

Szegedi Tudományegyetem Bölcsész- és Társadalomtudományi Kar
Irodalom- és Kultúratudományi Doktori Iskola
Angol nyelvű irodalmak és kultúrák

Mónika Rusvai

The Wood Within

*The Fantastic in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Novels
and the Renegotiation of Human–Plant Relations*

Supervisors:

Prof. Dr. Anna Kérchy

Dr. habil. Ildikó Limpár

Szeged

2024

Alulírott, RUSVAI MÓNKA, a jelen nyilatkozat aláírásával kijelentem, hogy a

The Wood Within: The Fantastic in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Novels and the Renegotiation of Human–Plant Relations

című doktori értekezés saját, önálló munkám, amelynek készítése során betartottam a szerzői jogról szóló törvény szabályait, valamint az egyetem által előírt, az értekezés készítésére vonatkozó szabályokat, és csak olyan forrásokat használtam fel, amelyekre a bibliográfiában a meghatározott módon hivatkoztam.

Szeged, 2024. január 19.



A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous; and it will change you.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1 Fantasy Literature in Times of Climate Crisis	5
1.2 Research Objectives and Methodology	6
1.3 Introduction to Robert Holdstock's <i>Mythago Cycle</i>	11
1.4 Structure of the Dissertation	16
Part I: The Plant-Visibility Strategies.....	20
2. Ways of Understanding Fantasy.....	20
2.1 Terminology	20
2.2 Literature of Things Unimportant	30
2.3 Fantasy in Ecocentric Mode	37
3. The Invisible Plant Kingdom	39
3.1 The Roots of Disconnection	39
3.2 From Plant Blindness to Plant Visibility	45
3.3 Overview of the Plant-Visibility Strategies.....	54
Part II: Textual Analyses.....	56
<i>Mythago Genesis</i>	56
<i>Primary Texts</i>	57
I. Encounters of the Vegetal Kind.....	60
4. Identity.....	60
5. Body	70
6. Coming of Age	80
II. Dimensions	91
7. Time.....	91
8. Space	100
9. Myth	113
10. Conclusion: A Story of Compenetration	123
10.1 The Plant-Visibility Strategies	123
10.2 The Plant-Conscious Analysis of the <i>Mythago Cycle</i>	124
10.3 The Six Theses of Plant Life in Fantasy.....	127
10.4 The Truth of Ryhope Wood	128
Bibliography.....	130

1. Introduction

1.1 Fantasy Literature in Times of Climate Crisis

Setting frequently plays a crucial role in fantasy, not only when a secondary world is portrayed, but also when magic filters into our everyday reality. One of the most common fantasy settings, the magic wood keeps re-emerging in fantastic narratives from ancient myths to modern fantasy literature. The wood, however, has the ability to transcend the role of providing background to the hero's marvellous deeds – quite frequently the wood 'comes alive,' gains its own role and meaning within the story, or even becomes a character on its own right. Nature 'coming alive' is definitely a tricky term. Nature *is* alive, the problem is, that our anthropocentric concept of reality tends to hide this fact to spare us from the guilt that we bear responsibility in its demise. Fantasy literature, however, has an infinite potential to provide a powerful reminder of nature's vitality and our inherent bond with it and dependence on it.

In an age when we live under the constant threat of climate crisis, any fiction that guides us to a more complex understanding of the natural world has strategic significance¹. Obviously, the present situation requires *scientific* answers quite urgently, however, there is another, equally important side of the coin: our relationship to nature in a *cultural* context. This entails a wide range of issues: our perception of nature both on individual and on community level, our everyday interactions with it, as well as nature's role in cultural practices (both mundane and spiritual). All these revolve around the human ability to see nature for the alive and dynamic entity it actually is, instead of the boring background it is reduced to in our Western, capitalist, urban reality. This change of mindset from ignorance to awareness is one of the most essential pre-requisites of our wholesome co-existence with the nonhuman world – and a more eco-conscious reading of fantasy literature could propel readers towards it.

At its highest potential, fantasy is a form of literature that breathes life into uncanny impossibilities within a self-coherent world and uses this method to cast light on hidden details of our everyday reality. Good fantasy disturbs and challenges us, and as Chris Brawley observes, it is able to "revise our perceptions of the natural world" (Brawley 2014, 9). Anthropocentric thinking composes a large part of our general perception of the natural world,

¹ Speculative fiction already has a category for this: climate fiction (cli-fi). Climate fiction started out as a subgenre of science fiction, but rapidly spread all over the genres and became extremely prolific in young adult dystopias. These narratives are typically set in a post-apocalyptic future, and the young protagonists have to pay the price for the sins of their reckless predecessors who did not respect Mother Earth. Survival is at stake, and the characters are forced to come up with liveable solutions for apparently irreversible environmental damage. No wonder that such novels have quickly found a generation of readers already burdened by climate anxiety: they want feasible solutions for the very real problems that already exist today.

and hence it is one of the greatest barriers keeping us from recognizing our inter-relatedness with the ecosystem. If we measure the nonhuman world by whether certain creatures or phenomena serve immediate human interests, we end up ignoring many things that are crucial to our long-term survival on this planet. Fantasy literature very often depicts worlds that successfully reverse this mindset through a conscious and consistent de-centring of the human. In Ursula K. Le Guin's words, fantasy has the ability to "include the nonhuman as essential" (Le Guin 2007, 87) – and in this respect it ventures to territories where realistic fiction cannot. Thus, when the magic wood of fantasy 'becomes alive,' it compels our attention in a way no real-life forest would be capable of. When you see ents on the marsh, you cannot help thinking about their goals and the reasons for their anger. You are fairly unlikely to have similar thoughts about the lakeside oak you pass by everyday – you might not even notice it is standing there.

Vengeful vegetation, however, is most times nothing else but our own guilt projected to the environment. Fantasy literature is a useful tool to interrogate issues like this, and through this process to gain a better understanding of both nature and ourselves. The magic wood, a setting of adventure and of contemplation, often becomes a place for such conversations. The gloomy seclusion under the canopies may appear threatening and first, but the woodland has the potential to make us understand that nature is first and foremost our home. This dissertation embarks on a similar journey: in ways detailed below, it develops a list of strategies for a more eco-conscious reading of vegetation portrayed in contemporary fantasy literature, and then demonstrates how these strategies are set to use through the analyses of British author Robert Holdstock's Mythago novels.

1.2 Research Objectives and Methodology

Making up more than 80% of Earth's biomass (Bar-On et al. 2018), plants still mean no more than part of the scenery for the average person. Whilst the destruction of rainforests raises a few eyebrows, our casual plant blindness renders most plants in our immediate surroundings practically invisible. In literature, however, vegetation is more frequently made visible, and even when trees and flowers only appear as metaphors for human feelings and thought processes, the interconnectedness of beings becomes more prominent. As argued above, fantasy literature has an even greater potential to combat our anthropocentric limitations and portray plants as essential and agential parts of the narrative. This is especially true for the kind of fantasy fiction that relies on myths, folklore and legends – a fluid and flexible subcategory, sometimes referred to as *mythic fantasy*. In this sense, mythic fantasy has the potential to reverse the disenchantment of nature within the storyworld. Disenchantment gained ground in the

Enlightenment period, and it rapidly turned nature into commodity. “This ‘disenchantment’ of the wilderness has been widely blamed for our current ecological crisis and firmly linked to increasing anthropocentrism.” (Parker 2020, 40). Mythic fantasy can play a role in making nature alive and visible through a process of re-enchantment.

The dissertation focuses on this pool of texts and intends to create a set of methodological strategies for a more plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy through the combination of the theories of fantasy and critical plant studies.

For this purpose, I formulated two hypotheses:

1. Mythic fantasy has the potential of creating more ecocentric texts and worlds by exposing and then subverting the most common, anthropocentric attitudes towards the woodland to reveal that human and nonhuman identities are in fact inseparable.

2. As an outstanding example of mythic fantasy, Robert Holdstock’s concept of the Mythago Wood is a unique, eco-philosophical construct that casts new light on human–nature relationships by giving agency to the vegetal Other.

Plants are definitely at a disadvantage in everyday discourse, however, in academia there has been a lasting focus on the nonhuman in the past decade. This aids us in modifying the otherwise very anthropocentric narratives of the climate crisis. We are slowly realizing that “the need to find new ways of encountering, discussing, and thinking of entities and environments where human and nonhuman entangle in increasingly intricate patterns has never been more urgent.” (Karkulehto et al. 2020, 1). The recent flourish in plant studies could be traced in at least three fields of research.

Firstly, in the natural sciences, there has been a breakthrough in the research of plant senses:

“The reflections on the vegetal world that have thrived on the margins of Western science seem to have gained new momentum in recent decades, attempting to understand plants in their own terms and offering a more integrated, ecological approach to plant life. Following decades of single-minded focus on molecular biology to understand mechanisms of plant growth under controlled laboratory conditions, combined with intense efforts toward plant genetic engineering, research in plant science has recently enjoyed a renaissance that has involved a real celebration of ‘plantness.’” (Gagliano et al. 2017, xiii).

This “plantness” of plants comes to the forefront in recent scientific volumes. Notable examples include Anthony Trewavas’s book, *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence* (2014), Richard Karban’s *Plant Sensing and Communication* (2015), and the edited volume of František Baluška, Stefano Mancuso, and Dieter Volkmann: *Communication in Plants: Neuronal Aspects of Plant Life* (2006). Plants used to be marginalized on the basis of lacking certain senses and intelligence compared to the animal kingdom but contemporary research is going strong on plant neurobiology, gradually busting the myths that kept the vegetal in this disadvantaged state.

Secondly, this renewed scientific interest in plant life gradually filtered down to books intended for the general public. An obvious example is Peter Wohlleben’s international bestseller, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015), followed by other successful volumes such as *The Secret Wisdom of Nature* (2017) and *The Heartbeat of Trees* (2019). Even though Wohlleben shares a great deal of scientific knowledge with his readers, he largely relies on anthropomorphism in his version of re-enchanting European forests. Other woodland-related works aimed at a general audience include Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013) and Suzanne Simard’s *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (2021). Kimmerer is a professor of environmental and forest biology, Simard is a differentiated forest ecologist (known for her discoveries in mapping the mycelial networks of primeval forests, called the wood wide web), yet in addition to their scientific publication, they both felt an urge to share their scientific and personal experience with a wider audience. Another recent popular book closely related to forest ecosystems is Merlin Sheldrake’s *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures* (2020). Sheldrake’s main focus are fungi; however, he highlights how fungi live in an intermingled and inseparable relationship with all beings – including humans. These authors typically have a conscious online activity, interviews, podcasts, and TED talks, calling attention with their work to the responsibility (plant) science bears in raising awareness about human–nonhuman relationships in the general public.

Thirdly, in parallel with the above two phenomena, a new, prolific subfield of ecocriticism emerged that focuses on the vegetal: critical plant studies. Critical plant studies are not only interdisciplinary in the way that they form a convergence of cultural studies and plant science but they also manage to incorporate the general public oriented attitude of the above mentioned authors. This field focuses on the role of plants within the ecosystem, their individual life both as physically embodied and personified beings, and our relationships to them on various levels. Recent works of plant philosophy are particularly eager at including vegetal life

in the ethical discourse and highlighting humans' inter-relatedness with plant persons (Matthew Hall: *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (2011), Michael Marder: *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), Emanuele Coccia's *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (the English translation was published in 2018)). Timothy Morton's eco-philosophy (especially *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), *Hyperobjects* (2013) and *Humankind* (2017)) also devotes attention to plants and their role within the ecosystem and their interaction with human beings.

Critical plant studies, however, also set these theories to practical use, analysing a wide scope of cultural products. With regard to fantasy literature, the analysis of works through an environmentalist approach even precedes the emergence of critical plant studies. Unsurprisingly, *The Lord of the Rings* is among the first to receive lasting attention in this respect. As trees have a special significance in Tolkien's oeuvre, a still growing number of articles reflect on that (Claudia Riiff Finseth: "Tolkien's Trees" (1997), Cynthia M. Cohen "The Unique Representation of Trees in *The Lord of the Rings*" (2009)). In 2006, an essay collection, edited by Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans and titled *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*, was also devoted to the environmentalist analysis of Tolkien's work. Walter S. Judd and Graham A. Judd pay specific attention to plants in Tolkien's work in their 2017 book, *Flora of Middle-Earth: Plants of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium*.

As theoretical works in critical plant studies flourished, the 2010s brought a boom in books centred on the plant-conscious analysis of fantastic media. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's 2006 essay collection *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* relies on monster theory to describe human relationships with the monstrous vegetal Other. Starting out from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's views on teratology (see Cohen 1996), this volume makes essential statements for the understanding of vegetal Otherness. Elizabeth Parker in her *The Forest and the Eco-Gothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020) follows in similar lines and admits early on that her main concern is the dark side of nature: "The landscape is commonly read as a *binary* space – as either 'good' or 'bad'. When it is 'good', it is remedial setting of wonder and enchantment; when it is 'bad', it is a dangerous and terrifying wilderness. It is with the forest's fearsome associations that this book is concerned." (Parker 2020, 1). Another recent publication, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019) by Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari, adopts a fairly wide scope of texts starting from the works of Guy de La Brosse and Cyrano de Bergerac and reaching to contemporary speculative fiction and film. Keeping in with the trends, this book also devotes a chapter to plant horror, focused on the two versions of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

(directed by Don Siegel in 1956 and Philip Kaufman in 1978), two movies that, up to this date, have received more than their fair share of attention within critical plant studies. Similar to the previous two books, Meeker and Szabari's volume does not include mythic fantasy among its analyses. Even though two works by Ursula K. Le Guin are discussed ("Vaster than Empires and More Slow" [1971], *The Word for World is Forest* [1972]), both texts would qualify as science fiction with regard to their methods and rhetoric.

Considering the current popularity of dystopic climate fiction, it is no wonder that narratives picturing the fearful side of nature remain in the limelight of critical attention. This dissertation, however, adopts a different attitude and focuses on texts that reveal our interdependence with the ecosystem and portrays worlds that are in line with the original meaning of the Greek word eco- (oikos) and show us that nature is first and foremost our *home*. By this, however, I do not intend to say that I omit the unheimlich qualities of nature as these are a key feature in almost all texts that focus on woodlands. Instead, I am interested in the ways how things that appear to be uncanny or even threatening at first glance for the human eye might become strangely familiar and at times even homely at a closer look and in a deeper understanding.

The Lord of the Rings could be seen as a common example of fantasy that (mostly) presents the natural world in homely terms. In fact, it is quite an obvious example of environmentalism, as Tolkien maintains the dichotomy of pro-nature elves facing the industrialization and deforestation lead by evil lords. Discussion of environmental issues has been present in mythic fantasy ever since, yet recent, non-dystopic fiction generally adopts much subtler ways and frequently manages to blur the binary opposition of nature and culture. Some recent examples that make use of the magic wood topos include Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* (2015), Emily Tesh's *The Greenhollow Duology* (*Silver in the Wood* [2019], *Drowned Country* [2020]). Patrick Ness' *The Monster Calls* [2011] also portrays a tree-monster. Further interesting manipulations of tree imagery are found in Kaaron Warren's *Walking the Tree* (2010) in which protagonists make a coming-of-age journey around a giant world tree, and Thoraiya Dyer's *The Titan's Forest* trilogy (*Crossroads of Canopy* [2017], *Echoes of Understorey* [2018], *Tides of Titans* [2019]) that pictures a world whose human inhabitants live in the canopy of an enormous woodland. There is also a World Fantasy Award winner anthology centred around the magic wood topos, entitled *The Green Man: Tales of the Mythic Forest* (2002) edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling. It includes short stories by such established mythic fantasy authors as Charles de Lint, Patricia A. McKillip, Delia Sherman and Jane Yolen. Plant conscious analysis of such fiction has been sporadic and occasional. For

instance, the 2022 essay collection, *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* edited by Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guanio-Uluru features some analyses of mythic fantasy texts, but the book's scope is limited to literature for young readers.

This renewed interest in plant life that filtered down from the natural sciences to the humanities and to the general public has the ability to connect these areas in ways never seen before. The process, however, has only just begun, and it naturally has its own blind spots. One of these is the hidden potential of mythic fantasy to speak for a more eco- and plant-conscious understanding of our world and do so in a way that does not threaten us with the pending doom lurking in dystopic literature. In order to unveil this gloomy territory, the dissertation aims to combine the theories of fantasy with critical plant studies to create a set of strategies for the analysis of mythic fantasy. To demonstrate the application of these strategies, the dissertation relies on Robert Holdstock's *Mythago* novels, a notable example of modern mythic fantasy.

1.3 Introduction to Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Cycle*

Robert Paul Holdstock (1948–2009) was a British fantasy author best-known for his 1984 novel *Mythago Wood* that was followed by multiple novels set in the same mysterious woodland: *Lavondyss* (1988), *The Hollowing* (1993), *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn* (1997). These four novels make up the original *Mythago Cycle*.² Holdstock's webpage lists two more volumes as being part of the Cycle. *The Bone Forest* (1991) is a short story collection that contains the woodland realm and some of the characters that appear in *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*. Another novel, *Avilion* (2009), published in the year of Holdstock's death, is also added to the Cycle, as this novel is the closest to being a direct sequel to the 1984 novel. Some publishers also regard *Merlin's Wood* (1994) as a seventh *Mythago* book. Despite the fact that this novel is set in a French woodland called Broceliande, the concept of this ghostly realm is somewhat similar to the one pictured in the other novels.

"*Mythago Wood*" was first published as a novelette in the September 1981 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. By that time, the then 33-year-old Holdstock had already published four novels. The first two, *Eye Among the Blind* (1976) and *Earthwind* (1977), would qualify as traditional science fiction stories, though as Paul Kincaid observes, "they both displayed an interest in time and in the mysteries of the past" (Kincaid 2022, 2). These were followed by the horror novel *Necromancer* (1978), which is concerned with the

² Even though the same characters keep reappearing, the *Mythago Cycle* is not a series in the original sense, as the events of the books are not shown in a linear order. Even the author's web page (<https://robertholdstock.com/>) refers to the novels as a "cycle".

deep past and the secrets of an ancient people. Holdstock's fourth book, *Where Time Winds Blow* (1981) was published just a few months short of the novelette, "Mythago Wood". This is yet another science fiction novel, however, as Paul Kincaid highlights, the close connection between the two 1981 texts could be hardly denied: "The two works together are a consummation of all the ideas about the variability of time and the immediacy of the past that he had been tentatively exploring in his fiction to that date." (Kincaid 2022, 2–3). Possibly, the fact that the novelette was a sort of crystallization of the topics Holdstock had long worked on and deeply cared about contributed to the attention the novelette immediately received. "Mythago Wood" won the BSFA Award and was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award. Later on, the novel version of the story with the same title was published in 1984, and won the World Fantasy Award the next year, earning Holdstock worldwide critical acclaim.

Mythago Wood starts out from the common scenario of a white male scientist conquering an unknown land – only to be conquered himself by the mysterious power of Ryhope Wood. The setting is post-WW2 rural England, and the scientist, George Huxley, originally trained in the field of (Jungian) psychology becomes fascinated and then overwhelmed by a local woodland that appears to be a regular, small patch of trees from the outside but proves to be an immense, primeval forest from within. In addition to its unnatural spatial qualities, Ryhope Wood has another extraordinary skill: the trees are able to enter the human mind and gradually turn its unconscious content into their own material. Interestingly, the wood focuses on narratives stored in the human mind. Most of these are ancient plotlines one might justly label as belonging to the Jungian collective unconscious, yet they are ever so often flavoured with details from the individual unconscious, as newer and newer victims of Ryhope are forced to re-enact the ancient tales. One may rightly assume that following from this, a Jungian analytic approach would be the most obvious choice to understand the *Mythago Cycle*. Opting for a paved road, however, brings certain limitations. Relying too closely on the archetypes of the collective unconscious, the analyst can easily get stuck in finding the proper labels while missing the bigger picture. In his Holdstock monograph, even Paul Kincaid admits that *Mythago Wood* "is not a wholeheartedly Jungian work" (Kincaid 2022 58) and points out that mythagos actually become "radically different as they reiterate over time" (Kincaid 2022, 59). At a closer look, mythagos are never pure manifestations of the collective unconscious but their image is always heavily influenced by the personal unconscious of the specific human whose mind has been used by the trees in the mythago's creation. In addition to this, a reliance on a Jungian analytic approach would also have to assume that the creation process of an individual, modern author is similar to that of an oral tradition of many generations. Thus, a

strict application of the Jungian terminology would simply strip the novels' imagery from their unique features to uncover universal patterns – that are traceable in almost any story. No wonder Brian Attebery somewhat cynically calls the psychoanalytic approach “the Freudian and Jungian analytical mills” (Attebery 2014, 125). From an ecocritical perspective we may pose another reserve against a Jungian analysis: a specific attention to the collective unconscious would keep the analyst's focus on the human mind and push the trees of Ryhope in the background as mere catalysts of the process. This dissertation, however, intends to formulate a different question: What if we take a closer look at the very beings through which the human characters are able to meet figures from their collective (and personal) unconscious?

In Ryhope, through the trees' penetration into the human, the wood materializes characters and even settings – thus maintaining and re-generating the woodland itself. Whilst the first novel remains rather secretive about the exact details of this process, in Holdstock's last novel, *Avilion*, Jack Huxley, George Huxley's grandson, who is himself half-made of woodland material, blatantly claims about Ryhope: “And it feeds on people. On their unconscious minds, as I understand it.” (Holdstock 2010, 62).

In an online article, written for the 25th anniversary of *Mythago Wood*, Holdstock highlights how his vision was shaped by the eerie tales his grandfather used to tell him (Holdstock 2009b). In the same article, Holdstock admits that he was urged early on to write a sequel to *Mythago Wood*. He resisted, but then came to the realisation that “Ryhope Wood itself suggested stories, journeys, and – yes – adventures that could embrace its strange complexities of not just space and time, but the ‘meeting place of all ages’” (Holdstock 2009b). Eventually, stories from Ryhope became Holdstock's lifetime devotion, and even in his non-Mythago texts, such as the three books of the *Merlin Codex* (*Celtika* [2001], *The Iron Grail* [2002] and *The Broken Kings* [2007]), Holdstock's fascination with ancient stories is obvious. And if his untimely death in 2009 had not prevented him, Holdstock would probably have brought fantasy readers on another visit to Ryhope Wood.

The blunt of the critical acclaim Holdstock received was especially for that: the way he combined and reinvented ancient narratives was back then unparalleled in fantasy fiction. By the time Holdstock appeared on the literary landscape in the early 1980s, fantasy was already heavily burdened with the sell-proof formula that emerged in Tolkien's wake. Even Brian Attebery observes that Tolkien has become an inescapable “mental template” for readers in English and “will be until someone else achieves equal recognition with an alternative conception” (Attebery 1992, 14). Within the conditions of the present-day book market this is fairly unlikely to happen. Moreover, it is evident that in all texts of the *Mythago Cycle*

Holdstock relied on largely similar material as Tolkien did (Celtic myths with specific focus on Arthurian legends), yet he set these to an entirely different purpose in an innovative way. Holdstock undermined some major facets of heroic fantasy: he significantly revised the hero concept itself, and in the *Mythago Cycle* there is no ‘thinning of the land’, as this wood is itself alive, not deteriorating, and definitely capable of saving and sustaining itself. Moreover, despite the constant presence of ancient narratives, all Mythago novels are set in the 20th century, and many of its characters have to bear the consequences of both historical and individual traumas of that age. Even when the protagonists enter the wooden realm, they are not facing the “fantastic neomedievalism” of formula fiction, this selectively positive, fictitious image of the Middle Ages that so often serves as a background in heroic fantasy.³ Stories found in Ryhope Wood extend back to the ice age, and once you enter the wooden realm, time might get reversed by thousands of years in the matter of minutes.

Despite the immediate critical acclaim *Mythago Wood* received, Holdstock remained a somewhat marginalised author within speculative fiction communities. Up until this year (2023), only two volumes appeared that are entirely devoted to his works. Not long after Holdstock’s death, a single essay collection was released, entitled *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction* (2011) and edited by Donald E. Morse and Kálmán Matolcsy. This volume contains eleven articles that cover Holdstock’s work from his early science fiction novels through the *Mythago Cycle* to the *Merlin Codex*, and thus it attempts to draw a comprehensive picture despite the heterogeneity of authors and critical approaches. More than a decade later, Palgrave Macmillan released the first monograph on Holdstock by Paul Kincaid: *Robert Holdstock’s Mythago Wood: A Critical Companion* (2022). As the title suggests, this thin booklet focuses almost exclusively on the first novel, *Mythago Wood* (1984). Kincaid remains on the narrow, yet well-trodden path of the early critics of Holdstock and focuses on how *Mythago Wood* adds to our perception of stories in general. In his view, the central theme of *Mythago Wood* is the never-ending transformation of narratives that constitute our life: “it is not just what happens within the story, it is what happens to the story itself” (Kincaid 2022, 5). This almost exclusive focus on the narrative and its modifications pertains throughout the volume, while Kincaid handles themes of war (on both personal and family

³ Kim Selling argues that what he terms as “fantastic neomedievalism” does not attempt to represent the real medieval world. Instead, it provides a convenient background, which is the exact right percentage of familiarity and otherness, producing a very selective and mostly positive image of the Middle Ages. However, as Selling points out, this relatively easy and well-known background might serve a specific purpose: “This Romantic construction of the Middle Ages as iconic ‘Other’ is one of the lasting myths of modernity, which has retained its deep symbolic and cultural value as a medium for social critique.” (Selling 2004).

level) and analyses how Holdstock weaves an intricate time structure into the novel. Nevertheless, it is surprising how little Kincaid's analysis is informed by theories of the fantastic. Despite the fact that he argues early on that in *Mythago Wood* “[i]t was the use of fantasy that made this a radically different and profoundly influential work” (Kincaid 2022, 1), he fails to contextualise it within the framework of modern fantasy texts. One might even suspect a slight contempt for fantasy literature on the author's part, when he claims that *Mythago Wood* “demonstrated that fantasy was a form that could be serious, challenging, and original” (Kincaid 2022, 70) yet fails to list any other writers of a similar achievement. In Kincaid's view, the fantastic is but an addition to the novel that somehow makes it “radically different and profoundly influential” (Kincaid 2022, 1). Similarly, in his perception, Ryhope Wood is but an appropriate background for the struggles of mythic figures and it exists “for no other reason than war” (Kincaid 2022, 25).

Critical works on fantasy literature in the 1990s and 2000s either omit Holdstock entirely or only include him in lists with similar fantasy authors. Interestingly, however, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), edited by John Clute and John Grant, contains a decent amount of information on Holdstock and his work – but only for the devoted reader who is prepared to meticulously check all the entries that mention him. Thus one might learn about the affinity group Holdstock belonged to, the multiple pseudonyms he used, as well as information on the Mythago texts under entries such as CELTIC FANTASY, GREEN MAN, IMAGINARY LANDS, JUNGIAN PSYCHOLOGY, MASKS and METAMORPHOSIS. The word MYTHAGO has a separate entry, offering some details about Holdstockian fantasy. As opposed to this, Richard Mathews' volume, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (2002) mentions Holdstock only in lists of authors, and offhandedly describes *Mythago Wood* as “a love story that takes place after World War II in a haunted-forest setting” (Mathews 2002, 188). Farah Mendlesohn made a more significant addition to the reception of the *Mythago Cycle* in her 2008 book, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Mendlesohn creates a taxonomy of fantasy based on the way the fantastic appears within texts and identifies the Mythago novels as impressive examples of *intrusion fantasy* (for a detailed description of Mendlesohnian taxonomy see Chapter 2). Importantly, Mendlesohn is the first to claim that in *Mythago Wood*, Holdstock manages to reverse the formulaic portal fantasy scenario: in this novel, the protagonist is unable to retain the upper hand over the otherworld, instead it gradually becomes clear that “all the power is with the wood” (Mendlesohn 2008, 154). In *Stories about Stories* (2014), Brian Attebery makes two short assertions about Holdstock's fiction that might serve as a starting point for later critical consideration. Firstly, he argues that Holdstock is an author who plays “overtly with thresholds

and contrasting realities” (Attebery 2014, 115). Secondly, he identifies *Mythago Wood* as a work of metafantasy (Attebery 2014, 198).

Up until now, the *Mythago Cycle* has scarcely found its way into eco-critical discourse. There appears an occasional journal article on Holdstock, and some of these include observations about the woodland itself. For instance, Marek Oziewicz’s 2008 article “Profusion Sublime and Fantastic: Robert Holdstock’s ‘Mythago Wood’” is a thought-provoking addition to the reception of the novel, yet as the sublime itself is very much a human and cultural construct, its analysis is consequently anthropocentric. From an eco-critical perspective, Elizabeth Parker’s observations are more up to the point. In *The Forest and the EcoGothic* (2020) she devotes three and a half pages to the brief analysis of *Mythago Wood*, focusing on the forest as a space of the monstrous. Even though Parker mentions that monsters within Ryhope are products of “human interaction with this environment” (Parker 2020, 151), she avoids making assertions about the biological and bodily reality of the plant life that make up this uncanny ecosystem, and instead, she settles for claiming that the forest was cast by Holdstock “as a setting for the human unconscious” (Parker 2020, 151).

When I take on the task of creating a more eco- and plant-conscious understanding of the *Mythago Cycle*, I do not intend to disregard any of the critical effort put into the analysis of Holdstock’s fiction. All the listed scholarly work are significant contributions to the identification and contextualization of the Mythago novels within modern fantasy literature. Neither do I wish to suggest in any way that Robert Holdstock had a specific eco-conscious intention in writing these novels – an author’s intent is an ephemeral creature that at times eludes (or surprises) even the author himself, but it definitely eludes critics and scholars. What I do wish to show, however, is that mythic fantasy has an inherent potential for more ecocentric forms of reading and understanding. Hence, the dissertation’s focus is limited to texts belonging to the *Mythago Cycle*, and despite applying information from Holdstock’s entire career, it cannot undertake to draw a full picture of his life and fiction.

1.4 Structure of the Dissertation

In accordance with the above, the dissertation is divided into two main parts. Part I is entitled “The Plant-Visibility Strategies,” and its major objective is to provide a set of strategies through the combination of fantasy theory and critical plant studies for a more eco- and plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy texts. This part is composed of two chapters. Chapter 2, “Ways of Understanding Fantasy” consists of two larger sections. The first one provides an overview of what attempts have been made to define the rather elusive group of texts we call

modern fantasy. The dissertation pays special attention to how the application of a certain term may modify our perception of these narratives, and this way I intend to identify the optimal terminology for readings that enhance plant visibility. The second half of Chapter 2 focuses on fantasy literature's potential in changing the reader's perspective of the real world. It reveals how fantasy fiction's devotion to story, its consistent internal rules, its imaginative ways of depicting the impossible and its inherently subversive nature contribute to more eco- and plant-conscious readings. The next chapter in Part I, Chapter 3, "The Invisible Plant Kingdom," provides a summary of the most recent achievements in critical plant studies, and then it moves on to the combination of this knowledge and methodology with the major assumptions of the previous chapter. Chapter 3 adopts a hope-oriented approach, and even as it provides a number of subchapters focusing on the various aspects plants might be at a disadvantage, it simultaneously offers a way out through a more thorough and thought-provoking way of reading mythic fantasy texts. The topics include: the roots of our disconnection from the plant kingdom, the nature-culture divide and its consequences for the vegetal, and finally, the anthropocentric prejudice against plants. The conclusion of the chapter summarises the plant-visibility strategies, that is set to use in Part II of the dissertation.

This second part mainly relies on the four novels of the original *Mythago Cycle* as primary sources: *Mythago Wood* (1984), *Lavondyss* (1988), *The Hollowing* (1993) and *Gates of Ivory, Gates of Horn* (1997). Occasionally, examples are drawn from Holdstock's other three volumes that are related to the cycle: *The Bone Forest* (1991), *Merlin's Wood* (1994) and *Avilion* (2009). Part II starts with the brief summaries of these primary texts. The subsequent chapters from 4 to 9 are devoted to the textual analyses. In each of these chapters, a single keyword is selected that highlights one special aspect of plant-human relationships, and that aspect is scrutinized through examples from the novels. The first cluster of the analyses is entitled "Encounters of the Vegetal Kind" and it includes chapters "Identity," "Body," and "Coming of Age," respectively. The second cluster is called "Dimensions," and it consists of the following chapters: "Time," "Space," and "Myth."

Chapter 4 focuses on plant identity and how it differs from and yet interferes and merges with human identity in Holdstock's mythic fantasy. This chapter observes how the human and the nonhuman are depicted in the Mythago novels, and in what ways the Otherness of the vegetal is made obvious. The chapter discusses in detail how Holdstock handles the question of vegetal agency, starting out from the hypothesis that the wood is given an agential role without the application of anthropomorphism, and the trees remain "treelike" except for their supernatural ability to reach into the human mind.

Chapter 5 deals with the questions of the body. The Mythago novels uncover the ultimate inter-relatedness of the human and the nonhuman – this, however, does not only refer to the general interaction with the natural world, but also to a continuous, physical compenetration and bodily hybridity. This chapter intends to identify the tools mythic fantasy uses to make convincing statements about our very real interconnectedness with the vegetal. To do so, the analysis relies on the analytic toolkit of plant horror and teratology, and interrogates how the apparent deathlessness of the vegetal other influences our relationship with plants.

Chapter 6, entitled “Coming of Age” sets the human external and internal growth process in parallel with the growth of the vegetal, highlighting the fact that nature is not a static entity but an event to which all beings belong. The chapter focuses on two teenage protagonists: Tallis (*Lavondyss*) and Alex (*The Hollowing*). One section deals with how young people interact with Ryhope Wood differently and how communication transforms them as a consequence. Another section is centred on Tallis and the female experience of the woodland. Focusing on the characteristics of the female coming of age, this part casts light on women’s role within fantasy and within the biosphere, showing how their unique perspective might contribute to a more ecocentric future.

Chapter 7 opens the second cluster of textual analyses, entitled “Dimensions”. It focuses on the first of these dimensions, “Time”. The argumentation revolves around the differences of human time and plant time, and how this matter of scales causes problems in the mutual understanding of beings. Time is also a crucial concept in the climate crisis, and this chapter intends to reveal that if mythic fantasy is used as a platform for understanding the different timescales of different beings we can benefit from this knowledge in our everyday challenges.

Chapter 8 focuses on the intricate spatial structure of Ryhope Wood. In place of classic fantasy’s tradition of notoriously mapping secondary worlds, Holdstock presents a world of unmappable vegetation that is literally intertwined with the jetsam of the human mind. This chapter dwells on how the ‘mythagoscapes’ are created, and how the interaction between the woodland and the human mind results in the maintenance of this supernatural ecosystem – and what conclusions we may draw from this for our own environment. It argues that mythic fantasy tosses us towards the recognition that mapping/colonizing/anthropomorphizing the nonhuman world is not the road to mutuality.

Chapter 9 is devoted to myth, and it observes what consequences the classic hero myth brings for our relationship with the natural world – and how Holdstock gives a twist to it in his Mythago novels. This chapter starts out from the hypothesis that the hero myth itself is inherently ecocidal, as it persists on binary oppositions and on the eventual triumph of the

human hero instead of the mutual cooperation that keeps the ecosystem in its dynamic vitality. The chapter demonstrates that relying on the toolkit of modern fantasy, Holdstock manages to subvert the hero narrative in a unique way.

Through these textual analyses, the dissertation intends to prove that despite their obvious focus on human characters and their internal worlds, the *Mythago Cycle* manages to include the vegetal with an agential role.

Part I: The Plant-Visibility Strategies

2. Ways of Understanding Fantasy

2.1 Terminology

2.1.1 *The Definition of Fantasy*

Modern fantasy literature is such a heterogeneous group of texts that it is impossible to label with a single, fixed definition. In this section, the dissertation provides an overview of 20th and 21st century attempts at defining fantasy, measures them within an eco-critical context, and selects the most fitting ones for a set of plant-visibility strategies. For the purposes of the present work, I limit the concept of fantasy to written texts and only occasional references will be made to metaverses and other manifestations of fantastic media that belong to the same “commercial industry.”⁴ Modern fantasy started out from and still relies on written texts, hence in this dissertation my focus remains on fantasy’s literary manifestations.

