather than seeing plant time as a metaphor for human time), let us again draw on both theory and historicism: respectively, Marder's *Plant-Thinking* and early modern botany. The first section of Part II of Marder's book, 'Vegetal Existentiality',

47 Dodoens, *Histoire des plantes*, pp. 457–459.

48 Fuchs, *Commentaires tres excellens de l'hystoire des plantes*, f. Lvi<sup>v</sup>.

focuses on 'the Time of Plants', in order to approach the question of plant being via the question of plant time, setting up a task 'to rethink temporality as the mainspring of the plants' ontology'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, various plant processes relate to the passage of time, including germination, growth, flourishing, fermentation, decay, and dehiscence. More specifically, and drawing on Heidegger—namely the latter's 'hermeneutics of facticity' to explain the meaning of *Dasein*—Marder proposes that 'the meaning of vegetal being is time', which he subdivides into three categories: 1) 'the vegetal hetero-temporality of seasonal changes'; 2) 'the infinite temporality of growth'; 3) 'the cyclical temporality of iteration, repetition, and reproduction'.<sup>50</sup> To each of these, Marder dedicates a full section of Part II. Rather than follow Marder step-by-step here, I want to single out a couple of insights and build on them in a given direction. Most essential is his connection—after Heidegger, of course, but here for plants—of being and time. The most concrete way to grasp this is via the example of the hothouse in which humans can gain mastery 'over the time of plants' and thus 'manipulate their being'.<sup>51</sup> Such mastery does not involve negating some supposedly natural condition but, rather, interjecting into the plant a different time. Creating the conditions (more heat, less heat; more rain, less rain; more light, less light, etc.) that determine *when* a plant grows or flowers means mastery over plant being.<sup>52</sup> Because of this immediate connection between plant time and plant being, Marder notes that 'the plant's future is entirely contingent on alterity'—and that Other might be the climate of a given place, or indeed some agro-industrial complex.<sup>53</sup>

If, as Marder argues, vegetal temporality is wholly bound up with—not identical to, but impossible to separate from—plant being, then what is there, if anything, of plant time in Ronsard's ode? The end of Ronsard's poem 'Cueillés, cueillés, vôtre jeunesse' ('Gather, gather the bloom of your youth') translates, of course, Ausonius's 'college [...] rosas' ('gather your roses!')—and indeed, it gives voice to the *carpe diem* topos. The poem clearly evokes human time, as Ronsard does, poignantly, throughout his *Derniers vers* ('Last Verses'). That much we know. But the literary-historical fact of this traceable translation obfuscates the fact that, since the times of Theophrastus, plant time, even more than the description of shape or

49 Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, pp. 93–117; here p. 94.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

colour, has commonly been central to phytography. The emphasis on time in Ronsard's poem in many ways communes with the rose in a manner similar to that of both Theophrastus and his early modern inheritors. Book IV of Theophrastus's *Enquiry Into Plants* contains a long section that evokes plant temporality, notably both the 'comparative shortness of life of plants and trees' and how that temporality is different for different plants and between wild and domestic plants ('thus the wild olive pear and fig are longer-lived than the corresponding cultivated trees').<sup>54</sup> The lives of the apple tree and the pomegranate tree, for example, are singled out as particularly rushed, as are plants that grow too near to water, such as the white poplar or the elderberry tree.<sup>55</sup> Of particular interest is that the father of botany, in a manner that anticipates Marder, passes quickly from the question of *time* in a strict sense to that of *being* more generally—for instance when he muses on how trees change over their life-cycle: 'some trees, though they grow old and decay quickly, shoot up again from the same stock, as bay apple pomegranate and most of the water-loving trees [...] about these one might enquire whether one should call the new growth the same tree or a new one'.<sup>56</sup>

The centrality of time to plant life is asserted even more clearly in early modern botany: in Fuch's *Historia stirpium*, which would become the model for numerous similar works in Latin and vernacular languages, the section on any given plant is divided into sections labelled 'Names' (*nomina*), 'Types or species' (*genera*), 'Shapes' (*forma*), 'Place' (*locus*), and 'Time' (*tempus*).<sup>57</sup> 'Time' is clearly one of the main factors of plant being according to early modern botany. Looking at the original Latin as well as the French translation of Fuchs, which appeared before Ronsard's ode, we find copious information about the *time* of different kinds of plants. Thus, 'absinthe [...] must be picked in the month of July'.<sup>58</sup> We must 'gather' (in French *cueillir*—the word that Ronsard uses) the marshmallow roots 'towards the end of August or in the beginning of September', whereas that plant's 'leaves and seeds must be collected only in the summer'. The plant flowers, finally, 'in the months of July and August'. *To be a marshmallow plant is to follow this temporality*. To be a chamomile plant is to follow a different *tempus*: it 'can—in warm climes—be picked [*se cueille*] in springtime; but