Generally, there are two ways of looking at fantasy: one is historical and inclusive, looking back on ancient and medieval texts as early manifestations of fantasy; the other focuses on modern fantasy and identifies its starting point in the second half of the 19th century. The definition hinges on the question whether we define fantasy as texts that *contain* the impossible or texts that *use* the impossible in a certain way for a certain purpose. As Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James observe in their introduction to *A Short History of Fantasy*: “The most obvious construction of fantasy in literature and art is the presence of the impossible and the unexplainable” (Mendlesohn 2012, 3). In my view, seeing ancient and medieval texts as fantasy is problematic on many levels. Firstly, for the audience of those times (or rather listeners as oral literature was more widespread than literacy), the marvellous in the tales had a place within their version of consensus reality. Before the Enlightenment, the *hic sunt dracones* sign was a significant and real warning for many. Secondly, authorship was an entirely different matter in the old days. For instance, in the case of *Beowulf*, which to our modern eyes could definitely qualify as a fantasy text, authorship is unidentifiable. Moreover, what we define as modern fantasy is overridden by the methods and techniques of late Romanticism, modernist, and postmodernist fiction, and in this sense they form an integral part of modern literature. *Taproot text* (see Clute and Grant 1997, 921–922) is a convenient term as it provides a middle way between these two approaches inasmuch as it acknowledges that works like *The Epic of*

⁴ Kim Selling even ventures to say that modern fantasy is not only a commercial industry (which it obviously is) but also “a kind of sub-cultural community” (Selling 2004).

Gilgamesh, *Beowulf*, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* are indeed precursors to modern fantasy that could not be ignored yet they fall into a different category in many respects. For the eco-critical purposes of the dissertation, some of these ancient and medieval works are of special significance, as they contain important information about how our attitude towards nature was formed during the ages.

Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James make the following observation about how modern fantasy differs from taproot texts: “Fantasy and not realism has been a normal mode for much of the history of Western fiction (and art). Arguably, however, fantasy *as a genre* only emerges in response (and contemporaneous to) the emergence of mimesis (or realism) *as a genre*: only once there is a notion of intentional realism, so the argument goes, can there be a notion of intentional fantasy.” (Mendlesohn and James 2012, 7). This intentional usage of the impossible began in the second half of the 19th century. In English literature, most authors identify George MacDonald as an initiator of modern English fantasy.

Nevertheless, the definition of fantasy only came into focus in the 20th century. If indeed fantasy emerged as a reaction to the dominance of mimetic tradition, it had to define itself against it and highlight that non-mimetic literature has merits comparable to hegemonic realism. This apologetic attitude pertained throughout the century and even though it has mostly subsided in the English language academic sphere, it still persists in some reader and scholarly communities.

J.R.R. Tolkien’s 1939 lecture at the University of St Andrews serves as a starting point for the definition of modern fantasy. First published in an essay form in 1947, this text contains the theoretical basis for Tolkien’s fiction, and it is among the first to argue for the acceptance of the fairy-story as a legitimate literary genre. For my present considerations, three of Tolkien’s arguments are of special importance. Firstly, he identifies the story-maker as a *sub-creator* of a secondary world (Tolkien 2008, 12). The author as sub-creator is able to re-arrange elements of our primary world in order to reshape the familiar into something new or to present the familiar from a new angle. If we measure this claim through eco-conscious lenses, it already entails the possibility of creating a different world where nature has a different role than in our modern civilization. Secondly, in identifying the roles fairy-stories play in our lives, Tolkien talks about our urge to transcend our human limitations. One of his examples is to understand the language of animals (Tolkien 2008, 35). This means that fantasy already contains the urge to gain better understanding of the more-than-human ecosystem we are part of. Thirdly, Tolkien coins the term *eucatastrophe* for the common ending of fairy-stories. In his view, the best fairy-stories do not have a formulaic happy ending, instead, they are concluded in a “denial of

universal, final defeat” (Tolkien 2008, 75). The consolation of the eucatastrophe remains a common feature in contemporary mythic fantasy – and the hope it brings is of special significance in an eco-critical context.

The post-Tolkien popularity of genre fantasy led to the republishing of earlier fantastic fiction (for instance the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series [1969-1974]), and these phenomena strengthened the urge to define fantasy literature in relation to the hegemonic tradition of realistic fiction. The above mentioned apologetic attitude pertained, and even in 1984, Ann Swinfen’s thoughtful volume came with the title *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945*, yet the depth and scope of every such attempt grew in significance. By 1982 even Harold Bloom felt inclined to make his input into the definition of fantasy: “Fantasy is a literary sub-genre, by which I do not mean to deprecate it, but rather to state this formula: what is good in fantasy is romance, just as anything good in verse is poetry.” (Bloom 2004, 237). Other definitions of the time tend to be similarly prejudiced and exclusive. In 1970, Tzvetan Todorov claims that the fantastic exists only in uncertainties consciously generated by the author. “Once we choose one answer or the other,” Todorov argues, “we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” (Todorov 2004, 136). This explaining away of the fantastic so that fantasy literature may fit the hegemony of the mimetic approach persists well into the 20th century. Even Kathryn Hume who formulates one of the most inclusive definitions of fantasy in her 1984 volume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, seems to fall in to this trap. Hume argues that fantasy and mimesis are equivalent impulses that are simultaneously at play in every literary text. In her view, “[f]antasy is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor.” (Hume 2014, 21). Even though *Fantasy and Mimesis* serves as an important source for later scholars to explain the complex interaction of reality and imagination in fantasy fiction, by claiming that fantasy is an omnipresent impulse, Hume practically renders it invisible. She creates a meticulous taxonomy based on the ways the fantastic and the mimetic are intertwined in literature, yet she takes her examples almost exclusively from established literary fiction and she shows a fairly obvious contempt for Tolkien’s work.⁵

⁵ Hume quite directly accuses Tolkien of regressing into a bypassed phase of literature: “he is a throwback to an earlier stage of mythic thinking” (Hume 2014, 47). Believing in the myth of eternal progress that extends to literature, Hume practically renders most mythic fantasy texts regressive and hence unworthy of scholarly attention.

In addition to its relation to the realistic tradition, when we intend to create a definition for fantasy, we should also consider the genre's own plasticity. As Brian Attebery recently argued, the "nature of fantasy literature keeps changing" (Attebery 2022, 1), and hence he deems it necessary to polish his definitions whenever necessary and "define fantasy a little differently every few years (Attebery 2022, 45).⁶ Each of Attebery's definitions tends toward the inclusive side, but unlike Hume, he manages to keep his focus on the literature of the impossible. For the purposes of the plant-visibility strategies, the dissertation relies mostly on Attebery's 1992 definition of fantasy. This definition identifies two major realisations of fantasy, but instead of placing these in binary opposition to each other, Attebery describes them as the opposite ends of a wide spectrum: "Fantasy is, indeed, both formula and mode: in one incarnation a mass-produced supplier of wish fulfilment, and in another a praise- and prize-worthy means of investigating the way we use fictions to construct reality itself." (Attebery 1992, 1). Attebery thus acknowledges that formula is in fact an integral part of fantasy, but authors are free to depart from it and introduce new topics and ways of storytelling.⁷ Mode for Attebery is practically the other side of the coin, the way the impossible is set to use in fantasy. He argues that a "mode is thus a stance, a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it." (Attebery 1992, 2). In his view, the fantastic mode "is a vast subject, taking in all literary manifestations of the imagination's ability to soar above the merely possible" (Attebery 1992, 2).

This sounds wide enough especially if we consider the fact that Attebery seems to confirm Hume's view when he claims that "there are no purely mimetic or fantastic works of fiction" but the two always coexist in the same text (Attebery 1992, 3). For Attebery, however, this does not mean the expansion of his scope to all literature. He argues later on, that genres are *fuzzy sets*, "meaning that they are defined not by boundaries but by a center" (Attebery 1992, 12). A fuzzy set is a practical term, as it reflects that there are no clear boundaries between genres, yet there are certain texts that an overwhelming majority of readers identifies as belonging to a certain genre. Attebery argues that *The Lord of the Rings* is one of these texts –

⁶ A fairly recent contribution to the topic is Patrick Moran's *The Canons of Fantasy* (2019), in which he observes that the definition of fantasy is the responsibility of both readers and the professional community, from which he draws the conclusion that "[t]he definition of fantasy is a work in progress." (Moran 2019, 11).

⁷ The question whether formulaic storytelling should be included among the criteria for fantasy fiction is still up for debate, but most scholars agree that even though mass-produced fantasy relies on formulas for its market success, fantasy as a mode offers intricate ways to departure from this redundant form of storytelling. In Gary K. Wolfe's view, for instance, the recent evolution of modern fantasy means that "authors began to discover that the Tolkien quest formula was but one expression of the genre's potential, and not a totalizing definition of it" and that in fact, "to a great extent the dialectic of the relevant genre seemed to define itself in recapitulation of, or reaction against, the world-views of these central figures" (Wolfe 2011, 24).

it even serves as a “mental template” for English readers of fantasy (Attebery 1992, 14). The fuzzy set could prove a useful concept when we trace the appearance of certain topics and themes in genre fiction. The magic wood topos has spread over the fantastic genres and if we wish to find an ecocentric understanding of it, limiting our attention through strict genre boundaries is an unnecessary hindrance.

Attebery’s most recent (2022) definition of fantasy roughly summarizes all of the above observations: “Fantasy is a form of fiction that evolved in response to realism, using such novelistic techniques as represented thought, detailed social settings, and manipulation of time and point of view to revisit pre-rationalist world views and traditional motifs and storylines.” (Attebery 2022, 45). If we recognise that pre-rationalist also indicates pre-industrialist and pre-capitalist world views, one might easily come to the realisation that fantasy is indeed a potential platform for ecocentric thought. Less than a year after Attebery published his most recent definition, fantasy literature is becoming more diversified – and also more commodified – than ever before. Its expansion into all kinds of media is irreversible, which requires the regular revision of both the terminology and the analytic toolkit of understanding fantasy.

In grasping this vast array of narratives, *speculative fiction* serves as a handy umbrella term. Gaining popularity in recent studies of the fantastic, *speculative fiction* offers multiple practical benefits. As Marek Oziewicz argues, speculative fiction is “a fuzzy set of cultural production” and as such, it is a “super category that houses all non-mimetic genres” (Oziewicz 2017). But *speculative fiction* is more than that, Oziewicz goes on, as it could be perceived as a cultural field: “a domain of activity defined by its own field-specific rules of functioning, agents, and institutions” (Oziewicz 2017). Speculative fiction is thus relieved of the burden of defining itself against the realistic tradition, and being an inclusive and flexible concept it is a safe term “free from the legacy of genre wars and hostile taxonomies (Oziewicz 2017). Following in the lines of Brian Attebery, Oziewicz argues that “speculative fiction is a *mode* of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real” (Oziewicz 2017, emphasis mine). Further benefits of the term make it readily fit for the ecocentric considerations of this dissertation. On the one hand, “the term’s wide scope is especially welcoming to texts from the margins” (Oziewicz 2017) – and in our present cultural context narratives that consciously de-centre the human or extend agency to the more-than-human world are considered marginal. On the other hand, speculative fiction entails the acknowledgement that these narratives do not fall victim to the realist fallacy, but consciously challenge consensus reality in a “politically scrappy, cognitively empowering, and affectively stimulating”

(Oziewicz 2017) way. As current consensus reality is still extensively human-centred, subverting it via a speculative toolkit can potentially be an eco-conscious act.

Fantasy as genre and mode is as vast as a woodland and has its own intricate and unique ecosystem. On the whole, the plant-visibility strategies rely on the below basic standards for the definition of fantasy:

1. For critical purposes, it is justifiable to use an umbrella term that is inclusive and place fantasy beyond the genre wars and the categorization fetish of fan communities. Speculative fiction is a fitting term for this purpose – but it should be born in mind that it is comprised of various subcategories. Each subcategory is a fuzzy set in itself that intermingles with others.
2. As initial criteria, we should include the presence of the impossible. For critical purposes, however, fantasy is better seen as a mode of writing fiction, a summary of methods and perspectives that are set to use in texts. The dissertation intends to reveal how these methods might be used for a more eco- and plant centric depiction of the world.

2.1.2 Mythic Fantasy

Broad and inclusive terms are useful on a general level, the dissertation's scope, however, is limited to a certain pool of fantasy texts that has a high potential for the representation of the vegetal Other. When I use the term mythic fantasy, I understand it as a category that relies on a specific group of taproot texts – but not only that: mythic fantasy also uses this material innovatively to construct new meaning. Mythic fantasy as a term refers both to its content and its methodology. Texts that belong to this group rely extensively on mythic sources, including the pantheons of classic mythology, as well as elements from local folklore and legends. In the innovative realisations of mythic fantasy this source material is not a mere background (as medievalism very often is in formulaic fantasy), but myths are used, combined and revised in the narrative. Mythic fantasy owes a lot to Tolkien in its attitude to the mythic material it applies. This, however, does not mean the imitation of Tolkien, but the innovative way of using and recombining sources from a great variety of mythic origin.

Mythic fantasy, however, has been sparingly used as a category marker in the scholarly discussion of fantasy fiction. If myths are referred to at all via a subcategory, the term mythopoeic fantasy is used. “Mythopoeic/mythopoeia” receives the following definition in Gary K. Wolfe's *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy*: “Conscious artistic fabrication of myths or myth systems, sometimes regards as an attempt to ‘remythologize’ experience as a reaction to perceived dehumanizing forces. Among fantasy narratives, JRRT's *The Silmarillion* is a good example.” (Wolfe 1986, 76). Writing in 1986, Wolfe focuses mostly

on the Tolkienian tradition of mythmaking, yet after 2000 and up to this day, fantasy that relies on myth and mythology as source material has become much more diverse in both methodology and the scope of myths it uses. The Mythopoeic Award (founded in 1971) uses this enigmatic description: “The Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature is given to the fantasy novel, multi-volume novel, or single-author story collection for adults published during the previous year that best exemplifies ‘the spirit of the Inklings.’” (Mythopoeic Society 2023). These criteria also link the category back to Tolkien, whose work once again becomes the centre of a fuzzy set of texts, but preserving this heritage, the award remains open to new and different ways of using mythic material. For instance, a secondary world setting is not a requirement, and in fact, some of the most memorable fantasies set in our primary world were given the award (e.g.: Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* in 1993, a holocaust novel; Terri Windling’s *The Wood Wife* in 1997, set in modern day US; or more recently, Helen Wecker’s *The Golem and the Jinni* in 2014, a late 19th century immigration novel set in the US). Robert Holdstock himself never won this award, but two of his novels were nominated: *The Hollowing* in 1995 and *Avilion* in 2010 (posthumously). Mythopoeia, however, extends beyond texts that the critical and reading community would perceive as belonging to genre fantasy. Nominated works include Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* (2016) that relies mostly on techniques of literary fiction and Madeline Miller’s *Circe* (2019) that was never marketed as belonging to the fantasy genre either.

Therefore, even though the term mythopoeia includes the description of what is actually happening in this kind of fiction, the dissertation relies on a more neutral term, *mythic fantasy*. The word *mythic* acknowledges the subgenre’s origin without taking on the burden of the Inklings’ heritage, and *fantasy* serves as a category marker denoting that these narratives are written in fantasy *mode* (in the sense Attebery described it), using the diverse methodology associated with it. The only essay collection on Holdstock’s work is also titled *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock* (2011), although the volume does not provide a specific definition for the term.

As myths are there to be applied for a wide array of literary themes, mythic fantasy is able to address almost any fields of life, and thus, as a taxonomic category it may intermingle with other categories of fantasy literature. For instance, myths might be applied in all kinds of settings ranging from faux-medieval fantasy (e.g.: Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* novels), to contemporary urban realities (e.g.: Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*). Myths also have a specific potential in an eco-critical context. Originally devised as a narrative form of making sense of the world that surrounds us, modern myths are a tool to re-negotiate this relationship within our post-Enlightenment and industrial circumstances. While myths were once meant to be the

containers of truth about the world, modern mythic fantasy is quite open about revealing its own falsity, and still challenge consensus reality in thought-provoking ways.

With regard to its eco-critical aspects, the dissertation also considers mythic fantasy's relation to what Marek Oziewicz defines as *planetarianist fantasy*. Coined in 2022, this category refers to “stories that articulate visions of hope for the biosphere” (Oziewicz 2022, 58). Oziewicz admits that planetarianist fantasy is an elusive term, and at the moment it is hard to say whether it becomes a distinct category similar to ecofiction or cli-fi (Oziewicz 2022, 64). The examples Oziewicz lists are for young readers, and similarly, on the web page ClimateLit (ClimateLit 2021), also linked to Oziewicz, there are books for children listed. The term, however, could be extended to fantasy fiction that is less overt about its ecocentric impulses, and tells stories about the re-negotiation of human–nonhuman relationships without dystopic settings. Mythic fantasy could be fine ground for such discussions. The Mythago novels do not fall into this category in many ways as they do not convey a direct ecocentric message – yet, in a way they do envision hope for the biosphere. Also, Oziewicz argues that “planetarianism can be examined as a component of narrative fiction” (Oziewicz 2022, 64) which opens up the term to be used in many ways.

2.1.3 *Speculative Reading*

Fantasy literature is thus a versatile set of various narratives that are impossible to grasp with a single and straightforward term. Similarly, the reading and understanding method of such fiction could also experiment with undermining and subverting the common analytic practices in creative and unusual ways. In a sense, the analysis of speculative fiction should be speculative itself, and speculate about the possibilities of new modes of reading and understanding. I propose that a speculative reading of this sort should be subversive on two levels:

1. on the level of rhetorics: In order to identify how these narratives create different effects and perspectives than realistic fiction does.

2. in a social/political sense: Even when set in a secondary world, the political aspects of fantasy literature are undeniable, and bearing this in mind would lead us to a better understanding of the interaction of human and nonhuman in these narratives. A speculative reading entails a readiness to venture beyond the patriarchal, capitalist and anthropocentric frames of thought.

Farah Mendlesohn's 2008 *Rhetorics of Fantasy* provides the most concise and compact inquiry into the rhetorics of modern fantasy. Guided by her genuine interest in the construction

of fantasy, Mendlesohn focuses on the various ways the impossible enters the storyworld and what position the reader is supposed to take on it according to the author's intention. Her taxonomy is quite flexible, and it clearly reflects how the realistic and imaginary elements intermingle within a single text, mimesis and fantasy depending on each other for a combined effect. It is especially this open-endedness of the four major categories of Mendlesohn that make her taxonomy a fitting part for the plant-visibility strategies. According to her, the four main types of fantasy are portal-quest, immersive, intrusion and liminal fantasy.

At its most basic description, a portal fantasy is "a fantastic world entered through a portal" (Mendlesohn 2008, xix). This type is the closest to the Tolkienian forms of modern fantasy, nevertheless, it holds interesting considerations regarding its rhetorics. The portal-quest fantasy applies a technique that invites its reader to "ride alongside the protagonist, hearing only what she hears, seeing only what she sees; thus our protagonist (even if she is not the narrator) provides us with a guided tour of the landscapes" (Mendlesohn 2008, xix). This, obviously, is the most basic way of introducing the reader into an imaginary world that hosts the impossible, and certain elements of this sort of rhetorics are present in many fantasy narratives even if their overall framework does not show a portal-quest structure. The portal quest technique is focused on the logic of transition, on moving from one world to another – and this element has special significance in the Mythago novels. Moreover, moving through a portal also entails a change of perspective: a prerequisite for the de-centring of the human and giving more way to the nonhuman. In Holdstock's fiction there are two types of portals: in a broader sense, any instance of stepping into Ryhope can be understood as a portal; and in a stricter sense, once you are within the wooden realm, you might go through the *hollowings* (the titular phenomena of Holdstock's third Mythago novel, *The Hollowing*) that are quite elusive portals through space and time that connect various eras, spaces and narratives. Transition in portal fantasy texts may also refer to mental transitions from one perspective to another: in Mythago Wood's case from anthropocentric post-war England to the arboreal realm of Ryhope, ruled by the vegetal agency of trees. The hero's journey in its traditional sense also relies heavily on transitions both physical and mental – in fact, the greatest pitfall of hero stories lies in how these transitions are handled by the author. In formulaic fantasy, the hero still quite frequently poses as the new ruler and conqueror of the magical realm he enters through the portal, and even if he is a just and rightful king, this trajectory still means that hidden lands exist to be conquered by (hu)man protagonists.

Immersive fantasy, Mendlesohn observes, "is a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world." (Mendlesohn 2008, 59). Hence, "it must assume

that the reader is as much a part of the world as are those being read about” (Mendlesohn 2008, 59). The only possible way to carry this out, according to Mendlesohn, is through an “irony of mimesis” (Mendlesohn 2008, 59). Thus, the textual depiction of the impossible, imaginary world is formulated in a way, as if it was the mimetic mode of storytelling of that world. Similar to portal fantasy, immersive fantasy could compose the overarching structure of a text, or it might appear as embedded into something else. For instance, in a portal-quest scenario, focal characters originally belonging to the secondary world can be portrayed in first person singular as being immersed in their own reality. In an eco-critical context, the rhetoric of immersive fantasy provides a chance to have an immersed view of the world of nonhuman characters. In the *Mythago* novels, creatures of the wood (*mythagos*) are immersed in the processes of the arboreal realm, and are thus aware of the fact that they are forever bound to the cyclic narratives of Ryhope. In contrast, human characters are ignorant of their own mythic origin, and keep struggling, until the vegetal power of the wood gradually claims their mind.

Intrusion fantasy is a form of fantasy in which the fantastic intrudes upon everyday reality. However, not all intrusion fantasies take place in our primary reality: the intruder may enter the secondary world and by virtue of juxtaposition it renders this imaginary world more ‘real’ (Mendlesohn 2008, 114). As Mendlesohn observes, the trajectory of intrusion fantasy is straightforward: “the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled.” (Mendlesohn 2008, 115). However different they may seem at first glance, the *Mythago* novels follow a similar story arch. Especially in the first novel, *Mythago Wood*, the introductory scenario is well-known: male protagonists intrude upon an unknown and nonhuman realm in order to conquer it. This structure, however, is gradually reversed as Ryhope Wood strikes back, and intrudes upon the intruder’s mind. The arboreal realm is not to be defeated or controlled – but to some extent it might be negotiated with. In fact, the outcomes of the four core *Mythago* novels represent the multiple outcomes of such negotiations. The intrusion fantasy as a category incorporates the dichotomy of intruder and victim, and thus it provides a framework for discussing the core binary oppositions of ecocriticism (nature–culture, human–nonhuman).

Mendlesohn’s fourth category of fantasy is the most elusive. In liminal fantasy, she argues, “the magic hovers in the corner of our eye” (Mendlesohn 2008, xiv). The reader realizes that the story is set in the primary world, where magic is supposed to be an intrusion, and yet “while the events themselves might be noteworthy and/or disruptive, their magical origins barely raise an eyebrow” (Mendlesohn 2008, xxiii). Whilst in immersive and intrusion fantasy, the reader is given clues on how she is supposed react to the impossible, in liminal fantasy, the

reader is in for a feeling of disorientation. Mendlesohn describes this experience as follows: “While liminal fantasy casualizes the fantastic within the experience of the protagonist, it estranges the reader.” (Mendlesohn 2008, xxiv). Using the most complex techniques of the four, liminal fantasy depends more closely on the reader’s knowledge of fantastic texts and techniques. The irony and tongue-in-cheek humour that often accompanies liminal fantasy, is absent from the Mythago novels, and this kind of rhetoric is only occasionally perceptible throughout the texts. In a broader context, however, this rhetoric could prove a fitting device in the set of plant-visibility strategies, as plants themselves seem to lurk in the corner of our eye, much like magic does in liminal fantasy.

2.2 Literature of Things Unimportant

When *The Lord of the Rings*’ success among readers became evident, literary criticism also began to make attempts at understanding Tolkien’s oeuvre. However, many of his early critics ended up dismissing his work, arguing that Tolkien is placing “unimportant” issues to the centre. As Brian Attebery observes, Tolkien’s fiction “showed virtually none of the signs of excellence that critics . . . looked for, and they were unprepared to see the sorts of excellence he had achieved” (Attebery 1992, 39). Realising the excellence of non-mimetic fiction is problematic in literary circles up to this day, though more and more scholars come to similar assumptions as did Ursula K. Le Guin: “knowledge and craft a writer brings to writing fantasy, the expectations and skills a reader brings to reading it, differ significantly from those they bring to realistic fiction.” (Le Guin 2007, 84). With a good deal of irony, she also asserts that “judged by the standards of fantasy, modernist realist fiction, with its narrow focus on daily details of contemporary human affairs, is suffocating and unimaginative, almost unavoidably trivial, and ominously anthropocentric.” (Le Guin 2007, 84). Kathryn Hume, who otherwise criticizes Tolkien’s work harshly, was also aware of the issue in 1984: “Thanks to the Greek philosophers, Christianity, and the Enlightenment, we have no vocabulary for analysing literary departures from reality.” (Hume 2014, 147). Since then, the situation has improved for the better, and now the general set of critical tools for the analysis of fantasy are available. However, with the ever changing scheme of fantasy literature, this methodology is to be revised and updated as much as fantasy’s definition needs regular modifications. In the following, the dissertation takes the cornerstones of fantasy analysis and examines what potentials they reveal for a more eco- and plant-conscious understanding of fantasy.

2.2.1 *Telling Stories*

Telling a story has always been central to modern fantasy. Within a literary landscape that focused on postmodern techniques for decades, fantasy teasingly insisted on depicting a series of events, frequently, but not exclusively including the interaction of two or more opposing forces. Already Tolkien would highlight in his essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” that this kind of fiction is “story-making in its primary and most potent mode” (Tolkien 2008, 61). Many early critics of fantastic literature who trace this tradition back to romance, argue for the importance of story. Northrop Frye claims: “The essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form” (Frye 2004, 109). The FANTASY entry in the 1997 *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* similarly highlights the importance of storytelling: „Fantasy can almost be defined as a genre whose protagonists reflect and embody the tale being told, and who lead the way through travails and reversals towards the completion of a happy ending.” (Clute and Grant 1997, 338).

The Greek word for myth (*mythos*) also means ‘story,’ hence mythic fantasy fiction has a twofold connection to the tradition of storytelling. And as with ancient and aboriginal myths, these stories are used for a better understanding of our world. Here lies the eco-critical potential of a literature that is devoted to storytelling: nature itself is never static, but it is an event, an incessant process of the endless interactions of beings. Fantasy does not only have a potential to depict nonhuman points of view, but it is also able to present these nonhuman characters in interaction with humans. Stories thus provide a way to connect with nature and think about our relationship with it. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to argue that Holdstock’s *Mythago* novels are not only visits to the woodland realm, but stories of various protagonists’ relationship with this uncanny ecosystem. And what makes them eco-critically interesting is that these relationships are never static moments, but storied processes, in which the intruding human forces become subject to arboreal intrusion, enforcing a rethinking of human–vegetal relations. Similarly, we would benefit from revising the view of our present situation within the climate crisis as a static point and an inevitable consequence of human civilization’s wrongdoings against nature – instead we may see our relationship to the environment as a story still in the making, the outcome of which is our shared responsibility.

2.2.2 *Literature of the Impossible*

The inclusion of the impossible is key to the definition of modern fantasy. The supernatural is always at play in these narratives disrupting consensus reality – and by doing so, it reveals some hidden truth that is veiled from our eyes in everyday life. Colin Manlove’s

1975 definition of the genre highlights the irreducible nature of this impossible content, claiming that fantasy is a “fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.” (Manlove 2004, 157). As opposed to texts written in the realistic tradition, fantasy remains honest about its own fictionality, and explaining it away is no option: “It must not be possible wholly to explain the supernatural or impossible away, by seeing it simply as a disguised projection of something within our ‘nature’” (Manlove 2004, 160). Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that the impossible is a tricky term as its definition depends on the reader’s perception. In line with this, Gary K. Wolfe warns that because of its reliance on reader response, defining fantasy by the presence of the impossible might be problematic (Wolfe 2004, 224-225). To cast more light on this issue, Wolfe defines 8 stages of the reader’s experience of wonder, and arrives at the conclusion that what fantasy actually depends on is in fact the “affective sense of the impossible” (Wolfe 2004, 227). Connecting the experience of wonder with the presence of the impossible is a tradition in fantasy criticism that can be traced back Tolkien and the earliest critics of the genre, but it persists to this day, and the most concise definition of fantasy very often reflect on this connection. For instance, Richard Mathews wrote in 1997 that fantasy is “a fiction that elicits wonder *through* elements of the supernatural or impossible” (Mathews 1997, 2, emphasis mine)⁸.

This has a number of consequences for the eco- and plant-conscious analysis of fantasy. If we assume that consensus reality is the sum of phenomena the individual reader perceives as ‘normal,’ a narrative that disrupts this belief system through the inclusion of the impossible, tosses the reader out of her comfort zone⁹. Should the reader be convinced that the human body’s boundaries are not to be trespassed, the bodily hybridity of fantasy creatures urges her to rethink her own position in relation to nonhuman beings. Horror fiction has a similar function, and it is undeniable that fantasy regularly borrows its techniques, yet most fantasy aims at a different reader experience. The Cambridge Dictionary defines ‘wonder’ as “a feeling of great surprise and admiration caused by seeing or experiencing something that is strange and new” (Cambridge Dictionary 2023). Thus, it is a positive experience caused in the reader by an encounter through her reading with something unusual – that in return expands her framework

⁸ The sublime is a term that is in a sense a close kin to the wonder induced by fantasy fiction, and especially so in the form that David Sandner calls the “fantastic sublime” (Sandner 1997, 6). With regard to Holdstock’s application of the fantastic sublime please see Chapter 4.

⁹ Consensus reality, however, is a tricky term. As Brian Attebery points out, “consensus is a mere patch over a crack that goes right down to the foundations of the real” (Attebery 2014, 141). The enforced category of ‘normality’ thus raises more questions about our reality than it answers, and good fantasy is able to disclose these questions instead of hiding them as a comforting patch over the gaping chasm of the real.

of reference¹⁰. This extension, followed by a revision of our belief system about our place in the world, is key to eco-conscious thinking. Therefore, in a more ecocentric analysis of fantasy, the understanding of the reader's encounter with the impossible is of special significance.

Another essential feature of the impossible in fantasy fiction is that it is governed by its own rules. George MacDonald in his 1890 essay, "The Fantastic Imagination" already highlights the importance of rules: "The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms—which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation." (MacDonald 2004, 65). If we consider MacDonald's well-known differentiation between Fancy and Imagination, we can see that when he observes that the latter is the "new embodiments of old truths" (MacDonald 2004, 65), he observes that the products of Imagination should have both significant *and* ordered content. Later on, Tolkien also argues that rules are inevitable in the laborious process of creating secondary belief: "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks." (Tolkien 2008, 61). Most fantasy scholars follow in Tolkien's lines, calling attention to the fact that fantasy fiction depends on internal rules for its success. Eric Rabkin writes in 1976: "Every work of art sets up its own ground rules. The perspectives that the fantastic contradicts are perspectives legitimized by these internal ground rules." (Rabkin 2004, 168). Some distinguished fantasy writers also highlight the importance of rules. Ursula K. Le Guin, for instance, is convinced that "[s]uccessful fantasy narrative is notable for its strong inner coherence; its rules are not those of the ordinary world, but it never breaks them." (Le Guin 2007, 85). Once the rules of this secondary belief system are set, "a *deus ex machina* in fantasy is as intrusive as in any other kind of fiction" (Wolfe 2004, 226).

These internal rules are essential to the construction of meaning in fantasy fiction, and they fundamentally affect reader experience. As Gary K. Wolfe observes, "in fantasy, the sources of meaning, the ideational structures of the narrative, are essential in molding our

¹⁰ At this point it is important to see the difference between the reader's and the characters' experience. The reader may feel awe reading about spaces that she would actually find frightening in reality. The magic wood topos definitely falls into this category. For instance, the wonder we feel when reading about mythagos, the embodied contents of the collective unconscious might easily turn into fear or even terror if we met these creatures in physical reality. Fantasy provides a safe distance, a vantage point from which we may gain glimpses of worlds beyond the limitations of our fears.

attitude toward the impossible and in controlling the depth of our response to it” (Wolfe 2004, 228). What is important for our eco-conscious considerations here, is that no matter how profoundly the illusion of the imaginary world is created through these rules, the reader never ceases to see it in parallel to her own world. However, what a successful fantasy text creates is not a mere allegory of consensus reality. Instead, as Gary K. Wolfe observes, fantasy authors “achieve a balanced tension—perhaps more properly a dialectic—between cognition and affect, between moralism and passion, between the impossible and the inevitable” (Wolfe 2004, 231). This dialectic also exists between the real and the imaginary world, urging the reader to revise her preconceptions about the former. Herein lies the political potential of fantasy, as its contained impossibility might subvert the thought patterns we live by. When constructing his own definition for fantasy, China Miéville follows in these lines: “Fantasy is a mode that, in constructing an internally coherent but actually impossible totality—constructed on the basis that the impossible is, for this work, true—mimics the “absurdity” of capitalist modernity.” (Miéville 2004, 337). As the capitalist power structure of the Western world bears great responsibility in the crisis of our relation to nature, we should not underestimate fantasy fiction’s potential to lay bare the absurdity of our ways of life within the current political and cultural settings.

2.2.3 Towards Larger Realities

As I have shown above, fantasy fiction has a complex relationship to the primary world, yet the realist bias against it still casts a long shadow over the genre. This prejudice against the impossible has always had strong political undertones. The realistic tradition in literature emerged in parallel to the Enlightenment, the rapid industrialization and gradual disenchantment of the world. Western, capitalist modernity has drastically reduced the diversity of human values: for any achievement to be considered worthwhile, it is supposed to serve the myth of eternal progress. A progress that is science-based and man-made, centred on the omission of any object and phenomena that are beyond its narrow, anthropocentric scope. Mimetic literature, in its attempt to capture culturally defined ‘reality’ is more inclined to be stuck in this circle – but fantasy stands a good chance of escape.

“Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?,” Tolkien asked in 1939 (Tolkien 2008, 69), and his words are equally true a good eighty years later, when we justly feel trapped in a world of multiple global crises. Keep your soft wonders, some readers may say, people need dystopic climate fiction to understand the true weight of the climate crisis – and their responsibility in it. In my opinion, one of mythic

fantasy's greatest merits in facing current global challenges lies in its ability to convey important environmental messages without feeding shame culture. In place of a lasting pang of guilt, fantasy offers hope. Hope in fantasy is intertwined with the narrative's departure from consensus reality, but in successful fantasy fiction, this 'escape' from reality does not equal the blissful ignorance of primary world issues for the false comfort of a fanciful secondary one. The hope fantasy provides through the inclusion of the impossible is key to its eco-critical significance.

Firstly, fantasy has the potential to include and highlight details of our world that go under our anthropocentric radar in everyday reality. This applies both to groups of people marginalized due to gender, race, age or other criteria and to the nonhuman Other that so often escapes our attention. In fact, fantasy might be seen as a space of unavoidable confrontation with the Other. As we strive every day to make our reality both physically and mentally comforting and comfortable, we have a relatively low chance of encountering the nonhuman Other in the primary world. Due to its muteness and immobility, the vegetal Other is especially prone to escape human attention, yet fantasy topoi such as the magic wood may bring them to the foreground. The hope of fantasy is a hope for recognition and inclusion.

Secondly, the hope fantasy offers is never disconnected from the primary world, but remains in a dynamic relationship with it. Robert Scholes writes that the world of fabulation is "clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (Scholes 1975, 29). Thus, fantasy prompts us to cognitively face our primary world, and recognize it for what it is: a cultural construct that was created in line with certain ideologies that might be changed. For instance, there is great power in the realisation of how the binary oppositions that sit at the core of our anthropocentric reality could be blurred if we take an outside view of them. As this dissertation will reveal, mythic fantasy has a great potential to subject the nature–culture divide to scrutiny. Fantasy, in this respect, serves as a shared space for the renegotiation of the foundations of our ideologies.

Thirdly, fantasy fiction offers real hope through the extension of reality and the promise that other ways of life are possible. In a sense, fantasy writers are indeed "realists of a larger reality" as Ursula K. Le Guin said in her 2014 acceptance speech at the 65th National Book Awards (Le Guin 2014). Le Guin, however, was very much aware of the responsibility fantasy bears in this enlargement of our reality. In an earlier essay, she highlights that the truth of fantasy "challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living" (Le Guin 1992, 40). Facing the falsehoods of our reality can feel devastating at first, especially for someone who lives a life of

privilege. Marginalised groups, however, have more reason to find refuge in a temporary escape from reality. “The very condensation of fantasy images, their ability to resonate with the different emotional needs in the members of the audience, gives fantasy a power and effectiveness that are different from anything achievable by mimesis alone,” Kathryn Hume argues (Hume 2014, 191).

2.2.4 *Subversion*

Fantasy fiction thus has a potential to give us hope through the expansion of reality. This expansion might be carried out in different ways, but most of them fit under the umbrella term of subversion. Subversion is intertwined with the analysis of fantasy on multiple levels. For one thing, it speaks about the ultimate inter-relatedness of the mimetic and fantastic tradition, as no subversion exists without a source to be subverted. For other, in subversion lies the joy and freshness of reading and understanding fantasy. As Kathryn Hume writes, the “...realistic treatment lets readers rely too lazily on their own standards and cultural assumptions. Fantasy helps liberate both author and audience from such sloth.” (Hume 2014, 162). Our slow mind accustomed to the drag of ordinary life gets refreshment through imaginative play. “Fantasy is fundamentally playful,” Brian Attebery argues, but he warns us about taking it too lightly, claiming that this “does not mean that it is not serious. Its way of playing with symbols encourages the reader to see meaning as something unstable and elusive, rather than single and self-evident.” (Attebery 2014, 2). Fantasy, being honest about its own fictionality, guides us to the realisation that meaning is not inherent to phenomena in the primary world either – and thus even the key concepts of our civilization might be subjected to revision. Recognizing this is both liberating and empowering. Richard Mathews claims that “[f]antasy is a literature of liberation and subversion. Its target may be politics, economics, religion, psychology, or sexuality. It seeks to liberate the feminine, the unconscious, the repressed, the past, the present, and the future.” (Mathews 1997, xii). Fantasy might even liberate our mind from the burdens of the Anthropocene.

Up to this day, ecocriticism has successfully identified the ideological roots of our present ecological crisis. As the next chapter of the dissertation will show in more detail, Christianity, the Enlightenment, industrialization, capitalism and patriarchy, and various other factors all have their share in the global issues we are to face today. By its very nature, mimetic literature cannot escape the power structures that govern our reality for better or for worse. As opposed to this, an imaginary world is not required to be run through the oppression of women and the abuse of nature to seem fully coherent and believable. According to China Miéville,

these qualities of fantasy literature significantly aid the reader in reconsidering her own reality: “In a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates mental space redefining— or pretending to redefine—the impossible. This is sleight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real. Bearing in mind Marx’s point that the real and the not-real are constantly cross-referenced in the productive activity by which humans interact with the world, changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities.” (Miéville 2004, 339). Fantasy’s ability to make us think differently about the real gains special significance in an eco-critical context. Whilst day-to-day climate crisis narratives tend to warn us about the very real limitations of human civilization, it is rare that we are informed about our potentialities in building a better world for both human and more-than-human beings.

Instead of turning its back on the primary world, fantasy actually gains its meaning through constant interaction with it. Rosemary Jackson uses the optics term, *paraxis* to demonstrate this. “A paraxial region is an area in which light rays seem to unite at a point after refraction. In this area, object and image seem to collide, but in fact neither object nor reconstituted image genuinely reside there: nothing does.” (Jackson 1981, 11). This fictitious space behind the mirror is “the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely ‘real’ (object), nor entirely ‘unreal’ (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two” (Jackson 1981, 12). However, should we see fantasy as a mirror, it is a magic one. Brian Attebery claims in his recent book, *Fantasy: How It Works* (2022) that fantasy “is the unreal that opens the way for deeper truths.” (Attebery 2022, 24); and if fantasy is a magic mirror, I am sure that it does show truths both beautiful and bitter. But even if a truth is bitter, fantasy is apt to provide ways to first subvert, then improve the situation.

2.3 Fantasy in Ecocentric Mode

This chapter identified the basic terminology for a more eco- and plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy, and called attention to those aspects of fantasy fiction that are especially important in an eco-critical perspective. The analytic methods and considerations that I propose for the set of plant-visibility strategies could be summarized as follows:

1. *Speculative reading*

Fantasy literature is a fuzzy set of diverse narratives that is impossible to grasp with a single, straightforward term. Fantasy as genre and mode is subject to constant change regarding its themes, settings and methodology, thus its definition requires regular updates. Similarly, the

analysis of fantasy needs a certain flexibility, that is why I suggest the *speculative reading* of speculative fiction. On the level of rhetoric, speculative reading means a special attention to the multiple ways the (vegetal) impossible interacts with the text and with the reader's perception. For this purpose, Farah Mendlesohn's taxonomy is a great starting point. Speculative reading requires an open mindset: a readiness to depart from the common cultural and political frameworks of literary analysis.

2. *Storied identity*

Mythic fantasy being both myth and fantasy is doubly linked to the art of storytelling. A series of causally linked events gives dynamic to narratives, and this movement can be set in parallel to the dynamic reality of nature. Nature itself is a story of the incessant interactions of beings, and if we wish to read fantasy in a more ecocentric way, we should recognize plants as characters in this overarching narrative.

3. *Beyond anthropocentrism*

In good fantasy fiction, the presence of the impossible is supposed to elicit wonder in the reader. Wonder is generally a positive feeling, but more importantly, it is induced by facing something strange and new: to experience true wonder, you have to be pushed out of your comfort zone. If we assume anthropocentric thinking to be our comfort zone, then the wonder generated by fantasy has a potential to introduce us to a more-than-human (secondary) reality through disclosing and then transcending the limitations of anthropocentrism. In a plant-conscious analysis of fantasy, we are given a chance to unravel how plants contribute to this sense of wonder.

4. *Subversion of anthropocentrism*

Fantasy is a form of fiction that lays bare its own fictionality. But the fact that these imaginary worlds are constructed, make us suspect that our primary world is no different. The recognition that meaning is ultimately a human construct is the great and empowering liberation fantasy literature brings – and it has significant ecological consequences. Even if it is evolutionary justified, anthropocentric thinking is a frame that we are able to consciously modify. First we have to make this frame visible so that we can challenge it, and eventually subvert it. Therefore, in a plant-conscious analysis of fantasy, the analyst needs to pay special attention to the ways plants are brought to the foreground on the levels of plot, theme and rhetoric.

3. The Invisible Plant Kingdom

The invisibility of vegetal life is a key issue that leads to the obliteration, negligence, abuse and objectification of plants. This chapter aims at identifying the various components of the marginalisation of the vegetal Other, and pave the way towards plant visibility on both theoretical and practical level. The first part of the chapter casts light on the possible historical and cultural roots of plant blindness. The second part lists the achievements the natural sciences and eco-criticism made in bringing plants closer to the centre of our attention. Using these achievements, I will suggest ways of analysing mythic fantasy in more plant-conscious ways. The third, concluding part of the chapter combines these methods with the results of the previous chapter on fantasy theory, and thus it provides a summary of the plant-visibility strategies.

3.1 The Roots of Disconnection

The reasons why plants became marginalised are manifold, but despite their complexity I wish to present them under these four key concepts:

- plant blindness
- radical bodily difference
- the nature–culture divide and its consequences for plants
- (human) power structures and their consequences for marginalised beings

Note that neither of these are distinct categories, but they are interconnected much like trees in the forest connected through mycelia.

3.1.1 Plant Blindness

The term plant blindness was coined by James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler in a 1999 article on preventing plant blindness among young students. The authors intended to combat the evident consequences of zoocentric thinking that very often borders on antropo- and zoochauvinism. In their definition of plant blindness, Wandersee and Schussler refer back to their earlier presentation of 1998, and identify the following components: “(a) the inability to see or notice the plants in one's environment; (b) the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs; (c) the inability to appreciate the aesthetic and unique biological features of the life forms that belong to the Plant Kingdom; and (d) the misguided anthropocentric ranking of plants as inferior to animals and thus, as unworthy of

consideration.” (Wandersee and Schussler 1999, 84).¹¹ The immobility and muteness of plants might serve as an explanation for our limited ability to notice them – simply because our nervous system focuses on potential threats from the environment –, yet, as Matthew Hall warns in his book *Plants as Persons* (2011), it is problematic to present the zoocentric attitude as “inevitable for all human beings” (Hall 2011, 6). However, if we consider our present level of plant recognition, it is quite obvious that facing the problems listed in Wandersee’s and Schussler’s b), c), and d) points require some conscious training. On an everyday basis, most people are used to encountering plants on their plates (and in the Western world food is still experienced as plenty and disposable) or they are part of a recreational environment (provide the “background” for a forest walk). These interactions with the plant kingdom do not necessarily require a knowledge of their amazing biological features, and without this information, plants become easier to marginalize. And plant blindness does not only affect us on an individual level: the marginalization of vegetal life has its consequences in cultural production, scientific research as well as in environmental policy. Moreover, plant blindness is not limited to our real world, if we remain unaware of it, plant blindness easily infiltrates our imagination and the stories we tell about ourselves and the world on both individual and community level.

3.1.2 *The Vegetal Other*

The problem is not only that we do not see plants – it is also that we do not *want* to see them. Our brain rejoices in finding familiar creatures and shies away when it is confronted with the absolute alterity vegetal life embodies. As Michael Marder observes, plants seem even farther to us than animals: “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.” (Marder 2013, 2).

Plants have multiple qualities that toss them to the margin of the margin from an anthropocentric perspective. Moreover, the fact that plants surround us in our everyday life only make their alien qualities more frightening – no wonder that Dawn Keetley’s first thesis of plant horror claims that “plants embody an absolute alterity” (Keetley 2016, 6). The tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar is activated whenever we attempt to have a closer look at vegetal

¹¹ Since then, Kathryn M. Parsley coined a new term for plant blindness in 2020. Plant awareness disparity (PAD) is supposed to relieve plant blindness from its ableist undertones, yet we are to be seen whether PAD makes its way into general usage within critical plant studies. For the time being, the dissertation sticks with the term *plant blindness*.

life. This uncanny alterity of plants can be summarized in three key points: immobility, muteness and lack of bodily integrity. From both a zoo- and anthropocentric perspective, life equals movement. Thus “immobile” plants easily find themselves on the lowest end of the mobility scale, despite the fact that plants are actually capable of various kinds of movements¹² – the only problem is that these movements are almost invisible on a human timescale. Plant mobility is actually only perceptible within the framework of *plant time*, and this difference in temporal perception significantly hinders our understanding of plant life and plant behaviour. The ability of communication is another factor we deem important in a fellow creature, but we excluded the entire plant kingdom by an anthropocentric definition of communication. Adding injury to insult, we associated a lack of emotional and psychic capacity with this perceived muteness of plants. These off-handed observations played a huge role in the objectification and subsequent abuse of vegetal life. The apparent immobility and muteness of plants are obvious markers of alterity, but are rarely seen as frightening. Plants’ lack of bodily integrity, however, is a different matter. If you cut a linden tree in autumn, its stump will produce new shoots the next spring, and they will become individual trees on the surface, but share a common root system underground. Can the linden tree thus survive its own death? If you cut a twig from a willow tree and stab it into the ground, it will take root. Is it the same tree then? As part of a scientific experiment, people planted 2,000-year-old date seeds taken from an ancient grave, and they sprouted (Klein 2020). When plants defy our human concept of communication, most of us remain uninterested as we have no senses to penetrate the seeming muteness of plants – but when plants visibly and obviously challenge our concept of death (a clear demarcation line between life and decay), then we are confused.

This blurring of man-made boundaries and stirring up of taxonomies is key to vegetal Otherness. As human civilization depends on labels and fixed categories to create an illusion of safety, no wonder that anything laying bare this fakery is subject to ruthless repression. Repression, however, is similar to what the trickster character in folklore has to offer as he trades short-term consolation for long-term suffering. Facing the frightful vegetal Otherness within the controlled environment of fantasy fiction provides a way to see the ecosystem in its complexity – and then, to revise our thoughts about it and connection to it. Understanding the

¹² One of the first detailed descriptions of plant movement is found in Charles Darwin’s book *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880) that he wrote with the assistance of his son, Francis Darwin. This is the volume that contains Darwin’s epitomic ‘root-brain’ hypothesis: “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the tip of the radicle thus endowed, and having the power of directing the movements of the adjoining parts, acts like the brain of one of the lower animals; the brain being seated within the anterior end of the body, receiving impressions from the sense-organs, and directing the several movements.” (Darwin 2009, 573).

Otherness of the plant kingdom is as much a challenge as it is a reason for hope, because, as Dawn Keetley argues, “[p]lants suggest alternative ways of being that challenge the inevitability of (human) being” (Keetley 2016, 9).

3.1.3 *The Nature–Culture Divide*

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the ancient Mesopotamian epic poem dated c. 2100 BC, the hero Gilgamesh together with his friend Enkidu slay Humbaba (or Huwawa), the guardian of the forest, so that they can obtain the precious cedar wood. It complicates the situation further that Enkidu himself was also beast man until he was civilized and gained the friendship of the cultured warrior-king, Gilgamesh. On a deeper level, this narrative informs us about how civilization was established at the expense of nature, and how the hero’s defeat of the forest guardian eventually created a fissure between the natural and the cultural. The woodland is thus not only seen as a place of the human species’ origin, but it is also perceived as the background of our immaturity, a place that we had to leave behind so that we can partake from the benefits of mature (?) human civilization. As Don D. Elgin observes, “the dominant idea in establishing humanity’s relationship toward nature has been its insistence upon their separateness from it” (Elgin 2004, 258). Thinking in absolutes seem to comfort our brains, as it relieves us from dealing with the complexity of our world. In fact, binary oppositions are so temptingly practical, that they still infiltrate our communication about environmentalism. Even as innocent statements as “we are responsible for nature” have the nature–culture divide at their core, as they start out from the assumption that nature is something out there.

The problem is, however, that nature does not respect boundaries drawn by humans and as a border-crosser it keeps haunting us in unexpected ways. In this respect, the position of suppressed nature is similar to that of fantasy fiction in relation to the hegemonic realistic tradition. As Attebery notes, “[t]he vogue of realism did not replace the fantastic; it merely drove it underground.” (Attebery 2012, 83). Nature, once driven out of the town walls of civilization keeps lurking in the background, and it is all the more difficult to see as it is already inside us and has always been. Even though the concept of the nature–culture divide has some practical benefits, using it in a rigid way definitely hinders the re-negotiation of the human–nature relationship on both individual and community level. Therefore, when we wish to create a more eco-conscious toolkit for the understanding of mythic fantasy, we should look into the various ways these texts attempt to question or blur the nature–culture dichotomy.

3.1.4 Power Structures

What makes the nature–culture divide even more problematic, is that it is reflected in our social, cultural and political systems. “Though the reasons for the current ecological crisis are usually attributed to our ideas of land use, resource management, and energy availability, in fact they have much deeper roots, roots that emerge inevitably from the basic philosophic and religious attitudes which it has been the central province of literature to examine, present, and often to create,” argues Don D. Elgin (Elgin 2004, 256). Among these ideological roots of our ecological crisis, Christianity had a lasting effect on our attitudes toward the environment. In his classic 1967 essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” Lynn White argues that the dominant religion of the Western world is responsible for our ambivalent relation to nature. White admits that some of Christianity’s messages about our relationship with the environment are sometimes conflicting, but others played a large role in forming our thoughts and actions. Take claims like, “God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.” (White 1996, 9), and it is easy to see how religion set the stage for ages of anthropocentric thinking (and decision-making). In another aspect, White goes on, Christianity systematically destroyed animistic beliefs, which previously meant a barrier to the exploitation of nature (White 1996, 10). White draws the dire conclusion that “[m]ore science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.” (White 1996, 12). As far as imaginary worlds are concerned, fantasy can easily have its take at both creating a new religion or rethinking an old one – and compared to the heated debates religion still evokes in the real world, literature provides a relatively safe place to discuss such matters. Mythic fantasy as a subgenre is extremely fit to revisit older, less institutionalised forms of religion such as animistic traditions that have a specific affection for vegetal beings.

What Christianity presents as divine intention is basically the very human urge to see the environment through anthropocentric lenses. In an evolutionary context, anthropocentric thinking definitely aided our survival in pre-historic times, yet the way it now fuels our social, political, economic and environmental decisions is clearly harmful for the more-than-human world. At its core, anthropocentrism is an exclusive term: it denotes a form of human exceptionalism, a conviction that as default species, only humans are eligible for moral consideration. Ben Mylius offers a deeper insight into the components of anthropocentrism and anthropocentric thinking. He argues that “[c]laims about human superiority are by no means the only form of anthropocentrism” (Mylius 2018, 161). Mylius identifies three types of

anthropocentrism: perceptual, descriptive and normative anthropocentrism. These are obviously not separate categories as they “shade into each other” (Mylius 2018, 180). Mylius highlights that perceptual anthropocentrism is a form of anthropocentrism that none of us is likely to escape: “A paradigm is perceptually anthropocentric when it is directly or indirectly informed by data received or gathered by the senses of the human body.” (Mylius 2018, 166). Similarly, descriptive anthropocentrism starts out from the human: “a paradigm is also descriptively anthropocentric if it in some way begins from, revolves around, focusses (sic!) on, takes as its reference point, is centered around, or is ordered according to the species *Homo sapiens* or the category of ‘the human.’” (Mylius 2018, 168). So far, it is only natural that we use our own perception and measure the world by our own standards. Mylius argues that this form of anthropocentrism is similar to heliocentrism, choosing man to be its sun around which the world revolves (Mylius 2018, 169). Normative anthropocentrism has two forms: passive and active. “Passively normative anthropocentrism manifests in paradigms that constrain inquiry in a way that somehow privileges *Homo sapiens* or the category of ‘the human’” (Mylius 2018, 183). Whereas actively normative anthropocentrism also involves acting upon this privilege, as it “manifests in assertions that *Homo sapiens* is superior to nature, and in attempts to make ethical or legal prescriptions (shoulds/oughts) based on these assertions.” (Mylius 2018, 185). Interestingly, Mylius concludes his observations about anthropocentric thinking by claiming that anthropocentrism is “*a failure of imagination*” (Mylius 2018, 186).

Could fantasy as the literature of imagination make up for it? As the example of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has shown, anthropocentrism can be intrinsic even to the most ancient narratives. Mythology at times works the same way as Christianity, inasmuch as it legitimizes the nature–culture divide as well as man’s central place as master of the ecosystem (cultural hero narratives are a common example). There are, however, other mythic stories, both ancient and modern, that manage to de-centre the human: most trickster narratives and stories about hybrid creatures and metamorphoses belong to this category.

Considering Mylius’s above categorisation, anthropomorphism could also be seen as a form of anthropocentrism – through which we project ourselves to the environment based on the recognition of shared features. However, even Mylius is convinced that not all forms of anthropocentrism are harmful. Philosopher Jane Bennett explicitly argues that depending on the situation a certain amount of anthropomorphism can be beneficial (Bennett 2010, 120). Anthropomorphism is also a significant component in animistic tradition, and modern mythic fantasy also relies on it to establish a deeper connection between man and nature. The projection of ourselves to the environment, however, is not necessarily one directional. Hannah Cooper-

Smithson's recent term, arboromorphism is a "deep-rooted literary tradition" and it refers to the "literal, literary, or psychological process of becoming a tree" (Cooper-Smithson 2022, 233). In this reversal of anthropomorphism characters in fiction realize their bodily resemblance to trees (arms as branches, fingers as twigs, toes as roots, etc.) or even physically metamorphose into trees.

3.2 From Plant Blindness to Plant Visibility

3.2.1 *Natural Sciences*

In the introduction to this dissertation, I have already referred to the renewed interest in plant life within the natural sciences. In this section, I will observe how recent achievements in science may help us bring the marginalised plant kingdom closer to the centre of attention. First and foremost, the natural sciences have made great efforts to provide useful and detailed information on the biological otherness of plants – and as the ever-growing number of pop-science books show, these results (even if in a somewhat simplified form) find their way to the general public.

As subchapter 3.1 revealed, our anthropocentric definition of vegetal Otherness relies mostly on the "deficits" of the plant body in comparison to the human body. On a general level, we associate human agency with our ability to think, and then express our thoughts, desires and decisions through movement and speech. At first glance, the immobility and muteness of plants informs us about the lack of agency and consequent lack of intelligence in the plant kingdom – yet science is now telling us otherwise. Research in the intelligence of nonhuman species has not only revealed that plants are in fact capable of making their own decisions, but it has also made scientists re-think the former anthropocentric definition of intelligence. By the 1990s this change was already on the way in cognitive science: "intelligence shifts from being the capacity to solve a problem to the capacity to enter into a shared world of significance" (Varela et al. 1991, 207).

Anthony Trewavas is among the first to argue for the application of the word intelligence for plants. He writes that "a simple definition of plant intelligence can be coined as adaptively variable growth and development during the lifetime of the individual" (Trewavas 2003, 1). Thus, plant movement – that is perceived as immobility on a human timescale – becomes the basis for plant intelligence. In a 2005 article, Trewavas arrives at the conclusion that "plants exhibit the simple forms of behaviour that neuroscientists describe as basic intelligence" but warns about the necessity of further research (Trewavas 2005, 413). Trewavas's 2014 book,

Plant Behaviour and Intelligence provides a concise summary of his work on plant intelligence. Meticulously analysing the characteristics of plant behaviour, he challenges our most basic assumptions about intelligence. In addition to the common prejudices against plants (apparent immobility and muteness), he also describes brain chauvinism (the assumption that only species with brains can be intelligent) and argues that even though “[b]rains are good at solving problems, but they hold no monopoly on this capability” (Trewavas 2014, 201).

Trewavas’s book is, however, not alone in its attempt to reach the general reader. Stefano Mancuso’s and Alessandra Viola’s 2013 volume, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (English translation: Joan Benham, [2015]), also provides a technically correct, state-of-the-art description of plant science, but places it in a much wider cultural context. Spreading knowledge about plants is important, because, as Mancuso and Viola argue, “[w]e know very little about the plant world, and we probably see plants in much the same way as the first *Homo sapiens* did” (Mancuso and Viola 2015, 13) – a provocative statement referring to the anthropocentric limitations that influence our perception of plants up to this day. The most recent book on plant intelligence by Paco Calvo was released with the bold title: *Planta Sapiens: The New Science of Plant Intelligence* (2023).

The debate about plant intelligence is also fuelled by the emergent subfields that dive into the unique senses of plants. Plants have special receptors to perceive light (phototropism), they are also sensitive to gravity (gravitropism), to touch (thigmotropism). To spread information to their environment they use hormones and various other chemical signals, and their bodies are also capable of delivering electrical signals. The muteness of plants was also proven to be a myth in the light of plant bioacoustics, the study of sound waves emitted by plants. Despite all this research the plant intelligence debate is still not settled¹³, yet it already serves as an interesting basis for eco-critical considerations. If even the scientific criteria for intelligence might be adapted when adequate data is produced, then why do we stick so persistently to our socio-cultural assumptions about the nonhuman world? The taxonomy we use does not only reflect the information we gather about certain phenomena, but it is also telling about our preferences and prejudices. In the long run, scientific evidence may help

¹³ For some recent input you might wish to consult Paco Calvo et al. “Plants Are Intelligent, Here’s How” that reviews important literature in the matter. By now even those who argue against using the term “plant intelligence” admit that a term is needed to explain plant behaviour. As an alternative, many authors suggest “plant cognition.” For a recent example you may turn to Jonny Lee’s recent article “What Is Cognitive about ‘Plant Cognition’?”. For a concise summary about how plant senses work you may wish to check Daniel Chamowitz’s book *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (2013).

change our everyday perception of plants, but surpassing our anthropocentric limitations also requires imaginative work.

Part of this imaginative work might be carried out through writing fantasy, as it is a mode of fiction that can bring the nonhuman into the forefront. Plants are frequently given supernatural skills in fantasy. The most common examples focus on trees as they are large enough to demand our attention and are relatively easy to anthropomorphise. From Tolkien's wrathful ent army to the Wood Queen of Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*, anthropomorphising trees so that they might interact better with the human characters is a method widely applied in mythic fantasy up to this day. For eco-critical considerations, however, those manifestations of the fantastic vegetal that do not mimic the human too closely are more interesting. For instance, Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction short story, "Vaster Than Empires and Mores Slow" (1970) displays a very interesting concept of vegetal life. The plot is set in a remote planet covered in green vegetation. One of the astronauts who are sent to this place, Osden is able of perceiving the consciousness of other living beings. Thus, as he eventually realizes, that the vegetation of the planet forms a single, complex system through their intertwined roots, similar to a nervous system. As the textual analyses of this dissertation will reveal, Holdstock depicts Ryhope Wood in a similar fashion: individual trees cooperate to achieve a common purpose. And if we consider the above described definition of intelligence within the context of literature, we can draw the conclusion that the supernatural woods of speculative fiction also possess the capability of entering into "a shared world of significance" (Varela et al. 1991, 207) – only that in this case this shared space is the text itself.

3.2.2 *Eco-criticism, Eco-philosophy*

As shown above, even scientific terminology is heavily influenced by our anthropocentric limitations in the perception of our environment. Eco-criticism and especially eco-philosophy dive deeper into the ways human preconceptions, ideologies, thought frames and common coping mechanisms influence human–plant relationships. This section provides an overview of how eco-criticism and eco-philosophy address the issues listed in subchapter 3.1 (plant blindness, vegetal alterity, the nature–culture divide, and plants' marginalized status within power structures), and it identifies those key concepts and considerations that should be included in the set of plant-visibility strategies.

The hierarchical ordering of living beings can be traced back to ancient times, and vegetal life forms find themselves at the lower end of the scale early on. This devaluing of plants is quite obvious in Aristotle's description of the nature of the soul – a theory that had a

lasting effect on Western thought. In *De Anima*, Aristotle identifies three levels of the soul (nutritive, sensitive, intellectual), and he argues that plants only possess a nutritive soul that enables them to feed and reproduce, but excludes them from sense and reason. Even though the obvious Otherness of the vegetal might explain this drive toward separation, contemporary eco-philosophy can no longer delay to face these long-standing prejudices against plants. Emanuele Coccia's metaphors capture both the guilt and the fear we might experience over the exclusion of vegetal life from proper philosophical consideration: "Plants are the always open wound of the metaphysical snobbery that defines our culture. The return of the repressed, of which we must rid ourselves in order to consider ourselves as "different": rational humans, spiritual beings. They are the cosmic tumor of humanism, the waste that the absolute spirit can't quite manage to eliminate." (Coccia 2018).

To make amends with the plant kingdom, current ecocriticism is eager to revise its terminology in order to be more inclusive towards the more-than-human world. In this respect, the catchphrase of our time, *the Anthropocene* has come in for harsh criticism in the past decades. Glenn A. Albrecht formulates his concerns about the Anthropocene as follows: "Even as Anthropocenic thinking attempts to call our attention to — and finally hold us responsible for — the egregious effects of our actions, it still figures humans as a singular agent, transcendent over and separate from some Edenic nature in peril. These narratives *re-centre* rather than *de-centre* Man as the agent with natural dominion over this planet's future." (Albrecht 2015). Thus, in our current understanding of the Anthropocene the nature–culture divide is reinforced, which in turn confirms the long-standing hierarchy of the human and the nonhuman. Many alternative terms have been suggested, but instead of replacing the Anthropocene entirely, they were created to "seize these ongoing global changes from different angles and call for new ways of understanding humanity itself" (Karkulehto et al. 2020, 2).

For the purposes of the plant-visibility strategies I suggest the application of the following terms, either in parallel to, or replacing the Anthropocene.

Plantationocene: First used at recorded conversation at the University of Aarhus in 2014¹⁴, this term focuses on (globalized) plantation agriculture as one of the main reasons for the present ecological crisis. Plantationocene reflects on how our abuse of plants leads to the demise of the entire biosphere.

¹⁴ The transcript of the conversation is now available in a published format: Donna Haraway, Noboru Ishikawa, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing & Nils Bubandt. 2016. "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene," *Ethnos*, 81:3, 535–564, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838.

Capitalocene: A term generally ascribed to Donna Haraway¹⁵, Capitalocene is similar to the Anthropocene inasmuch as it names “one of the latest and most dangerous of these exterminating forces” (Haraway 2016, 2) finding the cause of destruction in capitalism.

Chthulucene: Chthulucene is also Donna Haraway’s term, and she uses it alternating with Anthroocene and Capitalocene. ‘Chthulu’ is a compound of two Greek roots (khthôn and kainos), the first of which links it to the earth. In Haraway’s view, “Chthonic ones are monsters in the best sense; they demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters.” (Haraway 2016, 2). Chthulu is thus the fearsome part of reality we repressed. It is Humbaba, it is the monster of fantasy fiction driven underground by the realistic tradition, it is the vegetal Otherness we are afraid to face. The Chthulucene embraces us, yet we are still unable to grasp it, as this epoch is “an ongoing temporality that resists figuration and dating and demands myriad names” (Haraway 2016, 51).

Planthropocene: Whilst the above terms describe the world in its present state, anthropologist Natasha Myers’s concept (coined in 2016) sets goals for a liveable future, based on a revised relationship between plants and people. In her description of the Planthropocene, Myers condemns apocalyptic thinking in favour of a hopeful, cooperative future.¹⁶

Symbiocene: Glenn A. Albrecht’s term (coined in 2011) also describes the next era of human history. In the Symbiocene “human action, culture and enterprise will be exemplified by those cumulative types of relationships and attributes nurtured by humans that enhance mutual interdependence and mutual benefit for all living beings” (Albrecht 2015).

Recent eco-critical taxonomies also venture to surpass the nature–culture divide. For the considerations of the plant-visibility strategies, Donna Haraway’s *natureculture* is a fitting term, as it acknowledges both components without the burdensome opposition between them. Moreover, its application can be extended to entities beyond physical reality: “Flesh and signifier, bodies and words, stories and worlds: these are joined in naturecultures.” (Haraway 2003, 20-21). Whilst the nature–culture divide is a binary opposition that boils down to human superiority over the biosphere, Timothy Morton’s term, *the Severing* calls attention to the traumatic nature of our separation from the natural world. “The Severing is a catastrophe:” Morton argues “an event that does not take place “at” a certain “point” in linear time, but a wave that ripples out in many dimensions, in whose wake we are caught.” (Morton 2017, 15).

¹⁵ Although in a 2015 Haraway admits that she realized that it was Andreas Malm’s and Jason Moore’s term, devised as early as 2009, before Haraway started using it in 2012 (Haraway 2015, 160 and 163).

¹⁶ For Myers’s ten steps toward the Planthropocene, please consult: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548>

Replacing the nature–culture dichotomy that gave the cultural hero an agential role, the Severing becomes a destructive force effecting both human and nonhuman.

As the previous chapter has shown, the analysis of fantasy fiction has to work its way through an ever changing array of texts and taxonomy. Critical plant studies are similarly rife with elusive concepts. In the following, I suggest two terms for the plant-visibility strategies that capture complex phenomena in an effective way. The first one is Timothy Morton’s *hyperobject*, described in detail in his 2013 book, *Hyperobjects*. Hyperobjects, such as global warming or even the concept of the human surround us everywhere – yet they are almost impossible to pin down. The very nature of hyperobjects explains why humanity feels so helpless facing the global climate crisis: “they [the hyperobjects] occupy a high-dimensional phase space that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional humanscale basis.” (Morton 2013, 70) Whilst hyperobjects remain ungraspable in the real world, Markus Laukkanen argues that through the literalization of metaphors fantasy fiction can capture hyperobjects in a way that otherwise would be impossible (Laukkanen 2022, 241). The second working term I propose for the purposes of a plant-conscious analysis is *vital materiality*. Coined in 2010, Jane Bennett’s vital materiality combats the nature–culture divide through a radical extension of agency. She argues that “[o]rganic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects [...] all are affective.” (Bennett 2010, xii). Basically, Bennett equates effect with materiality: in her view, the very materiality of things is capable of affecting other things and bodies. When we observe the real world, surpassing the Hegelian framework of the subject and object relation requires considerable effort. However, an imaginary world may offer free roam for the representation of vital materiality – and such an extension of agency is crucial for the more eco- and plant-conscious analysis of fantasy. The prejudice against plants is generally rooted in the fact that ever since ancient times, we evaluated plant life by human standards. This led to the exclusion of plants from the ethical discourse, which in turn served as justification of our exploitation of the vegetal world¹⁷. Recent plant philosophy, however, focuses on the ‘plantness’ of plants, so that plant–human relationships might be revised on a different basis. In the plant-visibility strategies, I rely mostly on Michael Marder’s and Emanuele Coccia’s work, as their philosophy offers interesting intersections with the theory of

¹⁷ The inclusion of plants in the ethical discourse is a complicated issue, as we have to admit that there are quite natural limitations to our human ethical capacities. Deep ecology is an often criticised approach of ecocriticism, yet some of its observations might open up the way for extending our ethical capacities. As Greg Garrard highlights, “deep ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature” (Garrard 2014, 21). This way of thinking might aid us in shifting from an anthropocentric, Western approach to a more biocentric view of the world.

fantasy. From their approach I would like to highlight four key thoughts that may serve as a starting point for plant-conscious textual analyses. Firstly, Marder argues that a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn is a prerequisite for getting in touch with the existence of plants (Marder 2013, 28). Since fantasy literature is potentially able to cast light on what remains hidden in real life, it may serve as a safe space to learn about the true nature of plants. Secondly, Marder suggests that the “parallel between nature as a whole and the plant is a promising beginning for the philosophy of vegetal life” (Marder 2013, 28). This thought is also a fruitful starting point for the textual analysis of fantasy, where the imaginary nature could not only be paralleled with the imaginary plant, but also with the primary world. The third statement brings us even closer to the plantness of plants, as it focuses on the merits of vegetal existence: “Plant life is life as complete exposure, in absolute continuity and total communion with the environment.” (Coccia 2018). Plants thus offer a different kind of wisdom than we are used to. Human civilization is based on our separation from nature, and so far we have been reluctant to recognize the vegetal ethics of opening up to (nonhuman) Others and mend the Severing through a communion with the more-than-human world. Myths and mythic fantasy have the potential to transport the reader to a secondary world where the fissure between the human and nonhuman is repaired – and plants generally have a share in this process. In a sense, and this is the fourth statement we should consider for the plant-visibility strategies, plant life may serve as a model for a more ethical being-in-the-world. As Coccia argues: “One cannot separate the plant – *neither physically nor metaphysically* – from the world that accommodates it. It is the most intense, radical, and paradigmatic form of being in the world.” (Coccia 2018). Fourthly, and last, philosophy also offers theories that reverse anthropocentrism and adopt plant structures and processes to represent components of human life. Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s rhizome theory is a vivid example. Deleuze and Guattari call attention to the fact that the tree structure is already common in representing human structures (e.g.: family trees, syntactic tree diagrams), yet they argue that this sort of “arborescent thinking” could contain its own limitations in the rigid form of structure: “Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centers of signification and subjectification, central automata like organized memories.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 16). As opposed to this, a rhizome is a nonlinear and non-hierarchical structure of ultimate freedom: “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). Rhizomes, much like plant bodies themselves, are resilient to damage, as a rhizome “may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (Deleuze and Guattari 19987, 9). Thus the ideology and epistemology of Deleuze and Guattari intends to replace static

frameworks with the lively dynamism of rhizomatic structures – a metaphor that is applicable on various levels of a plant-conscious textual analysis.

3.2.3 Plants in Mythic Fantasy

This subchapter takes the above listed approaches and concepts of critical plant studies and provides suggestions to how they might be applied in the analysis of mythic fantasy in order to address the issues listed in subchapter 3.1 (plant blindness, vegetal Otherness, the nature–culture divide, the marginalisation of plants in power structures).

The Fantastic Skillset of Plants

Fantasy has great potential to decentre the human, and the eco-conscious analysis of fantasy fiction should pay attention to the various ways through which this is achieved. Fantasy offers multiple methods to include nonhuman plants as essential. The most common of these are possibly the exaggeration of natural plant characteristics and the addition of new skills that make plants more visible to human eyes. On the higher end of the plant-visibility scale stands ‘enforced’ visibility, that could be summarized with the concept of plant horror. As Keetley describes it, “plant horror upends usual hierarchies of the seen and the unseen, what is backdrop and what compels our attention, what matters and what does not” (Keetley 2016, 12). Obviously, the cheapest road to plant horror is through the anthropomorphisation of plant bodies, like the fabrication of vengeful walking and talking trees. A plant-conscious analysis of fantasy, however, should point out that such imagery is counterproductive to plant–human relationships in the long run. Via the plant-visibility strategies I wish to urge scholars to look for those subtler manifestations of plant horror that rely on natural plant characteristics. Pollination as a tool to influence human minds and bodies is a well-spread example both within and beyond mythic fantasy.¹⁸ A sheer mass of dead and alive tree bodies (some may call it a forest) also have the uncanny capacity to influence the human mind in multiple ways (disorientation, pareidolia, paracusia). Nevertheless, the plant kingdom is not only approachable through its ‘dark side’ and the plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should also focus on how plant-visibility is achieved in ways that support interdependence and connection with the more-than-human world. The golden standard is to pay meticulous

¹⁸ A recent example from mythic fantasy is Naomi Novik’s 2015 novel, *Uprooted*. The plot revolves around a primeval, Central European woodland, that infects the human population in multiple ways – infection through pollination is only one of the forest’s subtler ways of influence. Even though initially pictured as evil, the forest of Novik is not to be defeated: the people of the land eventually learn the ways of cooperation with this living and breathing landscape.

attention to the skillset of plants portrayed in the text and remain sceptic whenever the narrative takes anthropomorphisation too far. Bear in mind, that marginalisation has a similar effect on plants as it does on marginalised groups of people. As Michael Marder observes, a plant can also become a subaltern: once given a voice, it ceases to be a plant (Marder 2013, 33).