54 Theophrastus, *Enquiry Into Plants*, IV, 13, 1–2.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., IV, 13, 3.

57 This is the structure used in all entries of Fuchs, *De Historia stirpium*.

58 Fuchs, *Commentaires tres excellens de l'hystoire des plantes*, fols Lvi r–M r and Fuchs, *De Historia stirpium*, pp. 656–658.

in these [our] cold regions, picking only occurs at the start of summer, which is to say in the month of June'. As for roses, to bring us wholly within the Ronsardian, we read: 'Just as the rose appears the latest amongst the beautiful flowers of spring, so it is the first to pass. *It must thus be picked [cueillir] in the month of June, as soon as it is seen*'<sup>59</sup>. In Fuchs's *Historia stirpium*, the rose is the plant-that-requires-urgent-plucking. Not only does Fuchs state at which moment of the year (i.e. in June) we should pick roses, he also underscores how quickly we must pick it: 'Ne mox nusquam c[om]pareat!' 'Dès incontinent qu'on l'apperçoit!' ('Pick it as soon as you see it!') Behind the so-called *carpe diem* motif in Ronsard's ode there is thus, in essence, a *carpe florem* sense of plant time.

On the historicist front, one might thus posit that Ronsard's ode deploys the *carpe diem* motif in light of the botanical reality of the quick passing of roses, of which readers of Fuchs and other writers—not to mention gardeners—would likely have been aware. It is a fair assumption that, given the evolution of sixteenth-century botany, had there been a poem identical to Ronsard's two hundred years earlier, its words might not have resonated in the same way. On the *desencontro* front, the poem's botanical correspondence with regard to time reminds us to see a *plant* here, to meet it, somehow—and it also leaves us wondering about the directionality of the human/plant comparison. As humans, we know a lot about human mortality, and feel it intimately. Do we need a rose to teach us that? Perhaps we need a rose to *feel* that—and this feeling is perhaps, as Irigaray and Marder would put it, communion. What if we read the poem the other way round? What if our own firsthand, existential, anguished awareness of human mortality is what allows us to see the passing of the rose? Indeed, to see the rose at all? We might then see the rose in the poem not (only) as a symbol of *our* aging and death, but as a rose with which we commune because we *already know* that life passes quickly.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, by mediating between an ode, its reception history, early modern botany, and plant theory, the goal has been to examine how, when we see certain signifiers for plants (e.g. the word *rose*), it is all too easy to *not actually appreciate that plant's plantness*. We can read the word 'rose' and—because of its simplicity, its familiarity, its poetic-ness, its inclusion in

59 Fuchs, *Commentaires tres excellens de l'hystoire des plantes*, fol CCLIIIIr.



a thousand tropes and similes—skip on past it towards that of which it is a symbol, an allegory, an illustration. The preceding pages do not offer a new reading of Ronsard's ode, whose aim it would be to stop us from appreciating the *carpe diem* motif. They call, rather, for an open reading, one whose *debole* grasp is comparable to that of the claw crane merchandiser games we find in arcades, whose claws most often touch but fail to pick up the coveted cuddly toy. They call for allowing the poem to be a *desencontro*, in which the botanical *carpe rosam* and the human *carpe diem* give meaning to one another. Such a reading is an un-reading, perhaps; as Timothy Morton has put it, a 'functional definition of an adult book is one in which nonhumans don't speak and aren't on an equal footing with humans', such that young adult and adult Literature with a capital-L is often fodder for the 'anthropocentrist in training'.<sup>60</sup> A good education means that by the age of ten, children 'have already decided that literature should not be about talking toasters of friendly frogs'.<sup>61</sup> In other words, learning to read often means splitting off the material reality of humans and nonhumans living together from the correlationist *for-me* world, in which toasters, frogs, and roses, when they circulate in signs, are there only to furnish elements for understanding human life. The un-reading in the preceding pages looked to both historicism (the reception history of the ode; the potential echoes of Ronsard's poem in Charles de L'Écluse's French version of Dodoens and Guillaume Guérout's translation of Fuchs) and to theory (especially that of Marder and Irigaray) to bring into focus, side by side, both the cultural grasp on Ronsard's ode and the plant-ness of the rose. The ode, a product of Culture, here reveals itself—if we let it—as offering us time with what was once called Nature (i.e. the physical world), and more specifically with the vegetal. It offers us a moment of communion with the living, a brief escape from human exceptionalism, something more (and less) than a famous poem by the prince of poets.

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60 Morton, *Humankind*, p. 14.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 15.



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