Hybridity

In a plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy, we should also pay attention to the ways vegetal Otherness is described and enacted in narratives. In almost all its manifestation, fantasy includes a confrontation with the Other. The Other often takes on the role of the intruder, and the trajectory it follows is similar to what Farah Mendlesohn describes as the trajectory we see in intrusion fantasy: “the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled.” (Mendlesohn 2008, 115). In a plant-conscious analysis, the intruding vegetal Otherness might be negotiated through a close observation of its components. Such scrutiny very often leads to the unravelling of familiar components within the utterly unfamiliar. Hybridity is a common tool in all speculative fiction to manifest the uncanny – and, in many cases, to pave the road towards a reconciliation of the human and the nonhuman. It should be one of the major aims of a plant-conscious analysis to cast light on the composition and consequences of this hybridity.

Interconnectivity

The plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should also be sensitive to the ways these texts attempt to blur the nature–culture divide. Hybridity might also be used to this end. The Mythago novels, as the textual analyses will reveal in more detail, are intriguing examples in this respect: the mythagos are made of bone and wood, they are fully human in appearance, yet remain inseparable from Ryhope Wood. In their very body, the nature–culture divide dissolves. Agency, perspective, and communication could also be used to renegotiate the relationship between the human and more-than-human world¹⁹ – in this respect, the above-described eco- and plant philosophical terminology may aid textual analysis. Depending on the expanse of the

¹⁹ The author of this dissertation also wrote about the questions of vegetal agency and how it might aid the renegotiation of human–nonhuman relationships in her article “Vegetal Magic: Agnieszka’s Journey to the Understanding of the Vegetal Other in Naomi Novik’s *Uprooted*” (see Rusvai 2022). This paper reveals that the titular ‘vegetal magic’ is the key tool in renewing our relationship with nature. Firstly, to obtain vegetal magic, the young protagonist, Agnieszka has to challenge an established system of knowledge and evidently rewrite its rules. Secondly, this entails a non-rational, almost artistic modification of human language. And thirdly, this new form of language consciously deconstructs previous anthropocentric semiotics. All three are worth considering not only when fighting against a seemingly ruthless magical wood, but also when we have to face the consequences of our previous misunderstanding of the natural Other.

authorial toolkit, there might be multiple other methods that point towards interconnectivity, and a plant-conscious analysis should identify these on all levels of the text.

Empowering Plants

Plants are marginalised in the man-made power structures of the world – but fantasy has a potential to challenge and subvert these structures. In a plant-conscious analysis of fantasy, we should pay attention to the methods that empower the vegetal. In this, all the above listed aspects play a role. Visibility, the ability to communicate, a realisation of underlying familiarity between separate groups – each of these has its part in combating marginalisation. However, the real key to the empowerment of plants in mythic fantasy is through plant agency. Agency could be understood on multiple levels and forms; I suggest that the plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should pay special attention to the following:

- plants as agents in human–nonhuman relationships
- plants as plot agents
- plants as worldbuilders

3.3 Overview of the Plant-Visibility Strategies

If we wish to combat the consequences of the global climate crisis and build a liveable future, we should drastically revise our attitudes towards the more-than-human world. The plant-visibility strategies, devised for the plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy, could be a small step towards this much needed shift in perspective. The aim of this set of strategies is to cast light on the ways mythic fantasy can potentially disclose our anthropocentric view of the world and reveal what limitations this perspective entails. Relying on a combination of methods from fantasy theory and critical plant studies, the components of the strategy set could be summarized as follows:

1. speculative reading

The plant-conscious analysis of fantasy requires an open mindset to literary analysis and a readiness to depart from the common cultural and political frameworks.

2. storied identity

Nature itself is a story of the incessant interactions of beings, and if we wish to read fantasy in a more ecocentric way, we should recognize plants as characters in this overarching narrative.

3. beyond anthropocentrism

A plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should pay attention to the ways plants surprise us by escaping our comfort zone of anthropocentric thinking.

4. subversion of anthropocentrism

The recognition that meaning is ultimately a human construct is the great liberation fantasy offers – and it has significant ecological consequences. A plant-conscious analysis of fantasy should pay special attention to the roles plants play in the deconstruction of anthropocentrism.

5. the skillset of plants

The plant-conscious researcher should pay meticulous attention to how the skillset of plant is described or expanded in fantasy and to what consequences it entails to plant–human relationships.

6. the Otherness of plants

The plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should dive into the ways how vegetal Otherness is described, what confrontations with the human may occur and whether these encounters lead towards a reconciliation between human and nonhuman.

7. blurring the nature–culture divide

To unravel the multiple roles plants play in fantasy narratives, the plant-conscious analyst should identify the methods fantasy authors apply to blur the nature–culture divide via plant characters.

8. empowering plants

A plant-conscious analysis of texts should look into the ways mythic fantasy can subvert the marginalisation of plants with a special attention to the various manifestations of plant agency.

Part II: Textual Analyses

Mythago Genesis

Texts from the *Mythago Cycle* offer multiple definitions for mythagos. Since the term itself was devised by George Huxley, the most obvious source of it is his journal that appears in all Mythago novels. In *The Hollowing* we read: “The word “Mythago” – Lacan pronounced it with the stress on the “a” – was Huxley’s coinage, and derived from “myth imago” or image of myth.” (Holdstock 1995, 65). In “The Bone Forest,” a short story that might serve as a prequel to *Mythago Wood*, the reader can also glimpse into Huxley’s personal diary: “I have coined the word *mythago* to describe these creatures of forgotten legend. This is from ‘myth imago’, or *the image of the myth*.” (Holdstock 2009a, 351). For our present eco-critical considerations, Tallis’ description of mythagos in *Lavondyss* might be the most interesting as it greatly stress the interconnectivity of beings past and present: “Our old selves. Our dead selves. Ourselves of *thousands* of years ago.” (Holdstock 2015, 144).

And it is not only that these forms connect us with our past but they are created through an interaction between the human and the vegetal. According to Huxley’s journal, mythagos are “from the unheard, unseen communication between our common human *unconscious* and the vibrant, almost tangible sylvan mind of the wood itself. The wood watches, it listens, and it draws out our dreams...” (Holdstock 2009a, 351–352). In “The Bone Forest” the process is described as “the passage of memory from mind to wood” (Holdstock 2009a, 357). The same text also reveals what happens to these memories: “Ryhope Wood, the sylvan-awareness drawing out human dreams and fashioning forgotten memories into living organisms” (Holdstock 2009a, 369) and also “out of mind, into the forest, to become shaped, then no doubt to return to haunt me” (Holdstock 2009a, 370). Throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, different protagonists search for the explanation of this uncanny phenomenon starting out from George Huxley’s quasi-scientific observations: “The old man believed that all life is surrounded by an energetic aura – you can see the human aura as a faint glow in certain light. In these ancient woodlands, *primary woodlands*, the combined aura forms something far more powerful, a sort of creative field that can interact with our unconscious.” (Holdstock 2014a, 39).

The process of mythago genesis entails two important considerations for our present analysis. Firstly, Holdstock manages to endow trees with a supernatural skill without obviously anthropomorphising them through the addition of speech or mobility. Secondly, through the human mind’s interaction with this mysterious sylvan mind, Holdstock greatly complicates the

questions of agency. Mythagos are drawn to their creators (cf. Holdstock 1995, 84–85), but each human who tries to objectify a mythago of his own creation has to pay the price. Even Paul Kincaid seems to be slightly disturbed by the ambivalence of agency in *Mythago Wood*: “Who is the author of these stories, these identities?” he asks (Kincaid 2022, 71). In the following textual analyses, I will try to answer this question. But before that, I will briefly describe Holdstock’s subsequent visits²⁰ to Ryhope Wood and highlight how each text may contribute to a better understanding of plants.

Primary Texts

Mythago Wood (1984)

George Huxley moves into the immediate vicinity of Ryhope Wood in the English countryside, so that he can study the mysteries of the forest. His obsession with mythago genesis slowly devours him to the detriment of himself and his family. When his younger son, Steven returns home from WW2 he finds out that his brother, Christian has already fallen under the influence of the wood. Christian is madly in love with the mythago Guiwenneth who dies early in the novel but is later re-generated through the power of the wood – only that know each Huxley brother thinks that the beautiful Celtic woman is his creation. In hope of finding their object of desire, Steven and Christian adopt a colonizer attitude towards the woodland, but eventually they are both consumed by Ryhope and become part of this strange ecosystem.

Lavondyss (1988)

Lavondyss is another visit to the mysterious woodland realm – that is, another interaction between a human and the nonhuman, with possibly the most tragic outcome of all the Mythago novels. When Harry Keeton (a character the reader should know from *Mythago Wood*) disappeared in the woodland, his sister Tallis was an infant, but her childhood is shadowed by the absence of her brother. At thirteen, Tallis is determined to find Harry in Ryhope Wood. Unlike the male characters who used quasi-scientific methods, Tallis relies on shamanistic practices (magic names, masks and mythic clues) when trying to navigate the forest interior. Eventually, she reaches the innermost realm Lavondyss where she embarks on a frightening journey through which she is transformed into a tree. This tree-Tallis then finally sees the far-reaching consequences of her own actions and learns that she herself is responsible for her

²⁰ To the question whether the second novel is a sequel to the first, Holdstock provides the following answer on his website: “So *Lavondyss* is not a sequel to *Mythago Wood*, but rather a new visit, crammed with echoes of past visits, but seeking new answers to old mysteries.” (Holdstock 2007).

brother's original entrapment. This revelation aids her in releasing the birds of the ancient "Bird Spirit Land" but Tallis herself, now returned to the body of an old woman, can never be released from Ryhope Wood.

The Hollowing (1993)

This novel reveals to a greater extent that Ryhope Wood is indeed a mental landscape as it meticulously manifests the contents of young Alex Bradley's mind. The boy gets lost in the wood after he meets the desperate James Keeton (Tallis' father from *Lavondyss*). Alex's father Richard embarks on a similar journey as Keeton did to find his son. He is aided by a team of scientists determined to unravel the secrets of Ryhope. In this novel, the scientific and shamanistic attempts at understanding the wood are found intermingled: even the scientist characters rely on magical clues and folk traditions. Holdstock applies a relatively diverse set of characters each of whom is affected by the woodland in a slightly different way. Unlike *Lavondyss*, *The Hollowing* is concluded in a happy reunion, although the reader never learns whether Alex and his father will succeed in returning to the human world.

Merlin's Wood (1994)

Only loosely connected to the *Mythago Cycle*, *Merlin's Wood* takes place by the French wood of Broceliande, and focuses on a certain piece of the Merlin legendarium: the never-ending fight between Merlin and Vivien. The major difference between Ryhope Wood and Broceliande is that the latter's source of power is the two magicians and no arboreal agency is visible on the surface (even though the source of Merlin's magic is not clearly defined). Nevertheless, this novel also has a couple of aspects that are important for our present considerations. Firstly, it is clear that the woodland has a profound effect on all people living in its vicinity. Secondly, the fact that children interact differently with Brocelinda's magic might be easily paralleled with Ryhope's interaction with the teenage mind as described in *Lavondyss* and in *The Hollowing*.

Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn (1997)

"*Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn* brings the Cycle full circle," Holdstock writes. "In *Mythago Wood*, Christian, one of the two sons of the scientist and explorer George Huxley, becomes lost in the wood in more ways than one, and ends up a brutal and almost unrecognisable version of his more youthful self." (Holdstock 2007). In *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn* the reader learns how this monstrous version of Christian came to be when the original trauma of losing his mother began to interact with the immense power of Ryhope Wood.

Avilion (2009)

As Holdstock describes it, *Avilion* is “the closest I am able to come to a sequel to the original story” (Holdstock 2009b). With regard to its plotline, *Avilion* is indeed a sequel as it continues to follow the struggles of the Huxleys and Guiwenneth extended with the difficulties faced by the half-mythago children of Steven and Guiwenneth. Nevertheless, this novel relies more heavily on meta-narrativity inasmuch as it keeps organizing and re-organizing plotlines described in the previous Mythago novels and it boldly investigates new possibilities of (half)humans’ interactions with the woodland. However, in *Avilion*, the trees are not only retreating from Oak Lodge but also from interacting with and manipulating the intended storyline. The focus returns to and remains with the human.

Short Stories

Holdstock wrote multiple short stories that apply the concept of Mythago Wood. Most of these were published as a single volume under the title, *The Bone Forest* (1991). The present dissertation refers to only some of them, but it gives more attention to the titular story. “The Bone Forest” is acknowledged by Holdstock as a Mythago tale that is “set before the rest of the *Mythago Cycle*” (Holdstock 2009a, 454) and it tells a tale of the Huxley brothers’ childhood uncovering some background details that are useful in the analysis of the *Mythago Cycle*. Originally, Holdstock wrote this short story upon a screenwriter’s request who wished to learn some more details about the Huxleys’ backstory (Holdstock 2009a, 454). Sadly, no Mythago Wood movie has been made ever since.

I. Encounters of the Vegetal Kind

4. Identity

4.1 Plants as Persons

Matthew Hall's book of the same title (*Plants as Persons*, 2011) suggests new modes of thinking about and encountering plants. He argues that our long-time devaluation of the plant kingdom is at the core of the nature–culture divide (Hall 2011, 157). Thus, in order to combat the disastrous consequences of the fissure between humans and their environment, we are required to re-negotiate our relationship with vegetal life. In the concluding chapter of his book, Hall summarizes the components of considering plants as persons. Firstly, plants should be introduced into the ethical discourse. This moral inclusion might be carried out in multiple ways, however, for our present considerations, “dialogical engagement” is the most important (Hall 2011, 161). Hall highlights that “to bring about dialogue, the autonomous, communicative presence of nonhumans needs to be recognized and affirmed.” (Hall 2011, 161). We can only meet plants on equal terms if we stop projecting our expectations and limitations on them and accept their innate characteristics and capacities.

It can prove difficult to follow Hall's guidance in our everyday encounters with plants, reading fantasy, however, may provide some intellectual aid in revising our attitudes. As a mode of fiction that is apt to provide the nonhuman with personhood, fantasy has a potential to bring those characteristics of plants into the foreground that would be obliterated by our plant blindness. This chapter discusses how plant identity is depicted throughout the *Mythago Cycle* and what tools Holdstock applies to show that plant and human identities intermingle within the uncanny depth of Ryhope. I argue that Holdstock starts out from the most common, anthropocentric attitudes towards the woodland and gradually subverts these prejudices to reveal that human and nonhuman identities are in fact inseparable within the sylvan realm. Even though Holdstock applies protagonists of various backgrounds and genders, the main character arcs follow a single trajectory: the wood intrudes upon the person's mind and it has to be faced and negotiated with to establish a new status quo. In this pure iteration of the Mendlesohnian intrusion fantasy scenario, the various aspects of plant identity (or plant personhood) play a key role in plant–human encounters. The chapter suggests four terms for the identification of Ryhope (superorganism, metaphor, hyperobject, character) and describes how each of them contributes to a more eco-conscious understanding of the *Mythago Cycle*.

4.2 Woodlands through the Anthropocentric Gaze

We might hold the nature–culture divide responsible for our alienation from the natural world, the truth, however, is, that our very concept of nature is problematic on multiple levels. A common approach that fantasy fiction relies on in the depiction of the natural world is through the application of the sublime. Modern fantasy has been in such awe of the sublime that it developed its own version of it: the fantastic sublime. The term was coined by David Sandner and he traces its origin to Tolkien: “Tolkien's Consolation is the fantastic sublime, drawn from the Romantic tradition of the natural sublime, both extending and revising it.” (Sandner 1997, 6). Sandner defines the fantastic sublime by its effect on the reader: “The fantastic sublime must move the reader to glimpse beyond the printed page, because the sublime does not lie in the text at all, but reveals, beyond it, Joy, with a capital J. The fantastic sublime, like the natural sublime, requires a visionary to arouse wonder and desire, fear of loss of identity and a sudden rising above "poignant as grief.”” (Sandner 1997, 6). The fantastic sublime, apparently, is kin to Tolkien’s eucatastrophe inasmuch as it offers consolation and hope in the face of threatening forces. Sandner’s description of the fantastic sublime also resonates with the *Mythago* novels: “In fantasy literature, the reader is invited, perhaps tricked by Will o’ Wisps, into the primeval forest. As the simple power of the fairy tale narrative proves, no seeker comes into the forests of Faerie without wanting, without needing to come there. And nobody returns unchanged.” (Sandner 1997, 6). The fantastic sublime in this respect is a tool that allows the darker side of nature to seep into a fantasy world without the elimination of hope.

And it is exactly what happens in the *Mythago Cycle*: the wood mercilessly sucks out all the suppressed contents of the human mind and is unconcerned about whether these people are ready to face their fear, guilt or shame materialised. At certain points this process may induce moments of the fantastic sublime – at others, however, it is deeply unsettling. Freud claims that fiction provides more opportunities for creating uncanny sensations than real life (Freud 2004, 98) and Holdstock’s fiction seizes this opportunity on multiple occasions. According to Freud’s definition, “[a]n uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (Freud 2004, 96), and we have to realize that our relationship with the natural world is ridden with repressed infantile complexes and primitive beliefs we are trying to cover with the bandages of science. Woodlands are the places of our infancy as human species – no wonder that wandering too deep inside them might sound like regression. But is it?

When we look at nature, our vantage point is still very much that of hegemonic white masculinity. Our anthropocentric view of the world owes a lot to this white, male gaze that systematically objectifies and commodifies its environment, labelling all living and non-living beings according to their perceived usefulness. Thus, our relationship to nature and to the plant kingdom cannot be re-negotiated until we disclose, challenge and eventually subvert the hegemony of white masculinity. Jacob Burg assumes that certain myths can serve as a tool in this process: “Myths of (un)creation deconstruct this figure, who has been the face of the Anthropos and the dominant figure in commercial fantasy, by reexamining his relationship to time and family.” (Burg 2022, 210). In the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock creates multiple white male characters, whose initial perceptions of Ryhope Wood is through the male gaze. This is quite obvious in the first novel, *Mythago Wood*, in which the possession of a single mythago form Guiwenneth causes major conflict among George Huxley and his two sons, Christian and Steven. A male characters’ obsession with a female mythago of his own creation is also prevalent in one side character of *The Hollowing*, Lacan, a French man looking for his wife, Mathilde. In these male characters’ search for the desired woman, the wood becomes a hindrance to overcome. This antagonistic attitude towards Ryhope is gradually dismissed as it occasionally gives way to fascination by the woodland – sometimes rising to the fantastic sublime. For the latter, a moment from *The Hollowing* is a good example, when Richard and Lytton glimpse a heron in Ryhope that has gone extinct thousands of years ago in the real world (Holdstock 1995, 100). Some male characters (like Steven Huxley and Harry Keeton in *Mythago Wood*) develop genuine interest in the ever-changing vegetation of the woodland. In *The Hollowing*, Holdstock also depicts the conservationist attitude to nature, yet he uses it to display its inherent contradictions. Lytton, a member of the scientist team encamped in Ryhope wishes to restore the “original” state of the wood. He takes an antagonistic attitude towards the young boy, Alex, whose interaction with the wood initiates radical changes in the landscape. Lytton says: “He is like a tumor at the heart of the world, eroding, destroying the subtlety and beauty of Huxley’s creation.” (Holdstock 1995, 103). Even though these characters definitely possess characteristics of hegemonic white masculinity, none of them gets to kill his Humbaba to master the wooden realm. Instead, their white man identity is gradually deconstructed as they are forced to face the materialized forms of their mind’s repressed content. Some of them do become primitive. For instance, Christian Huxley seems to give up his moral compass in order to fulfil his desires (in *Mythago Wood*; *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn*; and *Avilion*), and Richard Bradley temporarily goes savage (or bosky as Holdstock terms it) in *The Hollowing*. But regression is a concept that can only be defined from an anthropocentric vantage point – and it

is exactly this vantage point that is deconstructed in the *Mythago Cycle*. From the woodland's point of view, a (by human terms) immoral Christian and a bosky Richard play a more fruitful role in the ever-renewing ecosystem of Ryhope. In the following, I offer four terms to be applied for the description of this uncanny woodland and show how each of them aids us to see forests in less anthropocentric terms.

4.3 What Is Ryhope Wood?

4.3.1 Superorganism

When Steven Huxley and Harry Keeton attempt to fly over Ryhope Wood, this is what they see: “a sea of grey green, rippling in the wind, looking almost organic, a single entity, breathing and shifting restlessly beneath the unwelcome aerial gaze” (Holdstock 2014a, 88). Later on, Harry describes the wood in his diary as “A hundred forests in one.” (Holdstock 2014a, 190). When Steven muses about how the mythago Guiwenneth was created, he also describes Ryhope as a “whole complex life form” (Holdstock 2014a, 104). In the opening lines of Holdstock's last Mythago novel, *Avilion*, we read that “Ryhope Wood is as ancient as the Ice Age, primal, undisturbed for twelve thousand years; and it is semi-sentient.” (Holdstock 2010, 1). Throughout the other Mythago novels there are a number of clues that suggest that Ryhope is in fact a “single entity” that exists through the cooperation of all animate and inanimate beings within its realm. Communication within the body of this vast superorganism seems to be carried through a system that is similar to the wood wide web. For instance, Alex, the teenage protagonist of *The Hollowing* is carried through the wood by the “Big Dream,” a process that is elsewhere referred to as “sharing the rootweb” (Holdstock 1995, 37). We also learn that thought may flow through this web (38), and when Alex is connected to it, he is able to enter his father's mind and listen to his thoughts: “his head [was] full, now, of the lost man's inner voice” (39). Occasionally, even people's appearance is described as if they belonged to the wood: “For a second she had seemed a part of the tree and its root system, but now she stood, breathing hard and extending a friendly hand.” (Holdstock 1995, 43). This is how Helen Silverlock is described when Richard Bradley speaks with her the first time. Long-term stays within Ryhope seem to affect the human body as well: the young protagonist in *Lavondyss*, Tallis feels disturbed when she realizes that her eye colour turned green (Holdstock 2015, 220) – and this is definitely not the worst of the bodily transformations that eventually happen to her.

If Ryhope is indeed a complex, single entity, it means that all its components are supposed to cooperate or should be submitted to cooperation so that the entire superorganism could be maintained. The concept of the superorganism, however, defies our anthropocentric

logic that any large system should be hierarchically ordered. In Ryhope, there is no mastermind to rule over the sylvan realm. Instead, animate and inanimate beings form a collective identity driven by the common urge to keep the ecosystem reproducing itself. At the time the *Mythago* novels were published this was an unusual way to depict a magic wood. Following in Tolkien's footsteps, many fantasy authors stuck to the depiction of moral landscapes where the demeanour of any space would be determined by its owner (typical examples include Lothlórien shaped by the power of the high elves and Mordor shaped by the evil of Sauron). A glaring counter example is the sci-fi short story "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" (1971) by Ursula K. Le Guin. In this text, Le Guin describes a planet covered in sentient vegetation. The mind of this plant superorganism is described as de-centralised and non-hierarchical – similar to what we see in the *Mythago* novels. Nevertheless, whilst the scientifically correct description of plants was more than welcome in science fiction at the time, it was quite unusual for an 1980s fantasy novel to pay attention to the plantness of plants in a reiteration of the magic wood topos.

Viewing Ryhope Wood as a single, competent entity should not obliterate the individual beings that are its components. In this sense, Ryhope becomes synonymous with 'real' nature. In the culturally constructed version of nature, humans visualize themselves as masters of the biosphere so that they can repress the reality of our being equal players in a large and humanly uncontrollable system. In this real form of nature that Ryhope represents individuals are free to strive for their own goals but eventually each step they take plays into the common goal of sustaining the superorganism they are part of.

4.3.2 Metaphor

As the set of plant-visibility strategies revealed, attention to the various ways the impossible is included in fantasy fiction is key to the analysis of such texts – and they are also essential for the plant-conscious reading of mythic fantasy. Frequently, the impossible enters the text through a materialisation of metaphors. Here's how Steven Huxley describes this phenomenon in *Mythago Wood*: "The woods were alive with the creations of my own mind." (Holdstock 2014a, 81). To describe the complex influence metaphors have on our fiction and our life, I will rely on the inclusive and thought-provoking description of the metaphor by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who claim that "[o]ur ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature." (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 4). Thus a metaphor is a mode of thought that is part of our mental equipment, it is inherent to the way we think. Lakoff and Johnson also point out that metaphors not only influence our life down to its mundane details but more importantly, our choice of metaphors

influence how we perceive the world and how we interact with other people (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 4). Taking this statement a step further, metaphors also influence how we treat the more-than-human world. Metaphors have the potential to expand our reality and our thinking capacity, or as Brian Attebery writes, “metaphors carry us across the gap between the known and the unknown” (Attebery 2022, 10). Metaphors may also serve as multi-purpose tools in the eco-critical discourse, as they call attention to the similarities and connectedness of things and thus help to blur binary oppositions. Metaphors are elusive, easy to transform, and are capable of linking physical entities and abstractions on multiple levels. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors reveal the limitations of the myth of objectivism (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 210). In their view, an adequate account of our experience of the world should consider “viewing objects only as entities relative to our interactions with the world and our projections on it” and “viewing properties as interactional rather than inherent” and thirdly, “viewing categories as experiential gestalts defined via proto-type instead of viewing them as rigidly fixed and defined via set theory” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 210). The myth of objectivism as described by Lakoff and Johnson clearly resonate with our anthropocentric view of the world and the steps they suggest for a more adequate account of our experience could also mean a way to subvert anthropocentrism through the application of metaphors.

As the above quote has shown, mythagos can easily be interpreted as materialised metaphors. Metaphors, however, are to be found on all levels of the description of Ryhope Wood. Mythagos, metaphors themselves often carry out magic that is itself metaphoric and it figuratively connects the various entities of the woodland. Examples include the little wood pieces Ash (a trickster character that has a significant role in *Lavondyss* and in *Avilion*) that are substitutes for the different regions of the forest, or the hollowsticks, the tiny wooden dolls that are made in resemblance to their creators and are placed at the mouths of hollowings so that they may ease their owners return (described in detail in *The Hollowing*). Whilst the rootweb creates a physical bond among the various entities that make up Ryhope, metaphors are responsible for a psychic system of inter-connection. Thus, we might perceive Ryhope Wood as the ur-metaphor, the mental landscape of the collective unconscious that harbours a million metaphors in constant fluctuation.

4.3.3 Hyperobject

The third term that can be applied to Ryhope Wood for a more eco- and plant-conscious understanding of its role in the *Mythago Cycle* is Timothy Morton’s aforementioned term, the hyperobject. Morton identifies five key characteristics of hyperobjects: viscosity, nonlocality,

temporal undulation, phasing, interobjectivity (Morton 2013, 24). These qualities could be easily applied to describe Ryhope Wood. Morton writes about the viscosity of hyperobjects: “While hyperobjects are near, they are also very uncanny.” (Morton 2013, 28). A similar viscosity is perceptible in the description of Ryhope: from the outside, it appears to be a perfectly ordinary, small patch of woodland on a rural estate, complete with the ‘KEEP OUT’ signs all readers of English literature are familiar with. Local people do gossip about the uncanny qualities of the wood but most of them decide to ignore it – and their voluntary plant blindness indeed keeps them safe. Hyperobjects are also nonlocal which means that “any ‘local manifestation’ of a hyper-object is not directly the hyperobject” (Morton 2013, 1). This statement is specifically true for Ryhope, as its humble size as perceived from the outside reveals nothing about its internal vastness. Similarly, each *mythoscape* (natural settings associated with mythic narratives materialised through the mytho-genetic process) is in itself a manifestation of Ryhope but it cannot represent Ryhope as a hyperobject in its entirety.

Hyperobjects subvert our anthropocentric perception of time as they exist in a state of temporal undulation: “They [the hyperobjects] involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to.” (Morton 2013,1). As Chapter 7 will reveal, time moves in a unique way in Ryhope Wood. Even though it always moves forward, it does so at a different space in different parts of the forest. Humans entering the wooden realm may get trapped in a timeslow or their aging is sped up. For instance, Alex, the teenage boy in *The Hollowing* remains thirteen years old all the time he spends in Ryhope, while many years pass in the outside world. Tallis, the young protagonist of *Lavondyss* grows old when she embarks on a journey in the first forest and lives through an ice age version of the narrative she is tied to.

About the phased nature of hyperobjects Morton writes: “Hyperobjects seem to phase in and out of the human world. Hyperobjects are phased: they occupy a high-dimensional phase space that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional humanscale basis.” (Morton 2013, 70). Similarly, Ryhope is incomprehensible for humans on many levels. Both shamanistic and scientific attempts at figuring out the wood’s spatiotemporal structure bring no real breakthrough. Attempts at having a look at the forest in its entirety always fail, even when Ryhope pretends to be a small patch of countryside wood. For instance, in *Mythago Wood*, Harry Keeton and Steven Huxley fly over the wood in a small plane but are eventually deterred by a sudden, unexplainable storm.

According to Morton, hyperobjects are also able to disclose interobjectivity (Morton 2013, 81). In his view, all objects in our surroundings form “interobjective systems” (Morton 2013, 83) but hyperobjects are the prime examples of “interobjectivity—namely, the way in

which nothing is ever experienced directly, but only as mediated through other entities in some shared sensual space.” (Morton 2013, 86). In the *Mythago Cycle*, fantasy as a mode is applied to extend this interobjectivity to imaginary concepts and creatures. In *Ryhope Wood*, the hidden contents of the human mind are mediated through the trees and through this process the shared space (the “mindscape”) of the wood itself is created. Human protagonists can only have access to the contents of their unconscious through the mediation of the trees that materialise the ancient narratives hidden in human minds.

If we strictly consider these five qualities of hyperobjects (viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing, interobjectivity) we might assume that they are in fact so elusive as if they belonged to fantasy fiction. In many respects, some hyperobjects do belong to fantasy, but that is what Marek Oziewicz calls “the fantasy of the Anthropocene,” by which he understands the “mistaken belief that we are masters of the planet” (Oziewicz 2022, 58). The fact that certain hyperobjects such as global warming seem impossible to grasp are one of the reasons their effect on us can be so destructive. If we are unable to explain what global warming is, where it is, how it came to be, and how exactly it affects us, then we will not be able to make any measures to subdue the harm it causes. Coming to terms with the multifaceted meanings of the hyperobject is one of the great challenges of the Anthropocene. Interestingly, fantasy fiction may aid us in finding the solution. As Markus Laukkanen argues, the way fantasy literalizes metaphors can be a road to grasp the hyperobjects in a way that otherwise would be impossible (Laukkanen 2022, 241). The major problem with real-life hyperobjects is that their elusiveness renders them practically invisible. Due to the sheer complexity of its interobjective network, global warming cannot be dissected into clearly identifiable causes and effects. We are unlikely to see a direct link between today’s car-drive to work and next year’s summer heat waves. It is easy to deny individual responsibility. *Ryhope Wood*, however, is a hyperobject that we cannot ignore – or at least cannot ignore within the realm of the novel. If the reader wants to understand the plot, she is forced to face *Ryhope*’s complexity and immensity. She is also invited to unravel the wood’s interobjective network: an intricate system of both physical objects and symbols, metaphors, narrative elements that interact with each other over all texts of the *Mythago Cycle*. Gaining some experience of the hyperobject this way may urge the reader to start deciphering hyperobjects in real life.

4.3.4 Character

Ryhope Wood might be seen as a superorganism in a scientific understanding, a metaphor if we think about it figuratively, or a hyperobject if it is observed from an eco-

philosophical perspective, but if we wish to identify it according to its role in the plot of the novels, then Ryhope should be defined as a character on its own right. Landscapes in modern fantasy are often given more multifaceted roles than providing the background for the narrated events, however, Ryhope Wood is more than that as the wood has a central role in initiating conflict in all the *Mythago* novels. In each case, it is the trees' penetration of the human mind that sets things in motion, and in this sense, Ryhope can be identified as the intruder according to Farah Mendlesohn's aforementioned fantasy taxonomy. Mendlesohn argues that even though *Mythago Wood* appears to be a portal fantasy at first glance, the power relations Holdstock applies are radically different (Mendlesohn 2008, 154). Whilst in portal fantasies "the protagonist retains the upper hand over the otherworld" (Mendlesohn 2008, 154), in *Mythago Wood* the secondary world works differently as "all the power is with the wood" (Mendlesohn 2008, 154). As Mendlesohn points out, the way the main characters behave (including Steven's helplessness in the face of the unknown and Huxley's stubborn belief in his hypotheses about the wood) only increase their vulnerability to Ryhope (Mendlesohn 2008, 155).

What all this boils down to is that Ryhope as a character has an agency not only over human characters but also over the story itself. But to whom does this agency belong? Some sentences suggest that it is a vegetal agency, and the trees are themselves able to suck out the contents of the unconscious mind. However, considering all the above discussed phenomena, since Ryhope is a single, complex entity, it is more likely that agency is also a shared capacity, part vegetal, part animal, part inanimate – much like the way real-life woodlands affect us, because they do intermingle with our minds albeit not as harshly as Ryhope does. This agency, however, remains practically unidentifiable in the novels, approached differently by different characters. Male protagonists, for instance, generally see themselves as creators in the mythogenetic process and they are reluctant to admit that they are used by the woodland to its own end. When in *The Hollowing*, the scientist Lytton describes the process to Richard he proudly says: "Mr. Bradley, you're creating life, although you don't know it." (Holdstock 1995, 108). The description becomes a bit more ambivalent when he continues: "Out there, the wood is listening to you, feeding off you, enriching both itself and its underworlds from you. It's drawing out your dreams, your memories, your fears." (Holdstock 1995, 108). The words of Tallis' grandfather in *Lavondyss* are even more enigmatic: "... the wood is us and we are the wood!" (Holdstock 2015, 4). Who is the creator then?

In understanding the agency possessed by Ryhope Wood, I would like to suggest three terms from eco-criticism: intra-action, the agency of assemblages, and trans-corporeality. Karen Barad's neologism, intra-action, "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That

is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad 2007, 33). If we have a closer look at the mytho-genetic process as described in the *Mythago Cycle*, no distinct agencies are identifiable: each component of the superorganism contributes to the never ceasing process of mythago creation that constantly re-generates the body of Ryhope Wood. Moreover, intra-action “allows human and nonhuman bodies and meanings to co-emerge and, respectively, establish meanings in and through textual and material bodies” (Karkulehto et al. 2020, 7).

The second term to describe the agency of Ryhope Wood is Jane Bennett’s agency of assemblages. She argues that we have largely misunderstood human agency which is, in fact, also an agency of assemblages: “There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore.” (Bennett 2009, 31). Ryhope Wood is similarly an assemblage of human and nonhuman components. By claiming this I do not wish to limit the significance of vegetal agency, but instead, I intend to acknowledge the plantness of plants inasmuch as their existence is defined through their embeddedness in their environment with which they cooperate.

The third term that can cast more light on Ryhope’s agency is trans-corporeality, coined by Stacy Alaimo. Trans-corporeality is most simply defined as “the transit between body and environment” (Alaimo 2010, 15) referring mostly to the “material interchanges between bodies” (Alaimo 2010, 16). Trans-corporeality is a tricky term, as it appears to be local, located in our body, and still it has a global significance and is extended to wider networks (Alaimo 2010, 15-16). Moreover, “trans-corporeality denies the human subject the sovereign, central position” (Alaimo 2010, 16), hence, it may contribute to the deconstruction of hegemonic white masculinity. The exchange of materials between body and environment acquires an extra twist in the *Mythago* novels, where contents of the collective unconscious also count as material to be exchanged. Like the above two terms, trans-corporeality also reveals the complexity of how agency may appear, and it identifies agency as by nature non-hierarchical.

4.4 Vegetal Democracy

Superorganism, metaphor, hyperobject, and character – what conclusion could be drawn that sums up all these diverse concepts? In each case the vegetal cannot be separated from its environment, instead, it forms a vibrant, pulsating system with it. A system that grabs and incorporates every living being that enters the wooden realm. This could be justly seen as a

threatening force to Western-type individualism – and it is depicted by Holdstock as such in many respects. In one way or in other, protagonists eventually submit to the power of Ryhope Wood. On the one hand, they have to pay the price for their intrusion into the arboreal realm, but on the other hand, they are mentally enriched by the experience. There is no eucatastrophe in Holdstock’s oeuvre in a strictly Tolkienian sense, yet at the ending of each *Mythago* novel (wo)man and nature become inseparable. The fluidity of identities expressed in the concept of Ryhope Wood could be grasped by Michael Marder’s term, vegetal democracy (Marder 2013, 51). Vegetal democracy by its very nature works against binary oppositions: “If the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an ontopolitical effect of plant-soul, then it must, like this very soul, eschew the metaphysical binaries of Self and Other, life and death, interiority and exteriority.” (Marder 2013, 53). In *Ryhope Wood*, these oppositions are gradually dissolved, as human and nonhuman identities become less and less distinct. “So is that environmentalist speech that demands that we “get back to Nature”—that is, achieve a greater intimacy with things—only half right?” Timothy Morton muses. “Is there nothing to ‘get back to,’ since the problem is not that things are truly distant, but that they are in our face—they are our face?” (Morton 2013, 28). In the *Mythago* novels, Holdstock reveals exactly this face of nature.

5. Body

5.1 *The Deathless Vegetal*

In Chapter 4 I argued that the complexity of Ryhope might be grasped through multiple concepts. Ryhope can be seen as a superorganism, a metaphor, a hyperobject, and a character in the texts of the *Mythago Cycle*. In this chapter, I make a step closer and observe the Otherness of this uncanny woodland in its embodied reality relying mostly on critical plant studies and its subfield, plant horror. As the plant-visibility strategies have revealed, the absolute alterity of plants compared to the human species is rooted in the bodily alterity of the vegetal. Through the anthropocentric gaze, plants are defined by their limitations in comparison to the human body. Consequently, the vegetal Other is seen as immobile, insensitive, physically weak and more importantly, unable to defend itself against (human) force. All these perceived ‘deficits’ of the plant body are used up to this day to justify the abuse and objectification of the plant kingdom.

No wonder we have this limited perception of plants as we only ever get in touch with them through watching, using or consuming their *bodies*. The vegetal mind has been unknown

for ages and only recently have natural sciences and eco-philosophy developed interest in it. For our present consideration, the most interesting assumption of plant philosophy is that a plant's meaning is closely intertwined with its corporeality. As Luce Irigaray observes about trees, "[t]hey say through shaping their own matter." (Irigaray 2017, 129). Plants are not without a mind, but in vegetal Otherness, the body–mind dichotomy collapses. For trees, unlike for humans, bodily growth is a lifelong process through which they create their own meaning. Plant meaning is thus, quite literally, embodied meaning. In comparison, when humans established their place in the Lacanian symbolic order, their corporeal being was separated from their meaning. And by the time the Anthropocene began, they seem to have forgotten about (or suppressed?) their corporeality. Confronting vegetal Otherness in fiction may aid us in the re-discovery of our own embodied identity so that we can heal our artificial separation from the more-than-human world.

In all its above-listed differences, the plant body is perceived by humans as a monstrous body and as such, it is a boundary-crosser and a "harbinger of category crisis" (Cohen 1996, 6). However, it is not only the body–mind dichotomy that collapses in vegetal corporeality: the human perception of the divide between life and death is also blurred by the monstrosity of the plant body. The end of a plant's life is less clearly demarcated than ours. You may cut down a tree, but its stump will be covered in new sprouts the next spring, a carefully chosen twig sets roots into the ground – and there are a hundred other ways through which plants seem to outlive themselves. As Marder points out, "[t]he life of plants is situated on the brink of death, in the zone of indeterminacy between the living and the dead." (Marder 2013, 53). I would not call them immortal in their stubborn defiance against death – that is why I use the word deathless. By this, I understand that vegetal beings have a significantly different death experience than us due to their bodily construction. In the following, I argue that fantasy literature offers multiple tools to lay bare this abject, undead quality of the vegetal.

Displaying monsters is a common way in speculative fiction to show the frightening side of nature, yet in innovative fantasies, the significance of the monstrous runs deeper. As Arasu and Thornton argue, "[t]he monster is a figure in fantasy whose existence suggests the possibility of other modes of being, perceiving, and communicating—ways which challenge anthropocentrism and the teleological hierarchy that places humans as the end-point of evolution. Associated with queerness, liminality, and Otherness, the monster becomes a powerful metonymy for exploring the socially constructed boundaries of normality." (Arasu and Thornton 2022, 153). Thus, in its role as a boundary crosser, the monster potentially becomes a powerful tool in the renegotiation of the human–nature relationship.

Mythagos, created through the mytho-genetic process, are exactly such monsters. They are hybrid beings in two respects. Firstly, they are made up of human *and* vegetal components: the narratives sucked out of human minds give purpose to mythagos, whilst their physical body is created from “leaf and woodland matter” (Holdstock 2009a, 345) or as one mythago Guiwenneth claims, “I am wood and rock, not flesh and bone.” (Holdstock 2014a, 161). Secondly, even though their body is made of woodland matter, it has the appearance and functions of a normal human body. The true nature of mythago bodies is only revealed after death: when they die, their bones turn into deteriorated wood. Throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock provides graphic accounts of this process. The description of the dead body of Tallis’ infant son in *Lavondyss* is a dramatic example. Tallis enters Ryhope as a teenager and later she becomes the lover of Scathach, a half-mythago man. They have a son who lives for five months. Holdstock describes the baby’s remains as follows: “The bones of her son lay exposed at last, the sad wood which they had become crushed and broken after many years of being dragged through the forest and buried beneath her other goods.” (Holdstock 2015, 226). In his next novel, *The Hollowing*, Holdstock depicts hundreds of mythago corpses who fell victim to the protective field around Old Stone Hollow (the main station of the researchers who wish to uncover the secrets of Ryhope): “It was as if a graveyard had been unearthed and scattered. Leaves sprouted on drooping jaws. What appeared to be piles of firewood were hunched, agonized figures, their ribs returning to the earth.” (Holdstock 1995, 84).

Yet no bodies are wasted in Ryhope, as this uncanny woodland is deathless on two levels: on the one hand, it is deathless as a superorganism that manages to continuously rejuvenate and on the other hand, it is deathless on the level of individual mythagos that are also cyclically reborn so that they can continue re-enacting their own narratives. Through this extensive reliance on vegetal deathlessness in his depiction of Ryhope, Holdstock consciously brings the plant body into the focus. In the following, I intend to show that he does even more: he offers a revised definition of the human through the corporeal re-integration of the vegetal.

5.2 A Darker Shade of Reenchantment

In the first part of this dissertation, I argued that our traumatic fissure from the more-than-human world lies at the core of what it means to be human in the Anthropocene. In this section, I focus on our relationship with the plant kingdom as an embodied encounter and I argue that despite the frightening components of vegetal Otherness, seeing plants for what they are in their corporeality entails a form of re-enchantment that help us gain a new perspective on our role within the biosphere.

Tolkienian fantasy literature is generally associated with nostalgic, pastoral, peaceful landscapes. Tolkien himself said in his lecture “On Fairy-Stories”: “To the elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires, and when it is successful of all forms of human art most nearly approaches.” (Tolkien 2008, 64). There is, however, a different meaning of the so-called “green country” in heroic fantasy that brings into view a disturbing combination of ecophilia and ecophobia. Let us consider the following two observations of Ursula K. Le Guin. First, she claims that “Tolkien’s Middle Earth is not just pre-industrial. It is also pre-human and non-human.” (Le Guin 2007, 86). Then she points out that this nonhuman setting “reminds us of what we have denied, what we have exiled ourselves from” (Le Guin 2007, 86). Through these assumptions, Le Guin brings into focus the ambivalent nature of our relationship to the more-than-human world. The major problem with the disenchantment of the modern world is that it simplifies this complexity and mutes the longing for a natural world that we humans can truly participate in. Jane Bennett sums this up as follows: “For me the question is not whether disenchantment is a regrettable or a progressive historical development. It is, rather, whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world. The question is important because the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life.” (Bennett 2001, 3). In my view, the re-enchantment of the world should aim for regaining this “affective attachment to the world,” yet bear in mind that facing the vastness of the “pre-human” world is truly a belittling or even at times frightening experience. *Rewilding* is a term extensively used in connection with projects that work on increasing local biodiversity through human intervention.²¹ Similarly, if we wish to break from the constraints of the Anthropocene, our discourse about nature could also make use of some rewilding: the conscious inclusion of nature’s fearsome and repulsive side. And rewilding the analysis of modern fantasy would also require more focus on the monstrous plant body.

Plant horror is the subfield of critical plant studies that focuses on the abject qualities of plants. Dawn Keetley summarizes plant horror in six theses, three of which are closely related to plant corporeality. Thesis 1 is: “Plants embody an absolute alterity” (Keetley 2016, 6). If we think of this in the physical sense the plant body is indeed the farthest away from the human in

²¹ The well-known rewilding experiments around the world include the Pleistocene Park in Siberia and the wolf reintroduction into the Yellowstone ecosystem among many others. A recent volume that provides a scientific overview of rewilding attempts identifies four types of rewilding (trophic, Pleistocene, translocation, passive) but formulates worries about whether a strict definition of rewilding might actually hinder these processes: “Many practical rewilders worry that definitions of rewilding formulated by academic experts will constrain their ability to innovate and experiment with new approaches to conservation. They fear that international conservation policy-makers will use such definitions to specify what rewilding should or shouldn’t be, and how it should be practised.” (Jepson and Blythe 2020).

its limited mobility, muteness and lack of organs. No wonder, that from our human perspective plants mark an “absolute rupture of the known” – as Keetley’s 6th thesis goes (Keetley 2016, 22). But the most interesting questions are raised by thesis 4: “The human harbors an uncanny constitutive vegetal.” (Keetley 2016, 16). For the plant-conscious analysis of fantasy these three statements bring great potential as they point in the direction that despite their alterity, plant bodies are in fact closer to human bodies than we ever imagined – or ever feared. In this sense, the apparent deathlessness may serve as the ultimate abject through the human eye. As Michael Marder observes “We cannot help but feel a tinge of the uncanny in the demand that we discern the constitutive vegetal Otherness in ourselves.” (Marder 2013, 36). Fantasy, however, does not stop at the point of generating fear. Colin Manlove points out that in horror fiction “the supernatural is left entirely alien, for the point is the shock, the “frisson of the supernatural”, that is experienced both by the characters and the reader.” (Manlove 2004, 164). As opposed to this, familiarity with the Other is key to fantasy texts (Manlove 2004, 165). And more than that: many fantasy texts, the *Mythago Cycle* amongst them, are centred around the construction of the familiarity with the Other, the eventual acceptance of bodies that initially present themselves as the abject.

As described above, mythagos have a plant–human hybrid body. This is how Christian Huxley defines them in *Mythago Wood*: “myth imago, the image of the idealized form of a myth creature. The image takes on substance in a natural environment...” (Holdstock 2014a, 40). The latter observation about substance is key to my following arguments concerning human– mythago encounters. For humans, interacting with a mythago is an uncanny experience in many ways. As detailed in the previous subchapter, a mythago is a hybrid creature in two respects: it is guided by a narrative taken from the human mind, yet its body is made from woodland matter. And despite being made of woodland matter, it has a human shape and human bodily functions. This complexity of the mythago body is achieved through the mytho-genetic process: when the trees of Ryhope Wood suck out the contents of the human mind and materialize them. Thus, a non-material human component is incorporated into a vegetal body. This could readily be considered an instance of plant horror. Nevertheless, the reverse process occurs on a daily basis in the primary world: plant bodies get transformed into human bodies (and thoughts) and all this goes by the name of human metabolism. Through the consumption of vegetal bodies, we are eventually made of plant life. Mythagos thus confront us with the inherent hybridity of all kinds of living bodies within the biosphere. As I described in the previous section, the body–mind dichotomy collapses in vegetal corporeality. Now, I would like to argue that the situation is similar in the case of mythagos. These mythic figures generated

by Ryhope exist in *bodyminds*: the very shape of their body is defined by the narrative that was taken from the human mind that participated in their creation and this non-material inner component is literally inseparable from mythago corporeality.

These qualities of mythagos are decisive in the human–mythago interactions described throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. As Bennett points out, cross-species encounters can be a source of enchantment (Bennett 2001, 17) and inspire wonder (Bennett 2001, 31). However, the situation is more complex when someone is being faced with the monstrous. In such cases, Bennett argues, we should consider the “context of the encounter and the significance of the categorical boundary that they confuse, not to mention the particular body and sensibility that have been affected” (Bennett 2001, 30). The monstrosity of the mythago body is rooted in the above described uncanny human–plant hybridity that makes these creatures both attractive and repulsive in the eyes of the human protagonists. Crossing the human–plant boundary can be frightening in both directions.

In the *Mythago Cycle* it is clearly revealed that the human components of mythagos can induce as much fear as the radical alterity of the plant body, while at times even vegetal Otherness can create wonder and awe. On the one hand, the human side of mythagos also harbours components of disturbing otherness. The free will of mythagos is severely limited, because they are compelled to fulfil their individual quests prescribed by the mythic narratives they participate in. This inner drive is so powerful that it overwrites their moral codes and very often they are ready to ruin their own life so that they can re-enact the story sequence they were born with. All this becomes deeply unsettling when Holdstock reminds his reader that this compulsion to repeat the (harmful) patterns of their ancestors is also deeply embedded in the human protagonists – and into every single human being. On the other hand, the vegetal side of mythagos can also amaze human protagonists and readers. Daurogs, manifestations of the green man archetype, appear in multiple novels of the Cycle, and in their summer forms are ready to aid human protagonists. By appearance, daurogs are anthropomorphised trees that can walk around on long limbs and can talk in weird chatter. On certain occasions they are ready to communicate with humans and even help them. For instance, in the third novel, *The Hollowing*, the teenage protagonist, Alex is taken care of by a female daurog. While the boy is trapped inside the creations of his own mind, she helps him travel through the rootweb and this is how Alex is eventually located by the researchers who team up with the Alex’s father to find the boy.

This complexity of mythagos is further enhanced through the relationship between the mythago and the human whose mind was used in the mythago’s creation. From the human

character's perspective such a mythago is quite literally an uncanny being: it is made partly of the human's Self, yet it is materialised as the (vegetal) Other. Due to this intricate connection between the two, human and mythago are attracted to each other. For the human protagonists, this attraction often results in the objectification of the mythago in a creator–creature scenario where the creator is overwhelmed by the desire to possess its creature. The problem is, however, that no human has full agency in the mytho-genetic process.²² Throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock shows on multiple occasions how human protagonists deceive themselves into believing that they are the true creators of mythagos but in truth, Ryhope always keeps the upper hand. It is a shocking experience when human characters recognise their own powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of the Other. “They [the mythagos] *take* from us,” George Huxley bursts out in *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*. “I should have known that. They reflect us, and they *take* from us. We are them. They are us. Mythagos! Two shadows of the same mind. I was curious; therefore, so was she. I was angry. Therefore, so was she...” (Holdstock 2014b).

5.3 *The (Vegetal) Other Incorporated*

Confrontation with vegetal deathlessness – the most abject quality of the mythagos' human yet nonhuman body – is brought into the forefront in human–mythago relationships throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. In the first novel, *Mythago Wood*, George Huxley and his two sons, Christian and Steven obsessively wish to possess the object of their desire, the mythago Guiwenneth. Conflict arises because each of these three men believes that the wood used *his* mind to manifest the Celtic warrior princess. The question of Guiwenneth's true identity becomes even more complicated when the two brothers are faced with the vegetal deathlessness of mythagos. At the beginning of the novel, Steven travels back to England after he has recovered from a war injury serving, and he learns that his older brother has fallen in love with a strange woman from the nearby woodland. At this point, Steven is blissfully unaware of the fact that Guiwenneth is a mythago. To his horror, he finds out that the woman died, and Christian buried her in the garden by the chicken huts. Steven then plucks up courage to uncover the grave and finds the decaying body. Later on, when he confronts his brother with what he has learned, Christian explains him that Guiwenneth has probably already come back to life

²² More interestingly, even this fragile illusion of agency is always intertwined with a huge responsibility about the change one initiates inside the wood. In *Lavondyss*, Mr Williams tells Tallis: “But stories are fragile. Like people's lives. It only takes a word out of place to change them forever.” (Holdstock 2015, 120). These observations clearly have an ecological significance as they call attention to the far-reaching consequences of human actions.

within the wood. He says: “She’s lived a thousand times, and she’s never lived at all. But I still fell in love with her... and I shall find her again in the woods; she’s in there somewhere...” (Holdstock 2014a, 32). And soon enough, Guiwenneth returns, but this time Steven believes that her image sprang from *his* mind. The rebirth of the mythago marks only the beginning of Christian’s and Steven’s long chase after the beloved woman. Even though Guiwenneth has two children with Steven in the last Mythago novel, *Avilion*, she eventually slips away to fulfil her own quest as a mythic character leaving a desperate Steven behind. Despite its almost intimate connection with a human’s mind and its ability to rejuvenate, the mythago body is not there to be claimed and used by its human originator.

In *The Hollowing*, a striking instance of vegetal decay is portrayed when a dead mythago is mistaken for a human corpse. When the teenage protagonist, Alex looks through a magic wooden mask (the Moondream mask that Tallis lost in *Lavondyss*) his dreams are sucked out, and the boy falls severely ill. Later on, he escapes from the hospital and is lost. His body is found a year later, but in such a state of decomposition that proper identification is impossible: “The skull had been so badly crushed, by two or three blows, that precise dental association was impossible, but from the size of the bones, the male features of the pelvis, scraps of clothing in the same grave, and the fact that it was found so close to Shadoxhurs, the conclusion at the inquest was that the remains were those of Alex Bradley...” (Holdstock 1995, 31). Six years later, a team of researchers working in Ryhope Wood contact the boy’s father, Richard to inform him that they have found his son inside the forest. Overwhelmed by a surge of hope, Richard now remembers that the bones were not just decayed but *rotten*. When the researcher Helen asks him what he means by that, Richard says:

“They were woody.”

“They weren’t bones,” Helen said dogmatically, her eyes alive with certainty. “It wasn’t Alex. We have a word for what it was. A *mythago*. A false thing. And the boy we’ve located *is* Alex. Believe me.” (Holdstock 1995, 49)

Even though the dead mythago is visibly composed of wood matter, the fact that he was made through the boy’s mind and shaped in his resemblance proved enough to turn absolute vegetal alterity into confusing similarity. The question arises, whether plant corporeality is truly that different from human corporeality.

The most interesting inquiry into this issue occurs in the second novel, *Lavondyss*. When the young female protagonist, Tallis, reaches the innermost region of Ryhope, she embarks on a spiritual journey. Firstly, her human body is literally torn apart by the vegetal in a manner that

evokes medieval green man imagery: “She stretched open her mouth, screamed, then spewed out the great twisting branch. It came like a hard, brown snake. It flowed from her. It divided into two, then curled back on each side of her head, bursting into bud, then leaf, to wrap around her skull.” (Holdstock 2015, 304). Tallis is thus transformed into a giant tree, and after she observes the wood for a while from this arboreal perspective, tree-Tallis finds herself in the ice age version of the same myth, her own life is a re-enactment of. In this ancient form of the narrative, tree-Tallis is cut down, and her carved trunk is used as a monument to commemorate a deceased grandmother. The following quote describes how tree-Tallis gets in contact with the old woman’s body: “Below her was the corpse of a woman. Tallis had seen the grimacing features as she was carried to the grave. Now, as she impacted with the body, she felt the bones stir. A sap rose in her, human warmth in the veins of the wood.” (Holdstock 2015, 307). Thus, the human and vegetal body are physically intermingled. Later on, the grandson replaces the grandmother’s image with the wood, and turns to her in his despair: “He called on Grandmother Asha through the oak statue that was Tallis. ‘You are a part of the first forest. You have seen all things. You have lived through all times. You are bone and wood, Grandmother, so you must know how to save us. Please send us food.’” (Holdstock 2015, 308). As quoted above, Guiwenneth in *Mythago Wood* claims that “I am wood and rock, not flesh and bone.” (Holdstock 2014a, 161). Now tree-Tallis as a magical replacement for the dead grandmother becomes a combination of the two: a vegetal–human hybrid entity that is associated with the ability to intervene into the events inside the wood and send birds to the starving family. With regard to corporeality, this is the point in Tallis’ journey where vegetal and human are the most closely intertwined – and this is the deepest the girl ever gets inside the wooden realm. On her way back, as the human component in her body increases Tallis first metamorphoses into a daurog, then she finally returns into a human body. But to her shock, the journey to the first forest has taken its toll and she is now an old woman.

Through the magic of Ryhope Wood mythagos like Guiwenneth and even humans like Tallis can partake in vegetal deathlessness. In the wooden realm, all bodies are revived in one way or in another, so that they can re-enact the mythic narratives that keep this uncanny ecosystem in motion. To achieve this, Ryhope relies on hybrid corporeality: there is no body within the wood that is not intruded upon by the vegetal Other. This general hybridity is not as fictional as we might think. Eco-criticism has already begun to deconstruct human corporeality as something entirely separate from its environment. For instance, Stacy Alaimo argues that we should imagine “human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” and thus it becomes “ultimately inseparable

from ‘the environment.’” (Alaimo 2010, 2). Since I observed above that the vegetal Other in Ryhope blurs the body–mind dichotomy, I suggest that trans-corporeality should be extended to denote the intermeshing of different *bodyminds* that exchange both material and immaterial components. Revival and repetition are natural characteristics of plant life in the primary world, but they are also natural processes carried out by the human psyche. Narratives rooted in the collective unconscious are ready to sprout new leaves each time they are retold, and even when individual storytellers die, the *Cauldron of Story*²³ is kept alive. Relying on Holdstock’s depiction of plant–human relationships, we can redefine the human as a creature that is inseparably linked to the more-than-human world. Firstly, the human as an embodied creature is intermeshed with nature through trans-corporeality. Secondly, the human as a psychic being resonates with the processes that keep the entire ecosystem in motion.

²³ The term dates back to Tolkien’s widely-known lecture, “On Fairy-Stories”: “Speaking of the history of stories and especially of fairystories we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty.” (Tolkien 2008, 44–45).

6. Coming of Age

6.1 *Plant Growth, Human Growth*

“Coming of age is central in any mythology,” Brian Attebery points out. “Like all rites of passage or initiation, it marks the passage of an individual from one state to another: from one tribe to another, from the laity to the priesthood, from life to death, or, in this case, from childhood to adulthood and full participation in society.” (Attebery 1992, 89). Change is at the core of all coming-of-age stories. At first glance, an old forest is not a place of change in its stillness and immobility. Primeval woodlands appear almost frozen in time to the human eye – however, in this case as in many others, our anthropocentric thinking plays a trick on us. Even if this is less obvious observed on a human timescale, woodlands are in constant change. This change extends much farther than the change of seasons – all forests are in fact in constant motion, busy creating, decomposing and then re-creating their own material. In this motion, the *forest dynamic*, most of the binary oppositions that define culture as something separate from nature collapse. Forests thus become places of learning and re-defining what it means to be human, and hence they are an ideal setting for coming-of-age narratives.

“Transformation is the whole nature and character of *Mythago Wood*; it is not just what happens within the story, it is what happens to the story itself,” Paul Kincaid observes (Kincaid 2022, 4-5). In his analyses, Kincaid focuses mostly on this kind of change: the change and transformation of stories and people. Here I argue that all throughout the *Mythago Cycle* the change in human life is consciously and constantly paralleled with the change of the natural world – and that characters can learn from this motion. For nature itself can be seen as an event that never stops (Sheldrake 2020, 59), and if we are ever to think in an ecocentric way we need to realize that we are not an audience of this event but active participants whose deeds have far-reaching consequences in the ecosystem.

The young protagonists of the *Mythago Cycle* come to similar realisations. In this chapter, I will focus on two teenage characters that appear in two different novels. Tallis Keeton is the young protagonist of Holdstock’s second Mythago novel, *Lavondyss*. She lives near the edge of Ryhope Wood with her parents. Her daily life is darkened by the shadows of her family’s past: her half-brother, Harry Keeton (whom the reader already knows from the first novel, *Mythago Wood*) was lost in the wood many years ago. Tallis embarks on a perilous journey to find him and uncovers bitter truths about herself and the woodland realm. The other teenager, Alex Bradley is a thirteen-year-old boy who has his dreams sucked out of his mind through a magic, wooden mask in *The Hollowing*. As a consequence of this unfortunate event

he flees to Ryhope Wood where his thoughts begin to transform the space around him. While the boy seeks healing and an escape from his own mind, his father, Richard is on his way to find him in the wood. Tallis' and Alex's stories reveal Holdstock's genuine interest in the teenage mind and his urge to show how and why a young person's unconscious might interact differently with Ryhope.

From an ecocritical point of view, children are closer to nature in many respects. Anthropocentrism might be partly inborn, but our socialization is greatly responsible for turning us into the anthropocentrists we label as adult human beings. We are *trained* to respect the nature–culture divide, but oftentimes that separation is not that clear at a younger age. Moreover, there is another characteristic that links young people closer to nature and to plants in particular. Teenagers are still in a process of growth in body and mind. For plants, growth equals life as they grow through their entire life. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the very meaning of trees is created through their body and its constant growth (cf. Irigaray 2017). In *Lavondyss* and in *The Hollowing* Holdstock invites his reader to encounter Tallis and Alex on their coming-of-age journey that parallels plant growth and human growth within the single, ceaseless event that is Ryhope Wood.

6.2 Children and the Wood

Human beings are thirsty for knowledge of their environment and this thirst is probably strongest in young people. They desire knowledge – this knowledge is mostly forbidden knowledge, knowledge that is hidden behind taboos, knowledge that appears to be inaccessible. In portal fantasies, a better knowledge of the secondary world is both desired and needed. Very often, these stories rely on a coming-of-age scenario to present the quest for the truths of this imaginary world. Gloomy woodlands are regularly associated with hidden, secret knowledge – and quite often the very journey throughout the arboreal realm serves as a rite of initiation for the young protagonist. The one who enters the magic forest never comes back the same. Texts of the *Mythago Cycle* are well aware of these tropes, but Holdstock manages to give them interesting twists relying on the constant interaction of the human and the vegetal.

“Children have great power in this place,” Helen Silverlock tells Alex's father in *The Hollowing* (Holdstock 1995, 132). Similarly, in *Merlin's Wood* (the novel that is loosely connected to the *Mythago Cycle* as it depicts a different woodland in France), only children are able to contact with the ghosts that are regularly seen at the edge of the forest. Once they grow up, this special skill leaves them. George Huxley, the major scientist character who appears in multiple *Mythago* texts seems envious of the way his own children are so reactive to the aura

of Ryhope. In the short story, “The Bone Forest” Huxley admits in his journal that his boys Christian and Steven “are attuned more deeply to the wood.” (Holdstock 2009a, 400). Despite their insatiable desire to interact with the wooden realm and possess certain mythagos, adult male characters appear to be genuinely frightened to face their inner child. For long, they suppress their intuitive urges to participate in the ‘uncivilized’ rituals of mythagos. When his son asks Richard Bradley to join the mythagos dancing around the fire at the wood’s edge, he protests with ferocity: “I’m afraid I’d feel rather foolish.” (Holdstock 1995, 23).

In this sense, Ryhope is a place where each person is confronted with his or her unconscious. The contents of the unconscious mind are deeply rooted in childhood experiences, and the fact that these contents are repressed makes them all the more frightening. To observe how this influences human–nonhuman relationships I will rely on Timothy Morton’s definitions for a child and an adult. According to him, the “functional definition of “child” is “someone who is still allowed to talk with an inanimate stuffed animal as if it were not only an actual lifeform but also conscious.” (Morton 2019, 15). When a child plays this kind of game she places the nonhuman on the same level as herself. For her, value-based distinctions are non-existent: the human and the nonhuman, the animate and the inanimate are equated. As opposed to this, when Morton is writing about books targeting an adult audience he points out that these are stories “in which nonhumans don’t speak and aren’t on an equal footing with humans. The genre of young adult fiction proves the point: the young adult is precisely an anthropocentrist in training. The human–nonhuman separation is expressed as a psychic trauma objectified in the arbitrary definition of ‘child.’” (Morton 2019, 15). Thus, in the Western world, coming of age hinges on the unseeing of the nonhuman. We are trained to be plant blind. Within Ryhope Wood this process is reversed: to survive, the teenage protagonists have to embrace their intuitive side so that they can reconnect with the nonhuman.

The knowledge they gain is indecipherable through general, scientific methods. The objectivity that adult male characters try to impose upon the wood gradually falters, as the scientists themselves are consumed by their deeper and more personal (or more childish?) desires. Yet Ryhope Wood is not an illusion but a fully embodied ecosystem – as much as the knowledge it shares with the human intruders. To understand the wisdom of the wood on ecocentric terms, I would like to suggest that Ryhope provides *situated knowledge*, or more particularly, it offers a chance for humans to experience knowledge as an embodied experience. Individual vision is a basic requirement for gaining such experience. As Donna Haraway argues, “[v]ision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions. I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a

leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere.” (Haraway 1988, 581). And when the scientist characters try to understand Ryhope this is exactly what they do: they abandon their individual vision so that they can force their anthropocentric gaze upon the wood and the mythagos. In their passionate search for Guiwenneth, George Huxley and his two sons often remain blind to what other knowledge the wood might offer to them. Situated knowledge, however, is not about isolated individuals, as Haraway warns us (Haraway 1988, 590). Instead, “[t]he only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.” (Haraway 1988, 590). More importantly, situated knowledge requires “that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge.” (Haraway 1988, 592). Thus, in order to successfully interact with Ryhope, one should relearn the childhood way of seeing our environment when even the nonhuman and the inanimate actively contributed to our experience of the world.

In the beginning of *Lavondyss* and in *The Hollowing* each of the two teenage protagonists are shown playing, and the way they play greatly unsettles their parents and foreshadows the two children’s future interaction with Ryhope Wood. For instance, this is how Alex’s room is described: “There was something about Alex’s den that both embraced and unnerved Richard.” (Holdstock 1995, 11). Both Tallis and Alex appear to be extremely literate for their age in telling stories and this already suggests the agential power they later gain. A closer look at Alex’s room actually evokes a glimpse of how Ryhope changes after it begins to use the boys mind: “Models, in plastic and wood, were everywhere, and the boy could tell a story about each one.” (Holdstock 1995, 11). The stories he re-enacts with his toys inside the safety of his room are later re-enacted within Ryhope – in a more dangerous manner.

Interaction with the wood brings out more intuitive and ‘childish’ desires even in scientist characters. By childish I mean here those feelings that society trains us to suppress so that we can be accepted as fully matured adults. Interestingly, in many cases, these feelings can be identified as repressed urges to heal some form of separation. People who enter Ryhope Wood are there to find someone they have lost: a lost love, a lost brother, a lost mother – a lost self. In this respect, all members of the scientist team in *The Hollowing* are driven by such urgent needs: “leader Lytton’s personal mission is to meet Huxley and to preserve as much of Huxley’s mind- projections in the Wood as possible; Lacan is in search of his own death, meaning his magical wife; and Helen wants to meet and take revenge on the trickster Coyote, thus undoing the curse her family has been suffering from for generations.” (Limpár 2011, 147). Similarly, in *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn* Christian Huxley’s almost brutish desire for the

mythago Guiwenneth is revealed as repressed pain from the death of his suicidal mother. Ryhope, however, does not offer these people Consolation in a strictly Tolkienian sense. Lost ones may be found (as Richard eventually finds his son, Alex) but return to the human world is either impossible (as in *Lavondyss*) or the novel closes before the reader could learn whether the characters succeed in leaving the wood (as in *The Hollowing*). Nevertheless, Ryhope does offer connection to all people who venture into its realm: a connection with their repressed inner child and through it a connection with the more-than-human world.

6.3 Female Coming of Age

Throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock introduces multiple female characters. They are portrayed in various roles in the novels, yet their attitude and connection to Ryhope differs in some aspects from that of male characters. Guiwenneth, the iconic mythago woman of *Mythago Wood* is the first female character who gains a central role. In this first novel, however, her role is barely taken beyond mirroring the desires George Huxley and his two sons project on her. Nevertheless, the reader learns early on that Guiwenneth is well-literate in the ways of the wood and beyond her connection with the Huxleys her own ancient narrative awaits her in the arboreal realm. It is only in Holdstock's last novel, *Avilion* that the male gaze is lifted from Guiwenneth and she is allowed to pursue her own storyline. This novel also includes vivid descriptions of how strongly Guiwenneth's half-mythago daughter, Yssobel is linked to the wood: "The 'green' side of the girl was very strong indeed. They communicated through the very earth itself." (Holdstock 2010, 99). Non-mythago female characters that are not born through a (hu)man's mind are more likely to gain agential role in Ryhope. An obvious example is Helen Silverlock, a member of the scientist team working in the wood in *The Hollowing*. As Limpár points out, she is portrayed differently than the male scientists: "If we have Lytton of the mind and Lacan of the heart, we could see Helen as someone of the blood—the natural, instinctive woman." (Limpár 2011, 150). Instincts, a form of contacting the unconscious are certainly an important factor in connecting with Ryhope, and men socialised to repress non-rational thoughts face more difficulties when they have to confront and then accept the contents of their unconscious.

Tallis, the teenage female protagonist of *Lavondyss* is possibly the most active and most complex female character in the *Mythago Cycle*. She lives on the edge of Ryhope with her parents. The family is burdened with the loss of Tallis' half-brother, and all through her childhood, Tallis is genuinely lonely as both her parents are stuck in a gloomy, emotionally unavoidable state: "Where once her father had talked to her when they had walked together,

now he strolled in thoughtful, distant silence. He no longer remembered the names of plants and trees. And her mother, who had always been joyful and playful with her, became pale and ghostly.” (Holdstock 2015, 26). Tallis is devastated by all the disconnection, and is determined to find her brother in the hope of winning her parents’ back as well. In her struggles, the reader can follow a unique interaction with the female and the wilderness that culminates in Tallis’ reaching the innermost realm in the wood, where she is transformed into a tree.

What can the female bring to the magic wood topos? And what can the female gain from this connection? In her 2011 essay, “Tallis, The Feminine Presence in Mythago Wood: *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region*” Elizabeth A. Whittingham comes to the conclusion that Ryhope is in overall a feminine entity (Whittingham 2011, 111). Even though I accept that there might be a number of valid arguments to see the wood as feminine, I believe that such a conclusion leads us to the kind of understanding of the natural world that ecofeminists rightfully protest against. Ryhope is not a place where human binary oppositions such as the categories of feminine and masculine are reinforced. On the contrary, the arboreal realm gradually undermines restricting frameworks of thought and opens up new ways to exist for both men and women.

In the real world, it was not until the late nineteenth century that (rich) women could gain any access to the scientific observation of the wild as they started to accompany their naturalist husbands on botanical and zoological expeditions (Norwood 1993). At this time, “[s]ingle women also began to work as explorers, plant collectors, and field ornithologists.” (Norwood 1993). Nevertheless, “women’s efforts were bounded by the dominant male narrative of contact with the wilderness. That narrative, for scientist-naturalists as well as hunters, had to do with the search for and capture of the trophy animal.” (Norwood 1993). This situation left women with doing mostly assistant work (e.g.: trophy photography) through which they willingly or unwillingly strengthened the male image of nature. As opposed to this, in the *Mythago Cycle*, female characters have equal right to have their own view of and attitude toward the woodland and its creatures. In many respects, the mythic fantasy of Holdstock seems to resonate with ecofeminist thought: “Whereas mainstream nature ethicists have based much of their analysis on abstract principles and universal rules, ecofeminists have tended to highlight the role of metaphors and images of nature. The emphasis has been not on developing razorsharp theories that can be used to dictate future conduct, but rather on painting a “landscape” (or “mindscape”) of the world.” (Kheel 1993, 244). If ecofeminists use “mindscape” as a metaphor, Holdstock turns it into wood-and-stone reality in the *Mythago Cycle*.

Fantasy itself is not feminine, but the mindscapes it creates offer more room for female writers and characters than canonised realistic fiction. Kathryn Hume describes the situation as follows: “Like the right hemisphere of our brains, and like woman in a culture where the standard of definition is man, fantasy has been the silent partner, ever since Plato and Aristotle promoted mimesis in their critical statements.” (Hume 2014, 196). Following in line, Brian Attebery argues that “nonrealistic literature has something special to offer to the woman writer, who is already defined by her culture as the irrational, the disruptive, the formless, the Other.” (Attebery 1992, x). He goes on and claims that “fantastic literature is a woman” (Attebery 1992, x), intending that fantastic literature’s position within literature is similar to women’s position in society. Fantasy is thus an interesting tool to re-negotiate the female’s position within society and her relationship to the more-than-human world. In the following, I will show how Holdstock reflects on these issues through the coming-of-age story of Tallis.

Earlier in the dissertation, I described the Mythago novels as *intrusion fantasies* where Ryhope Wood becomes the intruding fantastic into the ordinary life of the protagonists. *Lavondyss*, the second novel of the cycle displays a similar trajectory, yet from Tallis’ point of view the wood is not only an intruder in her life but also a catalyst that propels her into the rough and dangerous process of maturing. In face of this force, the young girl appears to be helpless and paralyzed as if all agency was with the wood. Here’s how Tallis herself describes this process: “It [Ryhope Wood] had filled her head with legend, then sucked her in, a fish sucking in a fly.” (Holdstock 2015, 225). The wood thus becomes the monstrous Other that nevertheless aids the girl’s coming of age. This role of monsters in the maturing process has been recently analysed in depth by Ildikó Limpár who points out that monsters “allow the character who faces them to confront her/him with one’s limitations, fears, and desires” aiding him or her to come of age (Limpár 2021, 14). And Ryhope Wood is quite democratic inasmuch as it offers this chance of confrontation to every human. At the beginning of the novel, Tallis unknowingly feeds Ryhope with her hope to find her lost brother, and the wood mirrors and extends this hope the same way as it mirrored the Huxley’s desire for Guiwenneth. From the wood’s perspective, the urgent emotional need of a teenage girl and of grown men are no different, it reflects both in equal measure.

Unlike the male characters who use quasi-scientific methods, Tallis tries to contact *and* control the wood through shamanistic practices. The first of her methods is taming Ryhope using the ‘true’ names of the landscape. While she plays around her parents’ house she devises this little game that she can only move on to the next field if she figures out its true name. In many cultures, the possession of a thing through naming it is a masculine attribute that, in the

Western world, is often traced back to Adam giving name to animals in Eden.²⁴ In *Lavondyss*, however, this role is taken over by a teenage girl who manages to establish connection with long-forgotten narratives of her homeland through uncovering the ancient names of the landscape. Her own name, Tallis, is the female version of the legendary Welsh bard Taliesin, and as Whittingham describes her, “Tallis is all that her name indicates: singer of songs, figure of great potency, and teller of stories.” (Whittingham 2011, 98). Names frequently gain special significance in fantasy literature, and *nomen est omen* applies quite literally to Tallis’ life. Her grandfather writes to her in a letter: “*The naming of the land is important. It conceals and contains great truths. Your own name has changed your life and I urge you to listen to them, when they whisper.*” (Holdstock 2015, 27). Tallis is thus set on a journey of searching for great truths – but what she finds is not necessarily the answer to her initial questions.

Her second method to pry out Ryhope’s hidden truths is the creation of wooden masks that later help her navigate the complex spatiotemporal structure of the wood. She sets out to the task quite intuitively: “... she went to the woodshed, picking her way through the cut elm until she found a thick log. It was still in its bark. This, she carefully detached and cut in half, to make a curved sheet that she could fashion into a mask.” (Holdstock 2015, 37). Her doings are soon found out by her father who is equally shocked and amazed by her daughter’s creation. This first mask Tallis names the Hollower, and when his father asks her what a Hollower is she gives this explanation: “Something that guards the tracks between different worlds.” (Holdstock 2015, 38). But soon she elaborates as she wishes to impress his father: “... they led to the kingdoms of the dead... And only a *few* ordinary people could go there. Only heroes.” (Holdstock 2015, 39). When her father asks her how she collected her immense knowledge of folklore, Tallis answers: “It just came to me.” (Holdstock 2015, 39). Following her intuition, Tallis then goes on to create further seven masks that aid us revealing different aspects of the Wood:

- *Gaberlungi*: memory of the land
- *Skogen*: shadow of the forest
- *Lament* (meaning its own name)
- *Falkenna*: the flight of a bird into an unknown region
- *Silvering*: the movement of a salmon into the rivers of an unknown region
- *Cunhaval*: the running of a hunting dog through the forest tracks of an unknown region

²⁴ Another interesting example of how fantastic literature may subvert the traditional function of the naming process is Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “She Unnames Them” (1985) that is a reiteration of Adam and Eve’s biblical narrative.

- *Moondream*: to see the woman in the land

On the one hand, the imagery of these masks expresses Tallis' desire to find her brother and also foreshadow key turning points of her journey. On the other hand, Tallis' application of these masks already mark a large milestone towards her eventual transformation into a tree: all the masks are made from bark and anybody looking through the eyeholes imitates becoming a tree herself. This way Tallis becomes able to travel through Ryhope, but only at the cost of becoming one with it.

Names and masks are only the beginning of the maturing process. At this stage, Tallis is confident that if she finds the *right* method she will be able to uncover the truths she needs. She believes that she can gain an agential role. In part two of *Lavondyss*, "In the Unknown Region", Tallis enters Ryhope and she is forced to leave her former home for good. She is now come of age bodily and entangled into a sexual relationship with the mythic warrior Scathach. By this point she has wandered the woodland for eight years and is now more than twenty years old by her own reckoning (Holdstock 2015, 217). Through these years she gradually comes to the realization that she overestimated her role within and her influence over the immense wooden realm. Her union with Ryhope that was only mimicked through the application of the wooden masks is now taken to the next level: she gives birth to a baby whose father is the half-mythago, Scathach. The poor boy lives only five months and then his body decomposes into wood. At this point Tallis is unsure if he was real at all (Holdstock 2015, 226). Nevertheless, she carries the child's body with her because she admits: "He means too much to me." (Holdstock 2015, 232). In addition to an obvious motherly attachment, the body is a physical proof that Tallis managed to contact the woodland and its secrets.

As Tallis journeys further inwards, every step she takes propels her to experience the complex hybridity of Ryhope. Up to this point she has met half-mythagos and mythagos that have a fully human appearance yet are physically made of woodland material. Now she encounters a team of daurogs, creatures that are even farther away from her on the human-plant scale. The daurogs, however, only serve as an interlude to Tallis' final metamorphosis. In Chapter 5 the dissertation has described this event from a corporeal perspective – now, I intend to cast more light on the role of this transformation in Tallis' coming-of-age trajectory.

The girl's initial urge to contact Ryhope Wood was to gain information about her lost half-brother's whereabouts. When she realizes that Harry is in fact inside the forest but is unable to leave, Tallis' main goal becomes to find out why her brother is stuck and how she may help release him. Through her game of naming and the making of the masks she deceives herself into believing that she has agency over the wood – only to be betrayed by her own devices:

once she accidentally drops the Moondream mask she cannot fully navigate the ever-changing landscape of Ryhope. When her final transformation begins, Tallis is forced to relinquish all agency as she is literally torn apart by the vegetal Other inside her: evoking the green man imagery, a twisting brunch growth out her mouth, divides into to, and wraps around her head (Holdstock 2015, 304). In this tree form that only bears a trace of resemblance to her human body (“the impression of her face was left upon the wood” (Holdstock 2015, 304)) Tallis is sent back to the most ancient version of the narrative her own modern life embodies. And in this ice age version of her own story the truth is finally revealed to Tallis: when she banished the birds from the land to protect Scathach, she inadvertently trapped her brother inside a more ancient version of the same story. Thus, Tallis did have agency all along, but she failed to understand the far-reaching consequences of this agency within an ecosystem that is intricately linked through body and mind.

This hard-earned and devastating truth is literally an embodied experience for Tallis. First she is transformed from woman to tree, then her journey is gradually reversed. Before she is eventually restored into a human body, she becomes the very same daurog she attempted conversation with before her metamorphosis. Journeying the wood on a tree timescale takes its toll, and to her shock Tallis returns to her starting point as an old woman: “Her hands had aged. She could hardly bear to look at them. They were like gnarled wood. When she finally looked into clear water and saw her face, she wept bitterly as she greeted the old woman who stared back at her.” (Holdstock 2015, 320). I agree with Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook who observes that going through this process, Tallis eventually fuses with the entire composite being that is Mythago Wood (Heckendorn Cook 2020,132). Yet the question arises whether we could consider this as a process of coming of age. As I described above, in Western thought, adulthood is generally equalled with the acceptance of a highly anthropocentric, culturally constructed reality. Ryhope, however, trains no anthropocentrists. Instead, Tallis’ coming of age centres around the realisation of her own agency *and* the responsibility that comes with it. However, agency and responsibility inside the wood work differently than they do in human societies: they are never the attributes of individuals but they are extended to the entire system. In Ryhope, all agency is shared agency and all responsibility is shared responsibility – and it is through this sharing that the line between the human and the more-than-human is blurred. The human body may stop growing at a certain age yet our mind (conscious and unconscious) has the capacity to grow. Maturing in Ryhope is something like the extension of this thinking capacity, an inner growth that makes human protagonists capable to incorporate the vegetal Other – or as

Heckendorn Cook points out, by taking the vegetal Other seriously, we can expand our knowledge about being human (Heckendorn Cook 2020, 144).

Therefore, the coming of age process within Ryhope is still a *human* coming of age in many respects. As we have seen, Holdstock's focus remains on his teenage characters all throughout these journeys – yet the new person formed through the adventures is not a single, outstanding individual (like an epic hero) but a member of a community that is made up of human and nonhuman beings. Holdstock thus reintroduces his teenage characters into nature as a living and breathing ecosystem; even though this reunion with the nonhuman has its price.

II. Dimensions

7. Time

7.1 Caught Up in Time

“[I]n the modern world there is no time,” Rachel Carson claims in her renowned environmental science book, *Silent Spring* (Carson 2000, 24). Indeed, the time concept of the Anthropocene is dominated by a constant urgency that pervades daily life. People are hyper-focused on devising and maintaining schedules, but oftentimes this yearning for structure conceals a great deal of fear of the future. We wish to predict how much time we have left till global warming escalates, how much time we have left to find the tools for our survival. Sustainability is a term that is now frequently misused to subdue this urgency. Because what we wish to sustain is in fact the myth of eternal growth, the core concept of the capitalist ethos. If we give further thought to the word, however, sustaining is about providing for what one needs. We humans and nonhumans have physical needs: food, water, shelter, etc. And when we think about sustainability we tend to stop here. What industry, what infrastructure we need to stay alive. Psychological needs, however, are equally important – and it is only if these needs are met when there will be individuals who have the skills to come up to the challenges of the former and find solutions for agricultural and industrial sustainability. Culture has a lot to do in fulfilling psychological needs – fantasy literature a large part in there. Fantasy is a ‘safe place’ to face uncomfortable truths about our relationship to the environment and our role in its destruction. One of the great challenges of the Anthropocene is to figure out how our concept of time affects us on both a short term and a long term basis. As Robert Markley points out, climate change “forces us to reassess the relationships among three different registers of time: experiential, or embodied time, historical time, and climatological time” (Markley 2019, 16). In this process, various forms of speculative fiction may come to our aid.

Ursule Heise writes that “literary forms accommodate and even sometimes generate ideas about space, time, and agency” (Heise 2019, 276). This is also true for realistic fiction, but the fantastic gives an even larger room to first contemplate and then undermine commonly accepted concepts of temporality. The fantasy mode offers a particularly varied toolkit to manipulate time. According to Attebery, a fantasy writer can “make use of every violation of continuous flow of narrative time [...]: jumps backward and forward; ellipses, summaries, and pauses; repeated retellings of a single event or the compression of multiple events into one by using iterative verb forms and adverbial markers such as *would go, often, every day.*” (Attebery

1992, 55). This freedom holds potential for a more eco- and plant-conscious depiction of time, through the revelation that time operates on different scales for different species. Mythic fantasy is also able to re-evolve ancient concepts of time before the Enlightenment when time was not squeezed into ‘objective’ seconds, minutes and hours but was commonly observed through changes in the natural world: in the seasons, in stars, in floods, in breaths.

In the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock devotes considerable attention to the different aspects of time. As Paul Kincaid observes “the variability of time and the immediacy of the past” have been central to Holdstock’s fiction from early on (Kincaid 2022, 3). In Kincaid’s view, time for Holdstock is “sinuous, riverine, non-linear” and it is “equated with identity that is fragile and under threat” (Kincaid 2022, 3). As he does with all aspects of Holdstock’s fiction, Kincaid relates Holdstock’s avid interest in the working of time to his attention to human fate and free will. Admitting that this could be a valid layer of understanding, I argue in this chapter that in addition to a human timescale Holdstock also introduces multiple nonhuman timescales. In Chapter 4 I pointed out that there are multiple identities Ryhope may take on – in this chapter, I intend to show that there are multiple timescales. The individual life of mythagos, their related storytime, the cyclical time of the woodland ecosystem, the plant time of the trees all form different, but inseparable, intermingled timelines that ceaselessly interact in the creation and re-creation of Ryhope Wood.

7.2 Different Timescales

In a recent essay collection, *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene*, Brian Attebery calls attention to an important aspect of this era: “The Anthropocene, like any term for a period of history, covers not the entirety of experience at that time but whatever the majority perceives about it.” (Attebery 2022b, 17). Yet what resides beyond this majority perception of the world? All that is labelled as Other – with its own perception and thoughts about the world. Fantasy offers a textual space to reveal the minority perspective – and this is exactly what the reader should expect from the *Mythago Cycle*.

Paul Kincaid suggests that Ryhope is an “atemporal world” (Kincaid 2022, 37). Ryhope is indeed beyond the scope of time, but more precisely, it is beyond the scope of human time. It is our very limited human timescale that pictures the immensity of time encapsulated in this primeval woodland as timeless. I would replace atemporal with nonhuman or even with plant time. Undoubtedly, the unfathomable nature of time inside the woodland is presented from a human perspective – and from this perspective it is apparently inaccessible. Starting out from their own scientific concept of time, the scientist characters of the novels make two basic

observations. In *Mythago Wood*, the reader learns from Huxley's diary that "[e]ven in the more peripheral zones of the forest, time is distorted to a degree. It is as I suspected. The aura produced by the primal woodland has a pronounced effect upon the nature of dimensions." (Holdstock 2014a, 63). The exact nature of these time distortions, however, are beyond Huxley's skill. Similarly, in *The Hollowing*, the scientist team has to make do with some very basic assumptions about time. For instance, at one point Lytton says to Richard: "Time *always* goes forward in Ryhope Wood. Not necessarily at the same rate in different places, but always forward." (Holdstock 1995, 169). The fact that time may go forward at different rates results in such distortions in the temporary structure of Ryhope that make characters doubt the time-goes-forward principle. For instance, in *The Hollowing*, Richard once glimpses a (from his perspective) future-Helen at the edge of the wood. Despite their determined attempts, human protagonists fail to squeeze the temporal structure of Ryhope into their framework of scientific concepts.

According to Ann Swinfen, the most common concepts time fantasists use are linear displacement through time and the coexistence of all time (Swinfen 2019, 49). Holdstock relies on both of these methods in the *Mythago Cycle* and complicates them further. Linear displacement generally means moving backwards or forwards on a single timeline. In Ryhope, however, linear displacement is applied on multiple timelines: the individual time of the characters, the storytime of the narrative they are supposed to re-enact and various nonhuman (mostly vegetal or arboreal) timelines. Similarly, the coexistence of all times is not limited to events happening to and around the human protagonists. As Kathryn Hume points out, "[i]f the non-real is your focus, you have no stable point of reference, and the individuality of each departure from reality, each creation of something new, renders chronology largely irrelevant." (Hume 2014, xii). In Ryhope, time is manifested in vegetal growth and growth as we earlier observed is the creation of arboreal meaning. Thus the meaning of the wood is not a fixed concept but an event that has both a spatial and a temporal dimension. Depicting Ryhope this way, Holdstock gradually destabilizes human time and reveals that it is only one of the multiple, non-hierarchical timelines that constitute the temporal structure of the ecosystem.

This moving outside of our usual, human timeframe that fantastic texts offer brings great potential to talk about our relationship to the more-than-human world. According to Nathalie Blanc and Agnès Sander, speculative fiction is "a test of the renewed relation to nature presented as possible reality," as these narratives force us to rethink the rapport between space and time (Blanc and Sander 2014, 1). In their view, the way time changes is closely related to a different concept of agency: "time changes in relation to agencies and interagencies ascribed

to elements of the natural and built environments.” (Blanc and Sander 2014, 3). Thus, nature becomes “an actor in the narrative and a protagonist in the plot” (Blanc and Sander 2014, 4). Something similar occurs in the *Mythago Cycle*: within Ryhope, time gets distorted through the intermingling of the different timelines of different species. And even though the larger picture reveals that the wood has the upper hand in mastering these timelines, it becomes clear at a closer look that what constructs the temporal structure of Ryhope is a mixture of agencies: narratives taken from the human mind literally shape space and time, whilst the trees also exert profound influence over the human protagonists’ time experience.

7.3 Human Time Undermined

Human time is most commonly described as linear. Our perception of the world is ruled by the urge to tame a large and threatening environment into something that is physically manageable and mentally comprehensible. Thus, we label events with dates, lock them in diaries, safely pin them down on a timeline. Linearity is so much a part of our cognition, that even when we face multiple global crises, we create countdowns leaving us with mixed feelings: on the one hand, the countdown creates urgency, but on the other, it keeps up the illusion that we still have time. The most overused catchphrase of the ecological crisis, sustainability, also relies on temporal linearity. As opposed to this, plant life and plant time seem to be governed by cyclicity: the cycles of the season, the cycles of growth, the very cycle of life²⁵. In his depiction of vegetal beings, Holdstock extensively relies on this cyclicity. In Chapter 5, I have already shown that Holdstock extends vegetal deathlessness to mythagos that die and are reborn again in the arboreal realm. He also uses the change of seasons (often accelerated to an impossible speed) and applies plant growth as an indicator of passing time. What is particularly interesting in Holdstock’s depiction of plant time, however, is that unlike most modern fantasists, he manages to preserve the ‘plantness’ of plants in the process and uses it to undermine the human perception of time. In this section, I am going to reveal the ways he achieves this.

Time has always been an integral part of the magic wood topos, and this aspect is also frequently applied in modern fantasy novels. Magic woods have a tendency to distort time, and this quality often isolates them from their environment, turning them into what fantasy scholars define as a *polder*. The concept of a polder is already included in *The Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*

²⁵ As I have shown in the Body chapter, plants play a special part in the cycle of life, as for them, the boundary between life and death is different than what it means for human beings. Thus, the phases of the cycle fade into each other – and in many cases, the new generation is quite literally fed on the dead bodies of their ancestors (just imagine a forest floor covered with seedlings that consuming the humus made from older trees’ leaves and wood).

(Clute and Grant 1997, 772–773), yet Stefan Ekman in his recent volume *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantastic Maps and Settings* gives a more detailed description: “for a polder, the internal and external realities are set up as opposing forces, and as long as the polder is successfully maintained, it does not change. The world outside does, however, and its change widens the temporal gap between the two realities. The polder becomes a maintained anachronism—that is, an anachronism opposed to the time of the surrounding world, actively if not consciously” (Ekman 2013, 100). Ekman’s classic example for a polder is another forest, Lothlórien from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Amidst all the turmoil in Middle-earth, time remains the same within the realm of Galadriel’s people, yet this place is not defended by walls but boundaries. Ekman also identifies Holdstock’s Ryhope Wood as a polder, yet it differs from Lothlórien in its dynamism. In Ekman’s words, Ryhope is a “locus of change” (Ekman 2013, 110). Due to the ever recurring mythic narratives within the wood, Holdstock’s magical space remains in constant motion. In Lothlórien, the distortion in time is caused by elven magic and is thus anthropomorphic in origin, but in Ryhope Wood, all supernatural power is with the trees.

This tree magic, however, is achieved without bestowing human skills upon these arboreal agents. In fairy tales and in modern fantasy, plants are generally given agency through anthropomorphism: plants are made more human-like through mobility or speech. However, if we have a brief look at contemporary plant studies, we can see that scientists are revealing ever more details about the amazing set of senses plants actually have. Plants have sensitive photo-receptors by which they can perceive the change of seasons. They can also communicate with other plants and animals in multiple ways: through chemicals released into the air, electric signs transported through their body or even through the mitochondrial network attached to their roots. Using these forms of communication, plants – especially if they make up a biodiverse environment like an old-growth forest – can greatly influence or even transform their immediate surroundings. Normal trees obviously cannot distort the flow of time in an objective sense, but they definitely can distort our *perception* of time. It is scientifically proven that woodlands have a profound influence on our nervous system (regulate blood pressure, reduce stress, etc.).

Holdstock takes this interaction with a more-than-human environment to the next level. In our primary world, the neurological interaction with the wood goes on without our notice – we only see the results. Similarly, in the Mythago novels, human protagonists only perceive the consequences of their minds’ interaction with the woodland when mythago images begin to form in their peripheral vision. Throughout the entire process, the trees remain immobile and preserve all aspects of plant heteronomy. According to eco-philosopher Michael Marder, plant

heteronomy – the embeddedness of a plant within its environment – plays a key role in plant existence. Marder defines plant heteronomy as an “ontological dependence on something other than itself” (Marder 2013, 164). Due to their immobility, plants have to depend on their immediate surroundings far more extensively than animals and humans. This, however, urges them towards a greater level of interaction with their animate and inanimate environment. Holdstock adds a twist to this mechanism by introducing the supernatural interaction between plants and the human mind as an enhanced skill of trees. Thus, the vegetation of Ryhope Wood literally gains metaphysical agency – as it becomes a world builder when manifesting the components of the mythic narratives they find in human minds.

This plant-built world in turn has its own temporal dimension. As Heckendorn Cook points out in connection to *Lavondyss*, “Holdstock plays with plant-time, as in time-lapse photography speeding up the slow-to-humans pace of phytological growth, accelerating the dynamic extension of the branch from budding to leafing, and graphically imagining the material power of hard wood over the soft animal body...” (Heckendorn Cook 2020, 132). But acceleration of time is only part of the difference between plant time and human time. Plant time cannot be separated from all the different timelines that are intertwined in Ryhope, so this plant time is always wood time, the time of the ecosystem that eventually consumes what Holdstock’s protagonists believed to be time in the human/scientific sense.

To show this dissolution of human time within the forest ecosystem, Holdstock applies a multiple toolkit. Firstly, the human concept of time is undermined on the level of narrative. Linear storytelling modes are exhausted and useless within the storyworld of the *Mythago Cycle*. From George Huxley to Harry Keeton, different characters try to pin down the events through a linear diary but all their efforts fail. Similar to mythago bodies, mythago narratives are forever revived and each ending marks a new beginning – any linear sequence of events is but a biopsy taken from a larger, more complex system.

Secondly, Holdstock’s usage of trauma narratives all throughout the *Mythago Cycle* also contributes to the subversion of linear storytelling. For trauma survivors, the traumatic event is not something that happened to them in the past: trauma happens to you every day until you are healed. The way this process disrupts linearity is quite obvious in *The Hollowing*. Young Alex is taken to Ryhope to heal after his dreams have been ripped from his mind through a magic mask. All through his healing, the boy remains the same age. Christian Huxley, the character who bears the darkest childhood trauma (he witnessed the suicide of his mother) is unable to work his way through this event, and his search for relief (and a lover to substitute his mother) leads to ever more pain in the *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn*.

Thirdly, in place of the neatly proportioned, linearly organized human time, intruders of Ryhope are confronted with the immensity of nonhuman time and are belittled by it. A neat example of this is when human protagonists gain glimpses of nature as it used to be a *very* long time ago. In *The Hollowing*, for instance, Lytton and Richard spot a heron that had gone extinct thousands of years ago (Holdstock 1995, 100). Similarly, human and mythago characters observe on multiple occasions how the vegetation of Ryhope changed throughout the ages, yet the ways of its magic remained the same. Tallis, the young protagonist of *Lavondyss* is taken on a very long journey throughout the ages of Ryhope when she is transformed into a tree in the first forest. At this point, Tallis is already consumed by plant time and perceives the wood as a dynamic, ever changing entity: “She was lifted, turned, twisted and absorbed. In the preternatural green light she watched oak and elm slide into vision, growing at a fantastic pace, their branches reaching, entwining. Hornbeam moved as smoothly as a snake, creeper twisted, ivy writhed about the mossy bark, reaching towards her, its soft and furry touch tickling as it wound about her skin.” (Holdstock 2015, 303).

These Holdstockian manifestations of plant time and wood time could easily be linked to Blanc and Sander’s concept of long-term nature. According to them, long-term nature “occupies a particular place in the human mind-set: not only is it there for all eternity, but it is also the repressed part of civilized humanity. This ‘long-term’ nature is also the nature that we have neglected, a nature inside us that could in a certain way correspond to our profound humanity or to a naturalized unconsciousness.” (Blanc and Sander 2014, 4). When Holdstock undermines human time, he forces his characters to experience this other, overwhelming form of nature. In their description of the concept, Blanc and Sander also point out that confronting long-term nature involves rediscovering your memory (Blanc and Sander 2014, 4). And this is exactly what Holdstock relies on: by revisiting narratives from the collective memory of humanity, he manages to bring his characters and his readers closer to the long-term nature that has never ceased to exist inside all of us. “We all become a little prehistoric in Ryhope Wood,” Lacan tells Richard in *The Hollowing* (Holdstock 1995, 68). Though he intends this as a jesting remark, it gains a deeper meaning within a wider context. In Ryhope, all characters become pre-historic, but not necessarily in the sense that they become meat-eating cavemen (although this also happens in *The Hollowing*), rather that they experience the world in its pre-linear, pre-civilization reality. “We have no way of defining it, this imaginary time, this *sylvan* time. It’s beyond our language,” Lacan explains to Richard in *The Hollowing* (Holdstock 1995, 281). I would rather say that this other time pre-dates human language and thus there is no way to describe it but only to experience it.

7.4 *Escape from Time*

In the *Mythago Cycle*, Robert Holdstock offers a unique take on the magic wood topos. Agency is given to the trees to defend their polder-like territory by luring humans within their boundaries and entering their mind in order to constantly re-generate their own space within a cyclical time frame. Through the plotlines of these novels, the external and the internal are gradually reversed, and human protagonists are forced to realise that the vegetal Other they used to fear has always resided within their own minds. Their attempts to regulate time into a linear structure fails and they have to realise that their own life is no more than the re-enacted and slightly modified narrative of their ancestors. In this respect, Holdstock's depiction of time in the *Mythago Cycle* points towards an escape from the human construct of time via the toolkit of speculative fiction.

Erin James's recent monograph on Anthropocene narrative theory offers interesting considerations for how we might renew our ways of analysing the construction of time in narratives. According to her, "[a]n Anthropocene narrative theory is interested in a narrative structure that tasks readers with interpreting the implications of an event within multiple timelines—that of the embodied time of a narrative's existents and the longer timescales of historical and/or climatological time that outpace the text's timeframe." (James 2022, 97). We can trace something similar in *Ryhope*: alongside normal human timelines the immense timeframe of plant time or wood time is introduced that is almost impossible to comprehend for a single individual. This immensity of time is perceptible both in a linear sense (mythic narratives range back till the ice age) and in a cyclical sense (multiple stories are at play at the same time and they are constantly re-enacted). This also creates a very complex system of causality. As James argues, "the temporality of the Anthropocene also hinges upon the recognition of the significance of events that are not legible in the moment of their occurrence." (James 2022, 108). The way we interact with vegetal life is often manifested in these long-reaching consequences without us realizing the significance at the moment of its occurrence. Some phenomena are hard to perceive within a short timeframe, yet they are capable of doing a lot of damage (e.g. the ongoing decrease in forest biodiversity). Similarly, these phenomena are hard to describe within the constraints of a single narrative. The second *Mythago* novel, *Lavondyss* provides a very interesting example for this delayed causality. When Tallis intervenes into the events of the place she named "Bird Spirit Land," and banishes the birds so that she can save a young warrior's body from scavengers, the impact of her deed extends over the entire wood like ripples on water. Here is, for instance, what Scathach, the half-mythago says to Tallis in *Lavondyss*: "... you have manipulated forest in your world and created changes

in the forest of many other ages.” (Holdstock 2015, 164). However, Tallis herself only faces the consequences at the climax of the novel, when she realizes that it was her intervention into the story that eventually trapped her half-brother, Harry inside the wood. In the uncanny ecosystem of Ryhope, even the tiniest change can have far-reaching spatiotemporal consequences.

As much as this sequence of events talks about the importance of uncovering long-term causalities in the Anthropocene, at first glance, it still seems to be squeezed within the limitations of narrative time. To go beyond these limitations in textual analysis, Erin James identifies a way of looking at narratives that help us escape both story time and narrative time. Based on Genette’s categorization of narrative temporality, she comes up with the term, the pseudo-singular: “The pseudo-singular entangles events from a narrative into a larger, extranarrative sequence of similar events that readers know from other contexts, thereby forging chains between one timeline and another, between one narrative’s world and the broader, nonnarrative world.” (James 2022, 103). In Holdstock’s case this “larger, extranarrative sequence of similar events” could be the pool of mythic narratives that he applies throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. When Paul Kincaid observes in his Holdstock monograph that Ryhope is atemporal (Kincaid 2022, 37), he seems to base this claim on a similar process. But there are other chains to be forged between Holdstock’s narrative world and our extranarrative reality: and that is through the vegetal world and vegetal time (and space). Thus, the literary scholar may escape story time and narrative time but doing so, she also escapes most of the constraints of human time and discovers other, different timelines that may refresh both fiction and reality.

8. Space

8.1 Monstrous Homogenization

Uncharted territories bring a certain fascination to us, human beings. Nevertheless, by the time we arrived in the Anthropocene, this human urge to make the world decipherable has led to dire consequences: “The world grows more uniform and thus less resilient. Mystery evaporates. We inscribe ourselves upon the land.” (Attebery 2022b, 19). And as Ursula K. Le Guin points out, “[t]he monstrous homogenization of the world has now almost destroyed the map, any map, by making every place on it exactly like every other place, and leaving no blanks” (Le Guin 2007, 87). This process of homogenization also took place within all manifestations of fantasy: in literature, in movies, in games, in metaverses. Commercial fantasy promises to enchant us with unknown realms, but in most cases, it sticks to the safe mode of formulaic storytelling. This process of homogenization in popular culture might be propelled by an urge to suppress what Erin James calls an increased spatial instability (cf. James 2022, 121) – that despite our efforts at homogenization space cannot be controlled, cannot be made safe. In many respects, our perception of space is held in this dynamic of trying to grasp and never actually managing to pin it down.

“Critically, fantasy is all but uncharted territory,” Kathryn Hume wrote in 1984 (Hume 2014, xv). There have been detailed attempts to discover these different spaces of speculative fiction, but we have not yet used its full potential and we are yet to see and analyse the spaces of fantasy in an eco-critical context. Arboreal and vegetal spaces as portrayed in mythic fantasy are definitely among these uncharted territories of criticism. We still have a tendency to dismiss the plant kingdom as background to the human actions. Erin James suggests in her book about understanding narratives in the Anthropocene that we should adopt a new perspective on narrative space and see it as “a changing foreground that acts independently of the human interpersonal conflicts and dramas that drive narratives” (James 2022, 122). The task of criticism is no longer to pin down the characteristics of space but to open up its hidden potential. To see what directions it may point to, what questions it may raise and how it interacts with various other levels and aspects of the narrative. This approach could easily be paralleled with bringing background plants into the foreground and provide the magic wood topos with a more plant-conscious interpretation.

As I have already shown in the previous chapters, space and spatial structures are central in the *Mythago Cycle*. In fact, the novels could be summarized through the interaction of dynamic spaces that are frequently transformed in the process. These spaces are both internal

and external depending on the point of view the narrative takes. The most common starting point is that we are in a human protagonist's head (an inner space) and the wood (the external space) intrudes upon it. In this sense, Farah Mendlesohn's concept of the intrusion fantasy could also have a space-related interpretation. We have so far seen a multiplicity of identities, a multiplicity of timelines – and here we can encounter a multiplicity of spaces. The initial hierarchical structure of space is gradually deconstructed, as Holdstock materializes what I call a *collective mindscape* that is made up of the minds' of many people. We project ourselves, our wishes, our fears, all that is within us, often hidden, on the landscape. In Ryhope, these projections are quite literally reflected back on the intruders. What you bring to the wood, is reflected back at you – and whilst it is a possibility to repress your mind's contents in the real world, it is not possible when they are materialised through a supernatural wood. They appear in their complex reality without the conscious mind's help to organize or regulate them.

In this chapter, I intend to dive deeper into this intricate spatial structure that Holdstock creates in Ryhope. I will argue that mythic fantasy can re-enliven space – turn it into places of vitality and spaces where multiple spaces interact and the human perception of space is not something that rules over other perceptions. In Ryhope, human protagonists are confronted with the fact that they themselves are unmappable – and this is carried out through unmappable vegetation.

8.2 *From the Magic Wood Topos to Vegetal World-building*

World-building in fantasy literature can be scrutinised from various aspects and on different levels. Here I will rely on Stefan Ekman's concept of critical world-building defined as a “composite perspective on the imaginary world, looking at it holistically but with awareness of the meaning embedded in its sequential construction and in the layers of interpretation added to it.” (Ekman 2016, 16). What we see in Holdstock is that he uses the magic wood topos as source but keeps the plantness of plants in the process. The *Mythago Cycle* has precursors in myths, folklore and also in modern fantasy in the multiple manifestations of the magic wood topos. In the discussion of how Holdstock both relies on and departs from this topos, I will use David Herman's concept, the *storyworld*. Herman focuses on the inseparability of world and narrative in his definition of storyworlds: “Storyworlds can be defined as the worlds evoked by narratives; reciprocally, narratives can be defined as blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation.” (Herman 2009, 105). He also observes that story openings “prompt interpreters to take up residence (more or less comfortably) in the world being evoked by a given text,” adding, that different genres use different clues for this purpose (Herman 2009,

112). Holdstock uses both ‘story,’ that is, narrative models and ‘world,’ that is, thematic units from both myths, folklore and modern fantasy. Reading such worlds, however, brings its own requirements. As Donna Haraway points out, “[t]he world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read.” (Haraway 1988, 593). From this it follows that codes in literature are written by the writer – but they are separated from him, they are in a flux, and their decoding depends on a multiplicity of factors, the individual reader’s current mood and intellectual capabilities being only a couple of them. When Attebery argues that fantasy authors deliberately subvert the validating procedures of realistic fiction „subordinating them ultimately to the authority of traditional magical narratives” (Attebery 1991, 36), he basically claims that a fantasy text teaches the reader how to read its modified code system through which its storyworld is created.

In modern fantasy literature, the depiction of forests brings in multiple associations. For our present eco-critical considerations, I would like to highlight three of these. Firstly, that the magic wood is generally depicted in modern fantasy as a nonhuman space. As Ursula K. Le Guin argues, the “green country” of fantasy “verges on and partakes of realms in which humanity is not lord and master, is not central, is not even important” (Le Guin 2007, 87). In her view, the nonindustrial settings of Tolkienian fantasy also remind “us of what we have denied, what we have exiled ourselves from” (Le Guin 2007, 86). In place of our modern separation from the natural world, fantasy frequently offers a unique connection between humans or other anthropomorphic creatures and their nonhuman environment. Secondly, in what Mendlesohn and James call the Tolkienian “moral landscape” (Mendlesohn and James 2012, 49), the natural world seems to mirror the humans that inhabit the place. Thus the land of the dark lord, Sauron turns into a frightening place, whilst Rivendell literally becomes “The Last Homely House.” Thirdly, as the previous chapter has shown, the magic woods of modern fantasy very often fall into the category of the *polder* as defined by Stefan Ekman (cf. Ekman 2013, 100).

Holdstock relies on all these three qualities of the magic wood topos, yet he twists each of them by introducing vegetal agency. Ryhope Wood is a nonhuman space inasmuch as human protagonists no longer have the upper hand when they enter it. Nevertheless, the wood does need the contents of the human mind, so that it can maintain itself. Due to this interdependence, the spatial structure of the wood is transformed by the images human intruders bring with them, but since there is a multiplicity of such images, no human is capable of turning the entire woodland into what we might call a moral landscape. While Ryhope Wood functions as a polder, its interior is never static – no wonder that Ekman sees it as a “locus of change” (Ekman

2013, 110; see Chapter Time). Relying on the trees' constant interaction with human minds, different mythic narratives are being re-enacted within the arboreal realm and the spatial structure of the wood rearranges itself accordingly. Thus, plants have a key responsibility in creating and maintaining spaces. Their ability to reach inside human minds, however, enables the trees to reach farther than what their vegetal body would enable them and they can therefore transform large sections of the woodland in a short period of time. In the *Mythago Cycle*, there is a kind of world-building within world-building done by the trees of Ryhope.

In fairy tales and in modern fantasy novels, plants are generally given agency through bestowing human abilities upon them. However, if we have a brief look at contemporary plant studies, we can see that scientists are revealing ever more details about the amazing set of senses plants actually have. Plants have sensitive photo-receptors by which they can perceive the change of seasons. They can also communicate with other plants and animals in multiple ways: through chemicals released into the air, electric signs transported through their body or even through the mitochondrial network attached to their roots. Using these forms of communication, plants – especially if they make up a biodiverse environment like an old-growth forest – can greatly influence or even transform their immediate surroundings. In the light of the current research on plant senses, Holdstock's invention of trees tapping into the human mind in order to protect their own land, does not even appear as a great stretch of this concept. For instance, plant heteronomy is a key feature of real-life plants, and Holdstock also relies on it in his description of Ryhope Wood. As plants greatly depend on their immediate surroundings, they are compelled to a constant interaction with their environment. Holdstock, as I have already shown in previous chapters, adds a twist to this process through the introduction of a supernatural contact between plants and human minds that provides the trees with metaphysical agency as builders of their own world. If we now consider this process focusing on the spatial structure of the wood, we may realize that similar to the temporal structure of Ryhope, world-building is also a multi-layered process in the wood to which both human and nonhuman creatures contribute: author, vegetal beings of an imaginary forest, fictional characters and the reader.

8.3 Unmappable Vegetation

In a lot of fantasy fiction, protagonists frequently enter uncanny, unknown spaces where they confront the Other. Sometimes, however, the very space becomes a manifestation of otherness. Something similar happens in the *Mythago* novels, yet when the characters are confronted with this spatial Other, all their methods fail to understand or map it. In the first

novel, *Mythago Wood* two devoted scientists, Edward Wynne-Jones and George Huxley embark on a journey to discover and understand the unknown space of Ryhope Wood. After Huxley's death and Wynne-Jones' disappearance in the wooden realm, Huxley's two sons, Christian and Stephen start their own journey into the forest. As they fail to map the wood through traditional methods, the protagonists then opt for a different scientific approach to understand the forest's internal structure. Holdstock provides excerpts from George Huxley's diary to show how Huxley and Wynne-Jones try to understand the mytho-genetic process through brain analysis. Huxley writes: "... and the [brain] zone of the pre-mythago is excited accordingly. If only there were some way of exploring the living brain to find exactly where the site of this occult presence lies." (Holdstock 2014a, 34). However, as the characters become ever more engulfed in the wood, Holdstock twists the well-known scenario of white male scientists conquering an unknown land – as the Huxley brothers become conquered themselves by the mysterious power of the wood.

In the second novel, *Lavondyss*, Holdstock's focus turns to more pre-scientific methods of identifying spatial structures. In this novel, naming parts of the wooden realm also proves to be a method to decipher Ryhope. This comes to the forefront most obviously when teenage Tallis attempts to find the true names of places near her home: when she manages to reveal a true name, only then can she move forward, and enter the place with the uncovered name. A childish game as it may seem, within the novel, it gains mythic significance as Tallis gradually discovers "something deeper than reason" (Holdstock 2015, 29). A name might be an anthropocentric way of relating to the environment, but at its core it is driven by the urge to connect with the land. From Tallis' point of view, names appear to be fix points that aid her in orientation: "Names are names. [...] They exist. People find them out. But they don't change them. They can't." (Holdstock 2015, 11). Tallis' fear of change eventually becomes initiator of great change in the landscape through her very efforts to preserve it the way it is. In this world, nothing is fixed.

Whilst the human characters apply their own methods to decipher the wood's structure, Ryhope also does its best to remove these people from their human perception of space and it never runs out of methods to disorientate the intruders. In his vivid descriptions of this process, Holdstock relies on all five senses, with particularly strong olfactory imagery and peculiar background noises. He generally describes Ryhope as a claustrophobic space, where the human intruder's view is always limited by the vegetation. For instance, in *The Hollowing*, this is how Richard perceives his surroundings at his first time in the wood:

“The trees crowded in on him, the atmosphere heavy and resinous. He veered off the path and tangled with sharp thorns. He felt stifled and sick, increasingly enclosed, increasingly afraid.” (Holdstock 1995, 71)

Most of this is normal experience in a woodland – but exaggerated – and this imaginary movement is materialized in mythagos. Human space is literally filtered with wood space. The presence of the mythagos first appears in the form of movement in the corner of your eyes. Here’s, for instance, Steve’s first experience of mythago formation:

“Shortly after Christmas, whilst I cooked in the kitchen, I detected movement beside me. It was a shock to my system, a moment of fright that made me twist around, adrenalin making my heart race.

The kitchen was empty. The movement remained, a hesitant flickering at the edge of vision. I raced through the house to the study, and sat behind the desk, my hands on the polished wooden surface, my breathing laboured.

The movement disappeared.” (Holdstock 2014a, 66)

In Ryhope, space can be seen as vegetal space created through vegetal agency. Space inside the wood is thus dynamic – and that is how it may interact with human perception in the above-mentioned ways. Doreen Massey’s observations on space can come useful in an analysis of this vegetal space as she sees spaces as processes instead of static, inanimate entities. In Massey’s view, space is “the product of interrelations” (Massey 2005, 9). In Ryhope’s case, this interrelation is the interrelation of various species that form this strange ecosystem. Massey also points out that space is “the sphere in which distinct trajectories exist” and space is the sphere of “coexisting heterogeneity” (Massey 2005, 9). She concludes that “Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space.” (Massey 2005, 9). Human spaces partake in this multiplicity, even though we retain the illusion that we humans have the upper hand. In the multiplicity revealed in Ryhope Wood this illusion is dissolved. Space is “always under construction” – and as such it is never finished, consequently, “we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey 2005, 9). All these statements clearly resonate with Ryhope as a space, and they also bring inherent eco-critical considerations.

In the arboreal realm, some spaces are quite literally the manifestations of “stories-so-far.” These places are called mythagoscapes and they are created through the trees’ interaction with the human mind. Here’s how George Huxley describes the process in his journal in the second novel, *Lavondyss*: “... the mythogenetic effect works not only to create the untouchable, mysterious figure of lore and legend, the hero figure, it also creates the forbidden *places* of the mythic past.” (Holdstock 2015, 140). In the same novel, Huxley’s friend, Edward Wynne-Jones

calls these geistzones (Holdstock 2015, 140), whilst the term “mythagoscope” appears in the short story “The Bone Forest” (Holdstock 2009a, 427) which serves as a prequel to the first novel and focuses on the Huxley family. Despite the fact that they are physical manifestations, these forbidden places are still story material and as such they are subject to rapid and unexpected changes.

Spaces in Ryhope are always under construction, and the characteristics of the woodland change from novel to novel. In his article about the spatiotemporal structure of Ryhope Wood, Stefan Ekman reveals that spaces inside the wooden realm are absolutely flexible, and in each novel, characters experience Ryhope in a slightly different way (Ekman 2011). According to Ekman, the first novel, *Mythago Wood* displays the simplest structure: the wood represents a labyrinth that Umberto Eco would call a “linear labyrinth” and Penelope Reed Doob would identify as an “unicursal” labyrinth (Ekman 2011, 57). In the second novel, *Lavondyss*, young protagonist Tallis experiences the forest as a multicursal maze (Ekman 2011, 54). In a maze one is expected to make choices, but Ryhope is not only a spatial but also a “mythotopic” maze where, as Ekman points out, choices cannot be limited to spatial ones (Ekman 2011, 57). The forest in *The Hollowing* is pictured more like a net where every point can be connected with every other point and thus its structure represents a de-centred model unlike the previous two novels (Ekman 2011, 61). In the fourth novel, *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*, retains this net structure, yet there is an inventive addition in the form of Legion (an army of mythic heroes of varied origin that journey towards the innermost realms of the wood) that functions as a mythotope on its own right (Ekman 2011, 62). Legion seems to have a certain autonomy that enables it to force itself through the spatial structure of the wood: “It moves through the forest like a bubble, but a bubble that has no need for following the structure through which its path leads.” (Ekman 2011, 63). In addition to a supposed authorial intent, these changes in the wood’s spatiotemporal structure are also induced by internal catalysers: in each novel, the focal character’s point of view is intertwined with the way he or she experiences the interior spaces of Ryhope. The simple labyrinth of the first novel and the brutal power of Legion that forces itself through the wood could be set in parallel with the almost inhuman urges characters such as George and Christian Huxley have to find and possess the mythagos of their creation. *Lavondyss*, a coming-of-age novel in many respects, presents a structure with a large number of life- (and narrative-) changing choices. *The Hollowing* relies on a relatively large set of main characters whose individual journeys are equally important and are connected at multiple points: the net structure of the wood seem to reflect this.

Observing this multiplicity of interacting spaces, the question arises whether Ryhope could be seen as a heterotopia. Heterotopia is described as follows: “There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). The description of Ryhope can easily be paralleled with this description. Ryhope does have a real-life location as it is (from the outside) a small patch of primeval woodland on the English countryside. At the same time, it is also outside of all places – it is a different world. The simultaneity of different stories is also clearly seen in Ryhope.

The heterotopic structure of the wooden realm might be navigated through the hollowings that are spatial shortcuts zigzagging the wood. Holdstock uses the hollowings all throughout the *Mythago Cycle*, but they gain the most attention in the third novel that is actually entitled *The Hollowing*. In this novel, the scientist Lacan describes these magical pathways to protagonist Richard as follows: “The wood is criss-crossed with them, woven with them. Another system of space and time.” (Holdstock 1995, 83). Each novel fleshes out some new details about hollowings that were left unexplained or barely explained in the previous texts. In the second novel, *Lavondyss*, the teenage protagonist, Tallis repeatedly uses the hollowings to navigate the woodland realm (in addition to the hollowings that belong to the landscape, the magic masks Tallis makes also serve as hollowings), but it is only in the third novel, *The Hollowing* that the spatial structure of these uncanny pathways is described from a quasi-scientific perspective: “The map showed five Ryhope “perimeters,” one above the other in a staggered display, connected by thin tubes that curved down between them, some connecting adjacent planes, others running deeper and usually ending in a question mark.” (Holdstock 1995, 107). Even though each hollowing leads to real, physically manifested locations, sometimes it is impossible to predict to what time and space it will take the traveller.²⁶

Despite the vegetal material it is constructed from, the structures of the interior spaces of Ryhope rely on the contents of the human collective unconscious. In a sense, the wood

²⁶ Timothy Morton’s concept the “mesh” could also be used to describe the interior of Ryhope Wood. According to Morton, a mesh “consists of relationships between crisscrossing strands of metal and gaps between the strands. Meshes are potent metaphors for the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences.” (Morton 2013, 83). Gaps and absences are general tools in literature (and they are natural components of real life) as they are equal parts in the creation of a text’s meaning, thus the Mythago novels might be read as meshes on multiple levels.

mirrors the human mind. In his description of heterotopia, Foucault mentions the mirror as an example of heterotopia: “The mirror functions as a heterotopia [...]: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). Unsurprisingly, Rosemary Jackson also uses the mirror image to describe the relationship between the real and the unreal in her 1981 book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Relying on the optics term, *paraxis*, Jackson writes: “A paraxial region is an area in which light rays seem to unite at a point after refraction. In this area, object and image seem to collide, but in fact neither object nor reconstituted image genuinely reside there: nothing does.” (Jackson 1981, 11). This fictitious space behind the mirror is “the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely ‘real’ (object), nor entirely ‘unreal’ (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two” (Jackson 1981, 12). Both Foucault’s and Jackson’s description focus on the virtual point behind the mirror where light rays seem to unite and create an image that is real *and* unreal at the same time. Holdstock’s Ryhope Wood occupies a similar region inasmuch as it manifests the contents of the human mind (and thus it appears to be real), but nevertheless it remains behind the mirror in its vegetal corporeality (as all the images created by Ryhope are eventually made of woodland material). If we observe this real–unreal dynamics from an eco-critical perspective, we may conclude that whilst mythagos and their related mythagoscapes appear to be fit for our anthropocentric reality, in truth they are all uncanny combinations of the human and the nonhuman in a wooden realm where the fissure of nature and culture has not yet taken place.

This intricate interior structure of Ryhope might also be described relying on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept the rhizome. A rhizomic structure “operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21) – much like Ryhope does. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, “the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. It is tracings that must be put on the map, not the opposite.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The unmappable quality of Ryhope’s vegetal landscape could easily be described in a similar vein. And much like Holdstock’s arboreal realm, the rhizome is “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21). Even though Ryhope does operate on human memories and is sometimes described as having a “sylvan mind” (Holdstock 2009a, 351) its

'nervous system' is decentralised and shared among the many creatures that make up the superorganism.

Through this intricate spatial structure, Holdstock urges his reader to realize that the nature–culture divide is not only an ideological divide but also a spatial divide, an invisible barrier that separates us from the nonhuman world. The last boundary that physically separates us from our environment is our skin. However, if we look at ourselves as manifestations of bodyminds – our mind does not end at the demarcation line of our skin. We intrude upon other minds, while we are being intruded upon by those other minds. Now that we have seen how Ryhope constructs and re-constructs its own space relying on the contents of the human collective unconscious, let us move on to the observation of how this semi-sentient forest transforms the mind of intruders, turning them into a part of the landscape.

Even though the first novel, *Mythago Wood* initially pictures the traditional portal fantasy structure in which the protagonist enters an unknown world, Farah Mendlesohn argues that it fits better into the category of intrusion fantasy: a type of fantasy in which the supernatural intrudes into the everyday reality of the protagonist. Mendlesohn points out that even though Stephen Huxley initially views “the wood as something upon which they can impose their wishes, a place that they can fix” (Mendlesohn 2008, 154), later on, it becomes clear that “the colonized land is the body and mind of the protagonist” (Mendlesohn 2008, 152). And this colonization process is carried out by the vegetal intruding into the human mind. According to Georgy Huxley’s earlier mentioned journal, this intrusion is hardly perceptible at first and does not appear particularly threatening. As Huxley writes in his journal, “[t]he forms of the mythagos cluster in my peripheral vision, still. Why never in fore-vision? These unreal images are mere reflections, after all.” (Holdstock 2014a, 35). Huxley’s main ambition is to find the Urscumug, the most ancient mythago creature in the wood. However, his impatience is misleading, by the time he writes these lines, he is already hopelessly under the wood’s influence.

Based on the contents of Huxley’s mind, the wood re-creates the flesh-and-blood image of the Urscumug, described as: “It’s like a boar. Part boar, part human, elements of other beasts from the wildwood. It walks upright, but can run like the wind. It paints its face white in the semblance of a human face. Whatever age it lived in, one thing’s for sure, it lived a long time before man as we understand "man" existed; this thing comes from a time when man and nature were so close that they were indistinguishable.” (Holdstock 2014a, 55). After the death of their father, this pre-historic monster becomes a father image for the Huxley brothers. Because despite their bodily alterity as human-vegetal hybrids, mythagos are very closely connected to

humans through the stories they bring with themselves that demand even normal human beings to act along. According to Christian in *Mythago Wood*, becoming a re-enactor of a woodland narrative is similar to becoming a mythago: “I’m trapped in this wood by something in my own mind as surely as if I were a mythago myself.” (Holdstock 2014a, 55). Once the Huxley brothers become actors in the stories re-enacted within the wood, they realize that the wood’s real secret is not within the trees but in the human mind, the contents of which are materialised by the plants. We might understand this as a blurring of the nature–culture dichotomy in the sense that the Huxley brothers both physically and mentally enter a place where man and nature are so close that they are indistinguishable.

Despite the anthropocentric superiority we are taught to feel about nature, there is no denying that we eventually become part of the landscape ourselves. This leads us to a reversal in our thinking regarding the role of vegetal life. Non-vegetal life not only relies on vegetal life for food, but also for shelter, for climate – for the very context of their lives: “For the vast majority of organisms, the world is the product of plant life, the product of the colonization of the planet by plants, since time immemorial.” (Coccia 2018).

8.4 *Vegetal Metafantasy*

We have seen Ryhope Wood both as a physical and a mental landscape, but it has a third spatial dimension: the very texts of the novels and short stories. In this last subchapter I will cast more light on the textual spaces of the *Mythago Cycle*, and argue that they are unique manifestations of vegetal metafantasy.

Postmodern literature brought an increased attention to the fictionality of fiction and its construction, and this led to the flourishing of metafiction. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.” (Waugh 1984, 2). According to Robert Scholes, metafiction also requires a heightened attention for the different aspects of construction from the author’s part: “Metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself. It may emphasize structural, formal, behavioral, or philosophical qualities, but most writers of metafiction are thoroughly aware of all these possibilities and are likely to have experimented with all of them.” (Scholes 2013, 29). The appearance and success of self-conscious fiction is intertwined with the realisation that the role of language is different than how it was previously perceived: “The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and ‘objective’ world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own

‘meanings’.” (Waugh 1984, 3). When she is writing about the truth in fiction and whether authors are liars, Waugh assumes that “Literary fiction simply demonstrates the existence of multiple realities.” (Waugh 1984, 89).

All this attention to the construction of fiction comes quite naturally to modern fantasy. Unlike realistic fiction, fantasy is honest about its own fictionality, and the more self-conscious it is, the more likely that it applies its toolkit to lay bare its fictionality – and even involve the reader in its construction. George Aichele in 1988 makes an early rendering of what metafantasy is. Since his definition of fantasy relies on the ability of escape from the real world, he sees the real merit of the “subgenre” of metafantasy in its ability to subvert all defantasizing strategies (Aichele 1988, 56). In his view, “metafantasy establishes two or more worlds, each a distorted image of the other, but unlike other fantasies, it allows no escape from one to the other; instead it establishes an endless oscillation between worlds, a reciprocal interference with one another which becomes more and more violent until a blurring of every self-identical entity occurs” (Aichele 1988, 56). According to Aichele, metafantasy texts could be lined across a scale depending on to what extent the oscillation between the two worlds effect the story (Aichele 1988, 56). Brian Attebery, however, denotes a different and more complex role to metafantasy. In his view, these texts “often make the very structures of fantastic storytelling do metafictional work: calling attention to authorial decisions, linking different levels of reality, calling on readers to fill in gaps and extend the stories past endings” (Attebery 2014, 207). This means that when you set the toolkit of fantasy mode to create metafiction, then what you achieve is metafantasy. Attebery, who elsewhere argues for the extensively postmodern nature of modern fantasy (see Attebery 1992, Chapter Three), points out that metafantasy is created through the “typically postmodern devices” the analogues of which are found among fantasy’s conventions (Attebery 2014, 207).

The dynamic nature of myths and myth-making combines quite naturally with metafantasy. According to Lily Alexander, “symbolic crystallization” is an unfinished process in which “meaning-making vibration remains an intellectual puzzle, adding to our cultural experiences the never-ending pleasure of semantic riddles” (Alexander 2018, 123). The ever-changing mythological structure of *Ryhope* relies on a similar process. In the following, I will list some of the metafictional tools fantasy generally uses (see Attebery 2014) and argue that their application throughout the *Mythago Cycle* is always intertwined with the presence of the vegetal Other thus creating a form of vegetal metafantasy.

Myse en abyme, the “miniature versions of the whole story embedded within the larger narrative” is also an interesting tool of metafantasy (Attebery 2014, 207). For this, the *Mythago*

texts provide multiple examples: in *The Hollowing*, for instance, the wood confronts the protagonists with various forms of the trickster narrative, whilst the whole novel itself could be seen as a trickster story too (for more details on trickster stories see Chapter Myth). Under the illusion of their imagined agency, some characters even manage to temporarily reorganise stories and adjacent landscapes. In *Lavondyss*, for instance, we learn that Tallis “had changed the landscape, bringing the old winter to her modern summer” (Holdstock 2015, 75). Generally speaking, all kinds of fantasy symbols in fact serve as “narrative signposts, instructions in the art of reading creatively” (Attebery 2014, 208). In the *Mythago Cycle*, these “narrative signposts” gain special significance, as they not only create an inter-related network within single novels, but also link subsequent novels with each other and the short stories (e.g. reappearing mythago characters, repetition of certain fates/storylines/imagery/magic practices).

According to Attebery, voices and languages might also gain metafictional significance in fantasy (Attebery 2014, 208). As I have already described in the previous chapters, names and language have a special role throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. Names serve as a way of contacting the landscape (as when Tallis searches for the ancient names of the fields surrounding her home) and languages either connect our separate different species (like the daurog encounters described in *Lavondyss* and *The Hollowing*). When various versions of the same name appear (e.g. Guiwenneth–Guinevere–Jennifer) they also function as links between the different versions of the same narrative.

Thus, through these intricate authorial choices, text structure begins to resemble wood structure, and the mytho-genetic process is literally continued in the reader’s mind, undermining her urge to order events in a linear mode.

9. Myth

9.1 *Beyond the Monomyth*

Brian Attebery argues that the immense success of Tolkien's work in the 1960s can be largely attributed to "a powerful renewal of interest in myth" (Attebery 2014, 96). According to him, this decade was the time when "psychoanalysis met structuralism and philosophy converged with anthropology," and all the great mythographers (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, Mircea Eliade) were active (Attebery 2014, 96). This heightened attention for myth brought an urge to systematize mythic and folk narratives, and these efforts left their mark on the development of post-Tolkien fantasy. Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth had a long-lasting influence. The tripartite structure of the hero's path (separation, initiation, return) that Campbell describes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 2004, 28) is extensively used in commercial fantasy up to this day. Innovative fantasy writers, however, have been eager to subvert such rigid, structuralist frameworks imposed on their mythic material. Some of them, Robert Holdstock included, have also begun to deconstruct the glamour of the Campbellian hero. Despite acknowledging its significant influence on modern fantasy, Attebery himself has been a long-time critique of Campbell's monomyth (see Attebery 2014, 108 and 119). In addition to his previous reserves about the structural and conceptual limitations the monomyth entails, in 2022, Attebery pointed out that the monomyth is also laden with ecological concerns: "the hero narrative is about imposing oneself on the landscape, turning a complex environment into mere backdrop for a larger-than-life human figure" (Attebery 2022b, 16-17).²⁷ His description exposes the hero of the monomyth as the hegemonic white male or Anthropos, the standard human placed in the centre of our anthropocentric view of the world.

Nevertheless, there is reason behind the widespread popularity of the monomyth. The predictability of the hero's journey as portrayed in commercial fantasy offers a safe, mental haven from the immense complexity of the primary world. Acknowledging our real place as a

²⁷ We might even see the hero narrative as a master narrative of the Anthropocene. As Jean-Francois Lyotard describes, there are certain grand narratives (master narratives or metanarratives) that "determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do." (Lyotard 1984, 23). The Anthropocene operates on a variety of such grand narratives that have their common focus in their fixation on the human. From human exceptionalism through male chauvinism to plant blindness, many aspects of our lives are rooted in the central position of the human. Even sustainability, the over-used catchphrase of the climate crisis is centred on the sustainability of *human* civilization. It is evident, that the way we structure our narratives does play a role in how we see our relationship to the environment. We form our narratives and we are formed by them – and this is the exact process that Holdstock lays bare in the *Mythago Cycle*.

single species in a biosphere that expands farther in time and space than an individual human can comprehend *is* frightening. On the level of the entire ecosystem, the human species is expendable. No wonder we are ready to accept a theory that shows how the confusing array of narratives from around the world eventually boils down to the single ‘truth’ that we have an inborn right to become masters of the biosphere. Campbell tells his reader that “[t]he mighty hero of extraordinary powers [...] is each one of us” (Campbell 2004, 337), but having realized that the hero is in fact Anthropos in a thousand disguises we can easily expose this claim for the deceit it actually is. The concept of hegemonic white masculinity excludes not only women and people of colour but it is by nature an empty centre, a list of strict criteria no living man can fulfil. Thus, it is high time we overcame our fascination with the monomyth and disclose it as another comforting lie of the Anthropocene.²⁸

Mythic fantasy offers multiple methods to undermine the domination of the monomyth, and Holdstock’s *Mythago Cycle* is a prime example of this process. Ryhope Wood is literally alive with all kinds of myths that regularly intermingle. Holdstock’s fictional world even has its own structuralist researchers who intend to systematically document the narratives they encounter in the wood. For instance, George Huxley is revealed to be an avid collector of folk stories: in the appendix of *The Hollowing* the reader finds a version of the Jack narrative collected by him entitled “Jack His Father”. Similarly, Helen Silverlock in the same novel appears to be quite literate in the different manifestations of trickster stories, hoping that this knowledge helps her in her pursuit of Coyote. Nevertheless, all attempts fail at the systematic description of the mythic landscape generated inside Ryhope. Within the sylvan realm, there is no overarching monomyth that could serve as basis for a hierarchical system. Each (mythago or human) hero is burdened with his or her own quest and is driven by it. More interestingly, the fate of either the primary or the secondary world is never tied to the success of these individual quests. And yet, each hero’s journey contributes to the maintenance of this uncanny ecosystem. In Ryhope Wood, where an immense human–nonhuman assemblage is kept in motion by vegetal intervention into the human mind, cooperation seems to win over

²⁸ But are stories exclusively a human product? Paul Kincaid’s 2022 critical companion to *Mythago Wood* remains blatantly anthropocentric when claiming that a story is a “very human force” (Kincaid 2022, 37). For Kincaid, story is somehow a space outside of ‘normal’ chronology (Kincaid 2022, 37) – a debatable argument, since his normal is the heteronormative, patriarchal, anthropocentric normal. Attebery points towards a different perception of possession of stories, when he argues that myths accomplish something science is unable to do: they can convince us that “to know something is to be known by it” (Attebery 2014, 209). This observation is quite literally true for Ryhope Wood – entering this arboreal realm, you are most certainly get known by it, as the wood inevitably reaches into your mind. This speaks a lot about the ambiguous nature of agency within the wooden realm. When Tallis in *Lavondyss* is carving the masks she uses to intervene into the structure of Ryhope, it is described as follows: “she had never given a thought to the consequences of what she was doing... or of what was being done to her” (Holdstock 2015, 43).

competition. In this chapter, I intend to show how the mytho-genetic process undermines the hero narrative, and I argue that Holdstock depicts Ryhope Wood as an ecocentric entity that materializes a vast system of more-than-human mythology.

9.2 *Ecocidal Heroism*

Once the hero of the monomyth is disclosed as Anthropos, the further ecological consequences of his persistence in culture can be revealed. In Chapter 3, I have already summarized how our cultural and religious beliefs keep influencing our relationship with the natural world – now I argue that the classic hero narrative is a small but significant component of this influence. The deeds of the cultural hero such as the Sumerian Gilgamesh or his monster-slaying colleagues like Theseus, Beowulf and Siegfried serve both as explanation and validation of the nature–culture divide. These narratives thus actively contributed to our age-long abuse of nature that brought the Anthropocene into being. Moreover, the hero’s journey relies for its effect on further binary oppositions: hero–enemy, good–bad, winner–loser, subject–object. The normalization of these dichotomies played a large role in the objectification and consequent commodification of the nonhuman world. As people of the Anthropocene, we are conditioned to share the mental template that life is competitive, that there has to be a winner and a loser – and on top of this, we are convinced that all this is *natural*. Unfortunately, commercial fantasy frequently resonates with these beliefs creating wish-fulfilment narratives that reinforce our anthropocentric, patriarchal, capitalist reality under the disguise of imaginary settings. In these simplified secondary worlds, the hero’s arch enemy is easily identifiable and his defeat is predictable. Sadly, such run-of-the mill heroes trained against mass-media monsters would definitely falter facing the viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing, and interobjectivity of the *Hyperobject Monsters*, the pillars of the Anthropocene.

In her 1986 essay, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” Ursula K. Le Guin harshly criticizes the hero narrative calling it the “killer story” that exists in opposition to the “life story” (Le Guin 1996, 152). She argues that life stories are as much a part of our cultural heritage as the hero story is: “People have been telling the life story for ages, in all sorts of words and ways. Myths of creation and transformation, trickster stories, folktales, jokes, novels” (Le Guin 1996, 152). In Le Guin’s view, our patriarchal society is largely at fault for the dominant status of the killer story – and we have to suffer the consequences (Le Guin 1996, 152–153). Following in her lines, Marek Oziewicz argues in 2022 that ecocidal ontologies have filtered our story systems, and as a consequence “even narratives envisioned to defend the biosphere tend to get twisted into narratives that reinforce the anthropocentric myopia which is destroying the

biosphere in the first place” (Oziewicz 2022, 58). Oziewicz coins the term *ecocidal unconscious* referring to our refusal to acknowledge ourselves as agents of the ecocide (Oziewicz 2022, 60). He argues that the ecocidal unconscious extensively influences our lives as it “frames articulations of our ontologies, habituated behaviors, cultural assumptions, and ways of reasoning that have accrued around the delusion of ourselves as masters of the biosphere” (Oziewicz 2022, 60). Considering all these, the hero narrative can be easily identified as a manifestation of ecocidal ontology that in turn confirms our mistaken beliefs about our relationship with the nonhuman world. “It is not encouraging to realize that our literary conventions work against our survival,” Oziewicz points out (Oziewicz 2022, 63). However, once we have identified in what ways our fascination with the hero narrative can harm our future, we can go on to learn more about the composition of life stories and use this knowledge to lead us into a biocentric future.

Innovative fantasy has a potential to cunningly subvert the hero narrative through a re-introduction of what Le Guin calls the life story. Robert Holdstock’s *Mythago Cycle* is a notable example of this process. In Ryhope Wood, a multiplicity of hero narratives is found acted out by both mythago and human characters, yet none of them comes anywhere near to forcing the natural world into submission. Nevertheless, the way Holdstock depicts his human male characters reveals a lot about how the ecocidal unconscious works and how its harmful effects are eventually undermined by the arboreal power of Ryhope. In the first novel, *Mythago Wood*, it is obvious that George Huxley and his two sons, Christian and Steven intend to use Ryhope as a tool of wish-fulfilment, since the wood is able to materialize the object of their desire, the mythago Guiwenneth. As the wood can only rely on the contents of the intruders’ minds, the three men’s struggle is re-enacted within the sylvan realm as a killer story in which the father figure is replaced by his own mythago, the ancient monster Urscumug, while Christian is soon labelled as the Outsider, another destructive, archetypal figure. However, due to the very nature of Ryhope Wood their story could never come to the conclusion we would expect from a hero narrative. Objectification and possession of another living creature is impossible in this realm: the viscosity of the hyperobject Ryhope is also extended to its creations, the mythagos. “She’s lived a thousand times, and she’s never lived at all. But I still fell in love with her... and I shall find her again in the woods; she is in there somewhere...,” Christian says after he witnessed the death of the mythago Guiwenneth and buried her by the chicken huts of Oak Lodge (Holdstock 2014a, 32). Given the cyclical life of mythagos that are forever regenerated by the wood, this scenario still renders the classic ending of the hero narrative impossible. Even if Huxley and his two sons defeated all their perceived enemies, none of them could claim Guiwenneth as a

reward *and* keep her. Instead of having their wish fulfilled through the possession of the object of their desire, all three men become contributors in the maintenance of the superorganism that is Ryhope Wood – even though they remain so blinded by pursuing their own goals that they fail to realise this. However, Ryhope does not kill them as the winner–loser dichotomy of the hero narrative would require, instead, they enter the cyclical life of the wood. George Huxley, for instance, appears in multiple manifestations throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. Apart from the above mentioned Urscumug in *Mythago Wood*, he is later seen as a wandering human in *The Hollowing* whose mind greatly affects the landscape, and as a mythago creature in *Avilion* who haunts the ruins of Oak Lodge, his former home. Thus, in the *Mythago Cycle* Holdstock creates a *vegetal life story* that replaces competition with cooperation, possession with interaction, and death with cyclical rebirth.

9.3 *The Comic Mode*

However, it is not only the monomyth that provides free roam for the ecocidal unconscious. Oziewicz argues that tragedy is a primary venue for it, and the tragic mode’s core binary rests on the nature–culture divide (Oziewicz 2022, 63). Joseph W. Meeker sees tragedy as an invention of Western culture (Meeker 1996, 157) and summarizes it as follows: “The tragic view assumes that man exists in a state of conflict with powers that are greater than he is.” (Meeker 1996, 157). This attitude already sets the stage for nature as an antagonistic force that is to be defeated without a chance for negotiation. And indeed, as Meeker goes on, the “tragic man takes his conflict seriously, and feels compelled to affirm his mastery and his greatness in the face of his own destruction.” (Meeker 1996, 157). Even though the hero’s journey does not necessarily have a tragic trajectory, it is easy to perceive the obvious parallel in its attitude towards nature. What Don D. Elgin sees even more problematic about tragedy is that it paints a “flattering portrait of humanity” by establishing “humankind as clearly superior to all other creatures and, in fact, clearly asserts that the world revolves around humanity.” (Elgin 2004, 259).

In contrast to this, the comic mode offers more room for eco-conscious thought. Whilst the tragic mode urges us to think in absolutes, comedy gives us leave to be fallible and unheroic – without the threat of a final defeat. As Meeker argues, comedy “demonstrates that man is durable even though he may be weak, stupid, and undignified.” (Meeker 1996, 158). Thus, comedy offers hope, not only for the individual but also for the environment. “Literary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery,” Meeker argues (Meeker 1996, 159), and this process can easily be paralleled with the trajectory of Tolkienian fantasy in which the *thinning*

of the land is eventually followed by some sort of restoration and reconciliation.²⁹ Similarly, in texts that could be defined as intrusion fantasy “the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled.” (Mendlesohn 2008, 115). Even though Mendlesohn’s description does not rule out the tragic scenario, intrusion fantasy frequently makes use of the potential to negotiate with and understand the intruding Other, and blur or undermine binary oppositions in this process. The comic strategy, that “sees life as a game” can come particularly useful against these dichotomies as Meeker argues: “When faced with polar opposites, the problem of comedy is always how to resolve conflict without destroying the participants. Comedy is the art of accommodation and reconciliation.” (Meeker 1996, 168). The comic character perfectly fits into this scenario as she “acts on the basis of experience rather than abstraction, and in *so* doing, the character sets up a view of humanity and its future that emphasizes the limited nature of its powers and the likelihood of the system’s long-range existence instead of its own” (Elgin 2004, 261-262). In this respect, Elgin argues, comedy is more realistic and more human (Elgin 2004, 262). Considering this statement, it is even more interesting that fantasy as one of the major modes of non-realistic literature seems so naturally prone to the application of the comic strategy.

What Tolkien writes about the consolation of fairy-stories applies to most mythic fantasy texts in as much as they deny “universal, final defeat” (Tolkien 2008, 75). It may sound surprising if I argue that the novels of the *Mythago Cycle* are in fact written in comic mode, since they include great sorrow and suffering. However, if we step outside of our anthropocentric comfort zone and have a look at the larger picture it becomes easier to see things differently. In Meeker’s view, one of the key features of tragedy is that it “assumes that some truth exists in the universe which is more valuable than life itself.” (Meeker 1996, 167). In Ryhope, however, the only overarching truth is life itself. But it is life in its ‘natural’ or even *vegetal* form: life that inherently includes death and rebirth. Mythagos live and die but they never cease to exist and their cyclical lives contribute to the eternal life of the woodland ecosystem. From Ryhope’s point of view, a final defeat is impossible.

Fantasy’s reliance on the comic mode brings a number of ecological consequences as it offers connection to the natural world in place of the forceful separation from it that the classic hero narrative and the tragic mode represent. As Attebery points out, “[i]n generating narrative embodiments of an ecological viewpoint, myth provides more valid models than does history, for history tends to divorce humanity from the natural world, while myth continually reminds

²⁹ For a detailed description of “thinning” in fantasy, see Clute and Grant, 1997, 942–943.

us of our place within it.” (Attebery 1992, 33). In the following, I am going to show how Holdstock makes use of this potential through the mythic narratives included in the *Mythago Cycle*.

Despite the fact that the titular wood of the Mythago novels is located in the English countryside, Paul Kincaid points out that “there is nothing particularly English about Ryhope Wood” (Kincaid 2022, 55). Indeed, this peculiar patch of primeval forest seems equally interested in the minds of all kinds of humans and its inner realm is rife with landscapes and mythic figures from all over the globe. Since most of its intruders bring with themselves European mythology, the overwhelming majority of narratives portrayed in *Mythago Wood* and in *Lavondyss* are of Celtic or Anglo-Saxon origin. In this respect, *The Hollowing* is an interesting turning point, as in this novel, Holdstock begins to extensively rely on ancient Greco-Roman myths (this continues in the fourth novel, *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*, the title of which can be traced back to Greek origin). *The Hollowing* also reveals that Ryhope Wood can easily adapt its interior according to the minds of non-Western people and non-traditional story structures. Once Helen Silverlock, a woman of Native American origin enters the wood, the trees materialize the Coyote figure hidden in her mind. Similarly, the wood eagerly takes Alex’s version of the Green Knight narrative that the young boy has created for a school play. Holdstock repeatedly calls his reader’s attention to the fact that similar narratives keep reappearing in the course of human history³⁰ – yet Ryhope Wood retains the individual features of these story varieties and does not flatten them out into a monomyth. Instead, what are faded by the arboreal power are the following three boundaries.

Firstly, the ongoing mythic stories inside Ryhope blur the boundary between the mundane and the magical. In our post-Enlightenment, anthropocentric view of the world, this distinction has a similar function as the nature–culture divide – so much so that we even evaluate literary performance in relation to this opposition. Magic is suspicious in fiction, and in their never-ending search for the accurate description of mundane reality, critics tend to miss the fact that the two should not be separated in the first place. In nature, in the true form of it that is free from our imposed expectations, the distinction between the mundane and the magical is non-existent. Ryhope Wood reveals this face of nature to us. Once under the influence of the

³⁰ Fantasy, as a story-centred mode of fiction, provides free roam for experimentation with recurring narratives. Stories, however, are not to be an end in themselves but they are a tool. As Kim Hendrickx argues “Stories can turn very complex matters into something intelligible, into something we recognize and can relate to. Stories and characters convey importance to things, persons, and places.” (Hendrickx 2022, 227). I argue that stories are also able to connect people of different points of view and humans with the more-than-human world. Within mythagoscaples, all beings (both animate and inanimate) serve a common goal – and it might not be that different in the real world.

wood, even the slightest gestures of the protagonist gain magical significance. Teenage characters (Tallis in *Lavondyss*, Alex in *The Hollowing*) are more apt to accept this, whilst other characters (Huxley and his two sons, the scientist team in *The Hollowing*) learn through trial and error that any thought or deed can cause significant rupture in the magical structure of the wood.

Secondly, myths as materialised within Ryhope undo the boundary between the universal and the individual. Even though Holdstock relies on various myths as source texts, he writes modern fantasy that, according to Richard Mathews, “is characterized by a narrative frame that unites timeless mythic patterns with contemporary individual experiences. Its stories at their hearts are *about* the relationship between the individual and the infinite.” (Mathews 2002, 1). The same is true for the novels of the *Mythago Cycle*: in Ryhope, human protagonists are first confronted with the infinite nature of the wood’s spatiotemporal dimensions, and soon they need to face the infinity of their own unconscious, the Other that is already within the Self.

This realization is at the core of the third kind of boundaries Holdstock blurs through the skilful application of myths: the boundaries within consciousness. Lily Alexander draws a complex picture of consciousness when she writes: “Consciousness as a process, taking a form of a sacred narrative, is an essence of myth.” (Alexander 2018, 116). The mindscapes that the trees in Ryhope Wood materialise through contact with the human mind could similarly be seen as dynamic processes that never stop. Once set into motion, mythic narratives within Ryhope operate like a mirror chamber, mirrors endlessly reflecting and repeating the other mirrors, and there is no escape from this multiplied illusion.

9.4 *The Arboreal Trickster*

In Chapter 4 I identified Ryhope Wood as a superorganism, a metaphor, a hyperobject and a character. In addition to these, calling the wood an *arboreal trickster* can summarize the wood’s intriguing complexity from a mythological viewpoint. The trickster figure is one of the twelve Jungian archetypes that reside in the collective unconscious (Jung 2014). His different manifestations can be traced in all kinds of oral and written narratives from folklore through myths to modern literature, but crossing boundaries and consequently blurring distinctions is always key to the trickster’s role. Lewis Hyde also realizes that “boundary creation and boundary crossing are related to one another, and the best way to describe trickster is to say simply that the boundary is where he will be found—sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there, the god of the threshold in all its forms.” (Hyde 2008). Similarly, the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* describes the trickster as “a

liminal being who can never be fixed into place” (Clute and Grant 1997, 964). Following from these, the trickster is in many respects a more ecological character than the hero of the monomyth. On the one hand, the trickster may appear in many forms and through his ability to shapeshift he is not limited to the anthropocentric point of view. On the other hand, as a creator and crosser of boundaries, the trickster can challenge the status quo, disrupt prejudices and undo the harmful dichotomies (hero–enemy, good–bad, winner–loser, subject–object) human civilization still relies on.

Holdstock’s fondness of the trickster figure is evident from how much he relies on it throughout the *Mythago Cycle*. On his webpage, he even claims that he sees *The Hollowing* as a study into the origins of the trickster (Holdstock 2009b). And even though *The Hollowing* is definitely the most trickster-dense novel of the Cycle, other visits to Ryhope also include similar characters. One of these is Tig, the young, Stone Age boy who is up to some mischief in both *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss* and has a central role in the short story “Earth and Stone”. “I have always had a soft spot for that young trickster,” Holdstock admits in the afterword of *Merlin’s Wood* (Holdstock 2009a, 453). Ash, the forest witch who also appears in multiple novels and in the short story, “The Bone Forest” is another example. Interestingly, her figure might also be seen as a substitute for Ryhope as she does her magic with little pieces of wood that represent different parts of the forest. A trickster identity, however, is not reserved for mythagos only. As Lytton describes in *The Hollowing*, the trickster “exists in all of us, blocked by the small shadow to the best of the small shadows ability” (Holdstock 1995, 262). Yet, on some occasions, this ‘inner trickster’ is released. For instance, Richard Bradley, one of the same novel’s protagonists also takes on a trickster role when he lures the mythago form of ancient Greek Jason into a hollowing.

Since both mythagos *and* humans are largely influenced in their deeds by Ryhope, it makes sense to assume that the wood itself (all its animate and inanimate components included) is another manifestation of the trickster. Holdstock himself also gives a few hints that would direct the reader towards this assumption. One of these is when in the short story, “The Bone Forest” he sets Ryhope in parallel to Drummer Fox, another trickster character:

“There was no use in using a compass in this wood. All magnetic poles shifted and changed, and north could be seen to turn a full three hundred and sixty degrees in the stepping of four paces in a straight line. Nor was there any guarantee that the perspective of the wood had not changed; hour by hour the primal landscape altered its relationship with its own internal architecture. It was as if the whole forest was

turning, a whirlpool, a spinning galaxy, turning around the voyager, confusing senses, direction and time. And further inwards one journeyed, the more that place laughed, played tricks, like old Drummer Fox, casting a glamour upon the eyes of the naive beholder.” (Holdstock 2009a, 428)

In the final chapter of *The Hollowing*, yet another trickster, the Green Knight (or the green man?) is substituted for Ryhope. When Richard eventually finds his son hiding in the mythago form of a cathedral, he spots the following image on the wall: “Yet instead of the knight spearing the wild man, this window showed the wild man exacting the life of the knight. It could have been a portrayal of martyrdom. But Richard now saw that it depicted the triumph of nature over the despoiler.” (Holdstock 1995, 301). The wood, however, is never seen this vengeful in the *Mythago Cycle*, but it is very good at mirroring the fears and prejudices of its intruders.

Going through the detailed description of the trickster in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* reveals further similarities to Ryhope. According to the TRICKSTER entry, the trickster “creates the world through transformations and through seedings; and he sticks his voracious head (or huge penis) into the working of the world” (Clute and Grant 1997, 965). Whilst “seeding” should definitely be understood in a different sense for Ryhope than this description implies, yet the wood does create a multiplicity of worlds through the transformation of its own material and mythagos are its seed(l)ings that keep this vast, more-than-human mythology in motion. The same entry in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* also points out that tricksters are the “primary conveyors of wisdom in fantasy texts” (Clute and Grant 1997, 965). Donna Haraway extends the concept of the trickster even further when she muses that “[p]erhaps the world resists being reduced to mere resource because it is-not mother/matter/mutter-but coyote, a figure of the always problematic, always potent tie between meaning and bodies.” (Haraway 1988, 596). Then what is the wisdom of Ryhope? Through endlessly mirroring the contents of the human mind, it lays bare the great failure of the anthropocentric view of the world: no matter how humans exaggerate their heroism, their separation from and domination of nature remains no more than a dangerous delusion.

10. Conclusion: A Story of Compenetration

The dissertation created a set of strategies that combines the theories of fantasy and critical plant studies in order to aid the more eco- and plant-conscious analysis of (mythic) fantasy literature. Even though ecocriticism and critical plant studies currently have an ever-growing influence on the analysis of cultural products, they have not been systematically combined before with the theories of fantasy with a specific focus on vegetal life. As the dissertation asserts, the position of fantasy within literature could be clearly paralleled with the position humans give to plants within the ecosystem: fantasy and plants are both marginalised as they do not fit into our anthropocentric (patriarchal, capitalist, male and animal chauvinist, etc.) categorisation systems. Bringing the hidden plant kingdom to the foreground, the plant-conscious reading of modern fantasy holds a great potential for a better understanding of humans' place in the biosphere. Once even the average person is more literate in the ways of plants and forests, humanity stands a higher chance of combating the climate crisis. The plant-visibility strategies devised and then demonstrated in this dissertation might be a small step towards this larger goal.

10.1 The Plant-Visibility Strategies

The creation of this set of strategies starts out from a flexible and amendable definition of fantasy. As an ever-evolving genre, fantasy is a fuzzy set without clear boundaries, a spectrum that includes works ranging from formula fiction to more innovative texts that question and subvert those formulas (see Attebery 1992). It sees mythic fantasy as a mode (cf. Attebery 1992, 1) that can take on and observe current issues even while it revokes and re-invents ancient narratives. From the critical plant studies side, the plant-visibility strategies heavily rely on the recent results of plant science and plant philosophy, and it sees plants as conscious and intelligent beings, “plant persons” (see Hall 2011) that possess a wide array of unique senses and are worthy of being included in the ethical discourse.

The plant-visibility strategies could be summarized in the following eight aspects that a literary scholar (or general reader) is supposed to observe if she wishes to unravel plant secrets in any fantasy text:

1. speculative reading

The plant-conscious analysis of fantasy requires an open mindset to literary analysis and a readiness to depart from the common cultural and political frameworks.

2. storied identity

Nature itself is a story of the incessant interactions of beings, and if we wish to read fantasy in a more ecocentric way, we should recognize plants as characters in this overarching narrative.

3. beyond anthropocentrism

A plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should pay attention to the ways plants surprise us by escaping our comfort zone of anthropocentric thinking.

4. subversion of anthropocentrism

The recognition that meaning is ultimately a human construct is the great liberation fantasy offers – and it has significant ecological consequences. A plant-conscious analysis of fantasy should pay special attention to the roles plants play in the deconstruction of anthropocentrism.

5. the skillset of plants

The plant-conscious researcher should pay meticulous attention to how the skillset of plant is described or expanded in fantasy and to what consequences it entails to plant–human relationships.

6. the otherness of plants

The plant-conscious analysis of mythic fantasy should dive into the ways how vegetal otherness is described, what confrontations with the human may occur and whether these encounters lead towards a reconciliation between human and nonhuman.

7. blurring the nature–culture divide

To unravel the multiple roles plants play in fantasy narratives, the plant-conscious analyst should identify the methods fantasy authors apply to blur the nature–culture divide via plant characters.

8. empowering plants

A plant-conscious analysis of texts should look into the ways mythic fantasy can subvert the marginalisation of plants with a special attention to the various manifestations of plant agency.

10.2 The Plant-Conscious Analysis of the *Mythago Cycle*

The second part of the dissertation demonstrated the application of the above detailed set of strategies through the analysis of Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Cycle*. Each of the six chapters were organised around a single keyword: identity, body, coming of age, time, space, myth. As the dissertation revealed, Ryhope Wood is a giant information system that uses memories and ancient narratives from the human mind to maintain and protect itself. The wood

thus has a physical dimension and a real-life location but it also has an ungraspable, ever-changing, psychic component. The very texts Holdstock applies to describe this supernatural ecosystem have a similar structure in more than one respect. Each *Mythago* novel starts in a human setting, that is gradually undermined by the intervention of the wooden realm – and this process is also reflected textually. This transformation is possibly most obvious in the first novel, *Mythago Wood*, where the Huxleys' attempts to scientifically describe woodland phenomena in writing (e.g. George Huxley's journals) are systematically undermined, and by the end of the novel, recurring mythic narratives overwhelm the text on multiple levels. The re-mythologization of the world could be analysed from a limited, anthropocentric perspective. In this case, the analysis would circle around the fact that through re-living these mythic narratives, characters in the *Mythago Cycle* get in touch with their cultural (human) past. This method might lead us to question the modern-day myth of eternal progress when we realise that all ancient narratives are forever repeated in successive periods. The ecological significance of re-mythologization, however, lies beyond the human point of view. In connection with the *Mythago Cycle*, we should rather ask: What effect does the vegetal have on the human world that reflects it? If mythagos are plant-human hybrids, how can the narrative that represents them become a hybrid too?

Relying on the plant-visibility strategies, the textual analyses of Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Cycle* answered these questions and at the same time confirmed the original two hypotheses of the dissertation:

1. Mythic fantasy has the potential of creating more ecocentric texts and worlds by exposing and then subverting the most common, anthropocentric attitudes towards the woodland to reveal that human and nonhuman identities are in fact inseparable.
2. As a prominent example of mythic fantasy, Robert Holdstock's concept of the *Mythago Wood* is a unique, eco-philosophical construct that casts new light on human-nature relationships by giving agency to the vegetal other.

Below I summarize the key statements of each thematic chapter that support these hypotheses:

Identity

Relying on the plant-visibility strategies, the dissertation dived deeper into the complexity of plant identity, and described Ryhope Wood through four categories: superorganism, metaphor, hyperobject, and character. Firstly, Ryhope as a superorganism

defies the anthropocentric logic that any large system should be hierarchically ordered. In this woodland, animate and inanimate beings form a collective identity driven by the common urge to keep the ecosystem reproducing itself. Secondly, Ryhope might also be considered as a complex or master metaphor that is composed of the multiple level metaphors set to use in Holdstock's storyworld. The materialisation of metaphors is a unique tool of fantasy to make the unseen, suppressed or marginalised components of the primary world visible. Thirdly, Ryhope also provides the reader with an opportunity to investigate the hyperobject – a concept that is at the core of the climate crisis and is very hard to decipher in real life. And lastly, Ryhope might also be described as a character on its own right – and if seen through such lenses, the reader can raise interesting questions about vegetal agency.

Body

The *Mythago Cycle* confronts the reader with the physical reality of vegetal deathlessness, making her realize that this uncanny quality of the plant body is also an inherent part of the human body. Throughout the *Cycle*, Holdstock's mythago characters such as Guiwenneth and human characters such as Tallis can partake in vegetal deathlessness through their journeys to Ryhope Wood. Their stories surprise us with the revelation that what was supposed to separate us from the vegetal actually connects us with it, links us back to it. Thus, in the *Mythago Cycle*, Holdstock offers a revised definition of the human through the corporeal re-integration of the vegetal.

Coming of Age

All throughout the *Mythago Cycle* the changes in the protagonists' lives are consciously and constantly paralleled with the changes of the natural world. Tallis' (*Lavondyss*) and Alex's (*The Hollowing*) stories reveal Holdstock's genuine interest in the teenage mind and his urge to show how and why a young person's unconscious interacts differently with Ryhope. In the Western world, coming of age hinges on the unseeing of the nonhuman. We are trained to be plant blind. Within Ryhope Wood this process is reversed: to survive, the teenage protagonists have to embrace their intuitive side so that they can reconnect with the nonhuman. Inside the wood, all agency is shared agency and all responsibility is shared responsibility – and it is through this sharing that the nature–culture divide is blurred. The teenage protagonists' maturing process centres around the realisation of their own agency *and* the responsibility that comes with it.

Time

Holdstock's depiction of time in the *Mythago Cycle* points towards an escape from the human construct of time. The individual life of mythagos, their related storytime, the cyclical time of the woodland ecosystem, the plant time of the trees all form different, but inseparable, intermingled timelines that ceaselessly interact in the creation and re-creation of Ryhope Wood. In this complex system, even the tiniest modification can have far-reaching spatiotemporal consequences. Entering Ryhope, the reader may escape most of the constraints of human time and discovers other, nonhuman and nonlinear timelines that may refreshen both fiction and reality.

Space

In the *Mythago Cycle*, there is a kind of world-building within world-building done by the trees of Ryhope. In the wood, trees literally gain metaphysical agency – as they recreate the mythic landscapes (mythagoscapes) that they find in human minds. Thus, in Ryhope, space can be seen as vegetal space created through vegetal agency. In consequence, world-building might be described as a multi-layered process in the *Mythago Cycle* to which both human and nonhuman creatures contribute: author, vegetal beings of an imaginary forest, fictional characters and the reader.

Myth

Our fascination with the hero monomyth actively contributed to our age-long abuse of nature that brought the Anthropocene into being. Only when we have identified in what ways the hero narrative may initiate environmental destruction, can we devise different stories that lead us into a biocentric future. Innovative fantasy holds a potential to subvert the hero narrative through a re-introduction of what Le Guin calls the “life story” (Le Guin 1996, 152). In the *Mythago Cycle* Holdstock creates a *vegetal life story* that replaces competition with cooperation, possession with interaction, and death with cyclical rebirth. Calling the wood an *arboreal trickster* that replaces the hero of the monomyth can summarize the wood's intriguing complexity from a mythological viewpoint.

10.3 The Six Theses of Plant Life in Fantasy

Dawn Keetley formulated six theses to demonstrate the key features of plant horror (Keetley 2016), similarly, based on the above described results, I created six theses that I intend to present as the general conclusion of this dissertation and that might also serve as a starting point for future plant-conscious analyses of mythic fantasy:

Thesis 1: *Fantasy literature and plants are both marginalised creatures from an anthropocentric perspective.*

Thesis 2: *By bringing the vegetal Other into focus, fantasy makes the facing of the more-than-human inescapable.*

Thesis 3: *Vegetal life lays bare the absurdity of man's artificial separation from nature.*

Thesis 4: *The vegetal Other is already, and has always been within the Self.*

Thesis 5: *Vegetal agency is a shared agency that entails a shared responsibility.*

Thesis 6: *Stories provide a shared space for interspecies communication.*

What connects all these observations is the realisation that the separation between human and nonhuman is artificial, and we, the animate creatures of the biosphere, live in a constant state of compenetration, interacting with each other in body and in mind. Emanuele Coccia calls this form of being in the world “transcendental immersion” in which all creatures participate: “If living is breathing, it is because our relation to the world is not one of being thrown or being in the world, and not even one of mastery – that of a subject over an object that lies before it: no, being in the world means experiencing transcendental immersion.” (Coccia 2018).

10.4 The Truth of Ryhope Wood

In demonstrating the application of the plant-visibility strategies, the dissertation limited its scope to the analysis of Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Cycle*. Even though Holdstock had an avid interest in ancient forests, his focus in the novels remains on his human protagonists and his plots are centred around whether these characters can gain agency over their own fate. Nevertheless, Holdstock never falls victim to human exceptionalism – in his fiction, the vegetal Other has real power that is not to be conquered either by human strength or cognition. Holdstock's fiction shows us that we are inseparable from the ecosystem in body and mind, and unlike most of his predecessors in modern fantasy, he achieves this in a way that preserves the plantness of plants. The *Mythago Cycle* proves that ecocentric writing does not necessarily entail direct environmentalism or didacticism on the author's part. I would not call the *Mythago* novels planetarianist fiction as it does not directly “articulate visions of hope for the biosphere” (cf. Oziewicz 2022, 58), nevertheless, despite their gloomy atmosphere, these texts formulate an implicit hope for humans' reconciliation with their environment.

My personal hope is that these sample analyses of Holdstock's fiction will urge scholars to carry out more eco- and plant-conscious analyses of all kinds of fantasy fiction and thus contribute to a more ecocentric and more liveable future. The magic wood topos has always been a place of obtaining hidden knowledge – now let us learn the *life stories of plants* and through them let us combat limiting dichotomies and reinvent our perception of the world. And what about the validity of the knowledge we gain there, you might ask. Can we find the ultimate answers within the magic wood? Let me answer with Holdstock's words: "Anything is possible in Ryhope Wood. There is no such thing as truth here." (Holdstock 2010, 321).

Bibliography

- Aichele, George. 1988. "Two Forms of Metafantasy." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 1, no. 3 (3): 55–67. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308004>.
- Alaimo, Stacy. 2010. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press.
- Albrecht, Glenn A.. "Exiting The Anthropocene and Entering The Symbiocene." <https://glennaalbrecht.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene/>
- Alexander, Lily. 2018. "Mythology." *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf, 115–126. Routledge.
- Arasu, Prema and Thornton, Drew. 2022. "Sleeping with the Fishmen: Reimagining the Anthropocene Through Oceanic-Chthonic Kinships." in: *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dédinová eds., 150–160. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Aristotle. 1987. *De Anima (On the Soul)*. Penguin Classics.
- Attebery, Brian. 1991. "Fantasy and the Narrative Transaction." *Style*, vol. 25, no. 1, 28–41. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945882>.
- Attebery, Brian. 1992. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana University Press.
- Attebery, Brian. 2012. "Structuralism." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn eds., Cambridge University Press. 81-90.
- Attebery, Brian. 2014. *Stories about Stories*. Oxford University Press.
- Attebery, Brian. 2022a. *Fantasy: How It Works*. Oxford University Press.
- Attebery, Brian. 2022b. "From the Third Age to the Fifth Season: Confronting the Anthropocene through Fantasy." Oziewicz, Marek; Attebery, Brian and Dédinová, Tereza eds. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. 16–25. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Baluška, František, Stefano Mancuso, and Dieter Volkmann. Eds. 2006. *Communication in Plants: Neuronal Aspects of Plant Life*. Springer.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Duke University Press.

- Bar-On, Yinon M. et al. 2018. "The Biomass Distribution on Earth." *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, vol. 115, no. 25: 6506–11. June 19, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1711842115>
- Bennett, Jane. 2001. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton University Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Blanc, Nathalie, and Agnès Sander. 2014. "Reconfigured Temporalities Nature's Intent?" *Nature and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2014): 1–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43304040>.
- Bloom, Harold. 2004. "Clinamen: Towards a Theory of Fantasy." Sandner, David. Ed. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. 236–254. Praeger.
- Brawley, Chris. 2014. *Nature and the Numinous in Mythopoeic Fantasy Literature*. McFarland.
- Burg, Jacob. "Myths of "Un"creation: Narrative Strategies for Confronting the Anthropocene." Oziewicz, Marek; Attebery, Brian and Dédinová, Tereza eds. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. 208–218. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Calvo, Paco and others. 2020. "Plants are intelligent, here's how." *Annals of Botany*, Volume 125, Issue 1, 2 January 2020, 11–28, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aob/mcz155>
- Calvo, Paco. 2023. *Planta Sapiens: The New Science of Plant Intelligence*. W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle.
- Cambridge Dictionary. 2023. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wonder>
- Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press.
- Carson, Rachel. 2000. *Silent Spring*. Penguin Books.
- Chamowitz, Daniel. 2012. *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*. Scientific American.
- Clute, John and Grant, John. 1997. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Orbit.
- Coccia, Emanuele. 2018. *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*. Polity. Kindle.
- Cohen, Cynthia M. 2009. "The Unique Representation of Trees in The Lord of the Rings." *Tolkien Studies*, 6 (2009): 91–125.

- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory*. Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. 3–25. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cooper-Smithson, Hannah. 2022. "Arboromorphism." *Environmental Humanities* 1 March 2022; 14 (1): 233–236. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9481539>
- Darwin, Charles. 2009. *The Power of Movement in Plants*. Cambridge University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Dickerson, Matthew and Jonathan Evans. 2006. *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Duckworth, Melanie and Lykke Guanio-Uluru, eds. 2022. *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Routledge.
- Ekman, Stefan and Audrey Isabel Taylor. 2016. "Notes Toward a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building." *Fafnir* vol 3, iss 3, pages 7–18.
- Ekman, Stefan. 2011. "Exploring the Habitats of Myths: The Spatiotemporal Structure of Ryhope Wood." Morse, Donald E., Matolcsy, Kálmán. Eds. *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock*. 46–65. McFarland.
- Ekman, Stefan. 2013. *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Elgin, Don D. 2004. "Literary Fantasy and Ecological Comedy." Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 255–270.
- Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." 2004. Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 74-101.
- Frye, Northrop. 2004. "The Mythos of Summer: Romance" (1957). Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 108–115.
- Gagliano, Monica; Ryan, John C. and Vieira, Patricia. Eds. 2017. *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Garrard, Greg. 2014. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge.

- Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold. Eds. 1996. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. The University of Georgia Press.
- ClimateLit. 2021. Glossary of Climate Literature(s) and Climate Literacy Terms. ClimateLit. <https://www.climatelit.org/topic/terminology/planetarianism/>
- Hall, Matthew. 2011. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. SUNY Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2015. “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, 159–165.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Haraway, Donna; Noboru Ishikawa; Scott F. Gilbert; Kenneth Olwig; Anna L. Tsing & Nils Bubandt. 2016. “Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene.” *Ethnos*, 81:3, 535–564, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2015.1105838
- Heckendorn Cook, Elizabeth. 2020. “Alternative Reproduction: Plant-time and Human/Arboreal Assemblages in Holdstock and Han.” In: *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation*. Bishop, Katherine E., Higgins, David and Määttä, Jerry, Eds. 127–147. University of Wales Press.
- Heise, Ursula K. 2019. “Science Fiction and the Time Scales of the Anthropocene.” *ELH*, vol. 86, no. 2, 275–304.
- Hendrickx, Kim. 2022. “On Monsters and Other Matters of Housekeeping: Reading Jeff Vandermeer with Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin” Oziewicz, Marek; Attebery, Brian and Dédinová, Tereza eds. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. 222–232. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Herman, David. 2009. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Holdstock, Robert. 1992. *The Bone Forest*. Avon Books.
- Holdstock, Robert. 1995. *The Hollowing*. ROC.

- Holdstock, Robert. 2007. "The Mythago Cycle Afterwards." <https://robertholdstock.com/articles/the-mythago-cycle-afterwards/>
- Holdstock, Robert. 2009a. *Merlin's Wood*. Orion Publishing.
- Holdstock, Robert. 2009b. <https://robertholdstock.com/articles/avilion-and-mythago-wood/>
- Holdstock, Robert. 2010. *Avilion*. Gollancz.
- Holdstock, Robert. 2014a. *Mythago Wood*. Gollancz.
- Holdstock, Robert. 2014b. *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*. Gateway. Kindle.
- Holdstock, Robert. 2015. *Lavondyss*. Gollancz.
- Hume, Kathryn. 2014. *Fantasy and Mimesis*. Routledge.
- Hyde, Lewis. 2008. *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*. Canongate Books. Kindle.
- Irigaray, Luce. 2017. "What the Vegetal World Says to Us." Gagliano, Monica; Ryan, John C. and Vieira, Patricia. Eds. *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. 126–135. University of Minnesota Press.
- Jackson, Rosemary. 1991. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. New York: Routledge.
- James, Erin. 2022. *Narrative in the Anthropocene*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Jepson, Paul and Cain Blythe. 2020. *Rewilding: The Radical New Science of Ecological Recovery*. Icon Books.
- Judd, Walter S. and Judd, Graham A. 2017. *Flora of Middle-Earth: Plants of J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium*. Oxford University Press.
- Jung, Karl Gustav. 2014. *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. (The Collected Works of C. G. Jung Book 10). Princeton University Press. Kindle.
- Karban, Richard. 2015. *Plant Sensing and Communication*. University of Chicago Press.
- Karkulehto, Sanna; Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis, eds. 2020. *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. Routledge.
- Keetley, Dawn, and Angela Tenga, eds. 2016. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Keetley, Dawn. 2016. "Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?" Keetly, Dawn, and Angela Tenga, eds. *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*. 1–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kheel, Marti. 1993. "From Heroic to Holistic Ethics: The Ecofeminist Challenge." In: *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Ed. Gaard, Greta. Temple University Press.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.
- Kincaid, Paul. 2022. *Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Klein, Alice. 2020. "Extinct date palms grown from 2000-year-old seeds found near Jerusalem." *New Scientist*. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2232464-extinct-date-palms-grown-from-2000-year-old-seeds-found-near-jerusalem/>
- Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.
- Laukkanen, Markus. 2022. "Literalizing Hyperobjects: On (Mis)representing Global Warming in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones" Oziewicz, Marek; Attebery, Brian and Dédinová, Tereza eds. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. 235–245. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1996. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. 149–154. The University of Georgia Press.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 2007. "The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists." *The Wordsworth Circle*, 38.1/2 (Winter/Spring 2007), 83–87.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1992. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Le Guin, Ursula K.. 2004. „From Elfland to Poughkeepsie” (1973), Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. 144–155. Praeger.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 2014. 2014 acceptance speech at the 65th National Book Awards <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et9Nf-rsALk&t=12s>
- Lee, Jonny. 2023. "What is cognitive about 'plant cognition'?" *Biol Philos* 38, 18 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-023-09907-z>

- Limpár, Ildikó. 2011. "A Heap of Broken Images: The Mythological Waste Land of the Mind: The Hollowing and Ancient Echoes." Morse, Donald E., Matolcsy, Kálmán. Eds. *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock*. 141–155. McFarland.
- Limpár, Ildikó. 2021. *The Truths of Monsters: Coming of Age with Fantastic Media*. McFarland.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. University of Minnesota Press.
- MacDonald, George. 2004. "The Fantastic Imagination." 2004. Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 64–69.
- Mancuso, Stefano and Alessandra Viola. 2013. *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*. Island Press.
- Manlove, Colin. 2004. "Introduction to Modern Fantasy" (1975). Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 156–166.
- Marder, Michael. 2013. *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia University Press.
- Markley, Robert. 2019. "Literature, Climate, and Time: Between History and Story." *Climate and Literature*. Adeline Johns-Putra Ed. Cambridge University Press, 15–30.
- Massey, Doreen. 2015. *For Space*. Sage Publications.
- Mathews, Richard. 2002. *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. Routledge.
- Meeker, Joseph W.. 1996. "The Comic Mode." In: *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold. The University of Georgia Press, 155–169.
- Meeker, Natania and Antonia Szabari. 2019. *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction*. Fordham University Press.
- Mendlesohn, Farah and James, Edward. 2012. *A Short History of Fantasy*. Libri Publishing.
- Mendlesohn, Farah. 2008. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- Miéville, China. 2004. "Marxism and Fantasy: An Introduction." Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 334–343.
- Moran Patrick. 2019. *The Canons of Fantasy*. Cambridge University Press.

- Morse, Donald E., Matolcsy, Kálmán. Eds. 2011. *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock*. McFarland.
- Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology Without Nature*. Harvard University Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2021. *All Art Is Ecological*. Penguin Classics.
- Morton, Timothy. 2017. *Humankind. Solidarity with Non-human People*. New York: Verso.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Mylius, Ben. 2018. "Three Types of Anthropocentrism. Environmental Philosophy." Fall 2018, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2018), pp. 159–194.
- Myers, Natasha. 2021. "How to grow liveable worlds: Ten (not-so-easy) steps for life in the Planthropocene." ABC Net. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/natasha-myers-how-to-grow-liveable-worlds:-ten-not-so-easy-step/11906548>
- Mythopoeic Society. 2023. Mythopoeic Awards. <https://www.mythsoc.org/awards.htm>
- Norwood, Vera L.. 1993. *Made from this Earth*. The University of North Carolina Press. Kindle.
- Oziewicz, Marek. 2008. "Profusion Sublime and Fantastic: Robert Holdstock's "Mythago Wood."" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (72), 94–111.
- Oziewicz, Marek. 2017. "Speculative Fiction." <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>
- Oziewicz, Marek; Attebery, Brian and Dédinová, Tereza eds. 2022. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Oziewicz, Marek. 2022. "Fantasy for the Anthropocene: On the Ecocidal Unconscious, Planetarianism, and Imagination of Biocentric Futures." Oziewicz, Marek; Attebery, Brian and Dédinová, Tereza eds. 2022. *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*. Bloomsbury Academic, 58–69.
- Parker, Elizabeth. 2020. *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Parsley, Kathryn M. 2020. "Plant Awareness Disparity: A Case for Renaming Plant Blindness." *Plants, People, Planet*. 2020:2, pp. 598–601. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.10153>

- Rabkin, Eric. 2004. "The Fantastic and Fantasy." Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 167–171.
- Riiff Finseth, Claudia. 1997. "Tolkien's Trees". *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, no. 35 (September): 37–44. <https://journals.tolkiensociety.org/mallorn/article/view/172>.
- Rusvai, Mónika. 2022. "Vegetal Magic: Agnieszka's Journey to the Understanding of the Vegetal Other in Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*." *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Edited by Melanie Duckworth and Lykke Guanio-Uluru. 88–97. Routledge.
- Sandner, David. 2004. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger.
- Sandner, David. 1997. "The Fantastic Sublime: Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories' and the Romantic Sublime." *Mythlore*, 22:1, 4–7.
- Scholes, Robert. 2013. "Metafiction." *Metafiction*. Edited and introduced by Mark Currie. 21–38. Routledge.
- Scholes, Robert. 1975. *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Selling, Kim. 2004. "Fantastic Neomedievalism: The Image of the Middle Ages in Popular Fantasy", In *Flashes of the Fantastic: Selected Papers from The War of the Worlds Centennial, Nineteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*. Ed. David Ketterer, Praeger Publishers: Westport, CT. pp. 211–218. (Accessed via: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324764099_'Fantastic_Neomedievalism'_The_Image_Of_The_Middle_Ages_In_Popular_Fantasy)
- Sheldrake, Merlin. 2020. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*. Random House, 2020.
- Simard, Suzanne. 2021. *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*. Knopf.
- Swinfen, Ann. 2019. *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945*. Routledge, 2019.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 2004. "The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1970)" Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 135–143.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. 2008. "On Fairy-Stories." *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, Harper Collins, 27–84.

- Trewavas, Anthony. 2003. "Aspects of Plant Intelligence." *Annals of Botany*, Volume 92, Issue 1, July 2003, Pages 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aob/mcg101>
- Trewavas, Anthony. 2005. "Green Plants as Intelligent Organisms." *TRENDS in Plant Science*, Vol.10 No.9 September 2005, pp. 413–419.
- Trewavas, Anthony. 2014. *Plant Behaviour and Intelligence*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Wandersee, James H., and Elisabeth E. Schussler. 1999. "Preventing Plant Blindness." *The American Biology Teacher*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1999, pp. 82–86. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4450624>. Accessed 24 July 2023.
- Waugh, Patricia. 1984. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. Routledge.
- White, Lynn JR.. 1996. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold. Eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. The University of Georgia Press. 3–14.
- Whittingham, Elizabeth A.. 2011. "Tallis, The Feminine Presence in Mythago Wood: *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region*." Morse, Donald E., Matolcsy, Kálmán. Eds. *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock*. McFarland. 96–113.
- Windling, Terri and Ellen Datlow eds. 2002. *The Green Man: Tales of the Mythic Forest*. Viking.
- Wohlleben, Peter. 2016. *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Greystone Books.
- Wohlleben, Peter. 2019. *The Secret Wisdom of Nature*. Greystone Books.
- Wohlleben, Peter. 2021. *The Heartbeat of Trees*. Greystone Books.
- Wolf, Mark J.P.. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*. Routledge.
- Wolfe, Gary K. 1986. *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Wolfe, Gary. 2004. "The Encounter with Fantasy." Sandner, David. *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Praeger, 222–235.
- Wolfe, Gary K. 2011. *Evaporating Genres*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.